



# Melancholic Identities, *Toska* and Reflective Nostalgia

Case Studies from Russian and Russian-Jewish Culture

edited by

Sara Dickinson, Laura Salmon

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# Nostalgia and Creatuality in H. Leivick's *The Golem*

*Laura Quercioli Mincer (University of Genoa)*

Some forms of Jewish-Russian nostalgia find their full expression in one of the all-time masterpieces of Yiddish theatre, *Der goylem (The Golem)*, by H. Leivick. In this work, the Golem, a man-made creature based on an ancient Kabbalah legend widespread in several Central European countries, takes on openly messianic features, its helpless creatuality<sup>1</sup> and hopeless existential loneliness reflect the Jewish longing for God. It is also true that the blank verse of Leivick's drama contains a more direct political goal, and that an echo of the Russian revolution and of the ethical issues it raised can easily be perceived here. More generally, a 'nostalgia of the absolute' pervaded Leivick himself, who, over the years became through self-creation the symbol of a spirit that would prevail over the oppression reigning in society and history. In line with the tendencies of Neo-Romanticism, revived in Yiddish literature by Leivick himself, he persistently embodied this spirit or character in a blend of art and life in which each of these elements fed upon the other. Similarly intertwined in his work were the nostalgia of Eastern European Jewish culture, a Russian and revolutionary longing, and Russian *toska*.

## 1. *Jewish Nostalgia: Gaguim – The Awareness of an 'Elsewhere'*

In order to better interpret the peculiarities of Jewish-Russian nostalgia, it may be useful to analyze how the Hebrew and Yiddish languages encode this multifaceted feeling. The lexeme used to indicate what we currently translate as 'nostalgia' has uncertain origins in Hebrew. The lowing of cattle that walk towards the rock on which they are to be sacrificed (Samuel I, 6:12) and the bellow of the ox that is compared to the 'daring words' of Job (Job 6:5) are the only two examples found in the Bible of the root 'gah' ('wailed', 'cried'), from which 'gaguim', the Jewish word used for nostalgia supposedly derives. From 'gah' also come homophonic derivatives expressing craving, or the melancholy fluttering of ducks, or the action of digging, perforating. And nostalgia – as

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<sup>1</sup> 'Creatuality' refers to the sentiments of the 'creature' (the created) towards the creator.

hopeless and strong for the people of the desert as it was for an animal walking towards a death that implied no resurrection – was certainly capable of ‘digging’ into the soul of those who suffered from it.

In the *Talmud*, which was written several centuries later, the root ‘*gah*’ takes on two meanings to express an explicit feeling of nostalgia and wistfulness. It can be found in two passages of the *Shabbat* treatise (39a and 66b), where it is used in different situations to refer to the longing of a father for his son and that of a son for his father. The primordial wailing of a nature devoid of any hope or consolation thus takes on the form of a conscious, fully rounded human feeling. In the father’s nostalgia for his son, and in that of the son for his father, we can glimpse a reference to the idea of absence *par excellence*. This is human nostalgia for God, perhaps the ultimate expression of the ‘awareness of an elsewhere’ which, according to Jankélévitch (2013: 5), is the foundation of and precondition for the feeling of nostalgia<sup>2</sup>. And it is perhaps in this complex setting that we can identify the specific characteristics of ‘Jewish nostalgia’, i.e. in the overlap of yearnings for one’s mythicized childhood (the communion – also physical – with our parents’ bodies), for one’s homeland, and for God, a God that in Hebrew is also called *Makom*, Place.

## 2. Benkshaft: *The Yiddish Culture of Nostalgia*

Modern literary culture in Yiddish developed with incredible speed in the second half of the nineteenth century and, over the course of just a few years, evolved from a tradition featuring interesting, but marginal works into one of the leading literary phenomena in Europe. Because of the circumstances in which it developed, modern Yiddish literature seems to be pervaded by nostalgia.

The Yiddish term ‘*benkshaft*’ (or ‘*benkenish*’), from Middle High German ‘*bangen*’<sup>3</sup>, refers less to nostalgia for Zion than to regret for a more recent past, whose idealization is largely the result of a conscious cultural (self-)creation inspired by and embodied in the shtetl. The Central and Eastern European Jewish hamlet, cast as a close-knit community where every life has its own place and meaning and enjoys an uninterrupted vital bond with tradition, not only comprises one of the essential *topoi* in the work of the founding fathers of modern Yiddish literature, but also figures pervasively in the reception and evaluation of this literature. *Benkshaft* is a nostalgia specific to Ashkenazi Judaism that marks its entrance into modernity – ‘modernity’ being precisely the loss of ties and tradition whose devastating impact was quite effectively illustrated by the catastrophe

<sup>2</sup> Or perhaps nostalgia originates with God searching for man, as in the moving call “Adam, where are you?” (Genesis 3:9).

<sup>3</sup> The meaning of *bangen*, as reported in the Grimm brothers’ *Dictionary* (1838), is ‘concern, fear, anxiety’; only as a fourth meaning do we find the synonyms ‘*sich verlangen, sich sehnen*’ (‘to feel nostalgia, a burning desire for something or someone’).

of the First World War; it is also, in Allison Schachter's words, "intimately linked with a newly forming Jewish cultural nationalism" (Schachter 2006: 91). A feeling of nostalgia coupled with the same basic theme, i.e. with the vision of Ashkenazi culture as the bearer of universal human values, can also be found in currents of thought that developed in Central and Eastern European Jewish culture in the late nineteenth century and are effectively summarized in the title of David Roskies' important book, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Roskies 1999)<sup>4</sup>.

In the early twentieth century, Yiddish cultural *benkshaft* finds expression in two different tendencies, both shaped by external events as well as by changes occurring within Jewish society in Central Eastern Europe. In just one generation, traditional Jewish culture detached itself from the world of its fathers, a process that in the surrounding society had unfolded quite differently and over the course of several decades. At the same time, a powerful Jewish longing for acculturation and integration into that surrounding external world met increasingly with an impenetrable wall of ethnic nationalism and anti-Semitism, sentiments which were soon to reach their international apotheosis. Quite often the Jews had to face a world where, as Ola Watowa (1990: 22) wrote several years later, "there was no way out to be seen, no future". It was almost a foregone conclusion that the Bolshevik revolution – which promoted internationalism and equality – would represent the hopes of the Jewish people, at least until its openly totalitarian shift at the end of the 1920s. It was also fairly predictable that among individuals whose childhoods were still deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, such hopes would assume forms of messianism, one of the most original and (problematically) distinguishing elements of Jewish thought. As summarized by rabbi Arthur Green (1999: 161),

The claim has often been made that modern Jews who lost their faith in God did not as easily lose their faith in messianic redemption. The various movements for social progress that have attracted so many Jews, including Socialism and Communism, may be seen as forms of secular messianism.

Early twentieth-century Jewish messianists shared with their Aryan comrades and masters (such as Bakunin or Proudhon) a deep nostalgia for the pre-capitalist past, a feeling that Michael Löwy (1981: 6) defines as "romantic-nostalgic". It is significant that Löwy in *Rédemption et utopie* considers such themes with an approach similar to that later used by Svetlana Boym (2001): Jewish secular messianism, he writes, includes a restoring current, aimed at the restoration of a lost golden age, and a utopian current, aimed at the creation of an unprecedented social order<sup>5</sup>. These two currents are intertwined, however,

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<sup>4</sup> A variety of nostalgia for the shtetl and a re-evaluation of its culture and existential marginality is shared today by anti-nationalist intellectuals and those highly critical of Israel as a state project, such as Daniel Boyarin in the United States and Moni Ovadia in Italy.

<sup>5</sup> Here Löwy refers to Gershom Scholem, who identified three forces in Judaism (conservative, restorative, and utopian), under whose influence messianism develops (cf. Scholem 1995). For this information, I am grateful to Silvano Facioni.

each including elements that belong to the other, and both pervaded with the same ‘deep nostalgia’. He finds, for example, that the early rabbinic concept of Hebrew ‘*tikkun*’ (‘fixing’ or ‘repair’, often ‘of the world’ [*‘tikkun olam’*]) “highlight[s] the purely Jewish aspects of a political and existential stance – which means restoration, repair, and reform at the same time – [and thus] epitomizes the dualism of messianic tradition” (Löwy 1981: 6).

As noted, the *benkshaft* of the European Yiddish world also expressed itself in two different currents: indeed, when not ‘channeled into’ a messianic utopia, *benkshaft* referred to a diffuse mood or feeling deriving from the inability to take action, from energy that had no way of being released, from the impossibility of planning a different future, the *fin-de-siècle* melancholy of those who have been trampled on by history and know they are strangers wherever they go.

### 3. *Messiah in Chains*

‘H. Leivick’<sup>6</sup> is the pseudonym of Leivick Halpern, born in 1888 in the Belarusian town of Igumen (renamed Červen’ in 1923), approximately 50 kilometers from Minsk. He was the eldest of nine children and the biography of his early years is the typical biography of people living in a shtetl: poverty and lack of privacy (all the children in his household slept together in one room), a discontent and violent father (whom Leivick would later describe in a poem entitled “*Der beyzer tate*”, “The Evil Father”), and the iron discipline of the ‘*kheyder*’, the traditional school<sup>7</sup>. Later came the *yeshive* in Minsk, whose enlightened headmaster allowed the students to study Hebrew grammar, a lay subject and one that was disliked<sup>8</sup>.

During the 1905 Revolution, Leivick joined the Bund, the supranational and Yiddishist Jewish socialist party, which had been founded in Vilna in 1897. Although he had already made his debut as a promising author in Hebrew, once he joined the revolution, Leivick decided to abandon the sacred idiom and shift to Yiddish, the language of the deprived masses – and it was in Yiddish literature that he later made his mark as one of its greatest representatives. In 1906, Leivick was suspected of subversive activity and arrested by the tsarist police; during the trial – an episode mentioned by B. Harshav and B. Harshav (1986: 674-677) and often quoted in the literature – Leivick refused

<sup>6</sup> Also transliterated as Leyvik.

<sup>7</sup> Also spelled *cheder* when transliterated from Hebrew. In this article preference has been given to the system of transliteration for Yiddish names and words established by the YIVO Institute of New York. As for the details of Leivick’s biography, when those provided in the relevant literature are contradictory, I have generally relied on the information given by Harshav, Harshav 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Although the study of Hebrew grammar and of the Bible dates back to the seventh century, it was, in practice, frequently reduced to mnemonic repetition.

to be defended by a famous lawyer and even declared to his judges that "I will not defend myself":

Everything that I have done I did in full consciousness. I am a member of the Jewish revolutionary Party, the Bund, and I will do everything in my power to overthrow the tsarist autocracy, its bloody henchmen, and you as well (*Ivi*: 675).

Leivick was sentenced to four years of forced labor and permanent exile in Siberia.

In an isolated cell in the Minsk prison tower, Leivick wrote his first dramatic poem, *Di keytn fun Meshiakh* (*The Chains of the Messiah*), which was published only in 1939. The poem tells of the rebellion of angel Ariel against God's command that the Messiah be kept in chains, thereby postponing humanity's redemption. Together with *The Golem* and *Di geule komedie* (*The Comedy of Redemption*, 1934), *The Chains of the Messiah* completes a triad of works on the idea of Messianism (and these three works were published as such in Israel in 1956 under the title *Hezyoney Geulah, Visions of Redemption*). Messianism, which is perhaps the leading theme in Leivick's work, began its development during the years of his imprisonment: rather than using Messianism to foreshadow apocalyptic upheaval, Leivick uses it to represent an ethical commitment that is very closely linked to both Russian culture and Jewish tradition, a sense of responsibility combined with an unbreakable tie to all those who suffer (cf. Goldsmith, 2003: 736). In this context, the poet himself – and others as well – can come forward as a messianic figure. It was in this same period that a picture was taken of Leivick dressed in traditional Russian garb with chains around his waist and ankles: very rarely, if ever, has an iconographic representation better illustrated the inner world of an artist than in that picture.

The first part of Leivick's detention ended in March 1912, when his long march to Siberia 'in stages' and in chains began. The final destination was a hamlet called Vitim, where the poet was supposed to spend the rest of his life. Named after a tributary of the Lena river, this village boasted an average temperature in winter of minus thirty-five degrees Celsius and lay at a distance of six thousand kilometers from Minsk. And yet, thanks to the money that some comrades who had earlier emigrated to America daringly managed to send, Leivick accomplished the almost unthinkable and escaped from Siberia. He did this by purchasing a horse and cart, which he drove to a railway station, traveling across Russia and Germany, and eventually to the United States, where he landed in the summer of 1913.

Like many intellectuals of his time, Leivick faced great professional and personal difficulties in the States; these are described in some of his most popular plays, such as *Shmates* (*Rags*) from 1921 or *Shop* from 1926. Although already a well-known poet, Leivick continued for years to earn his living as a wallpaper hanger; people walking about New York were thus able to bump into "the greatest Yiddish poet and playwright of our time" (Harshav, Harshav 1986: 675) holding a bucket of glue and a roll of wallpaper. Even in this new home-

land, however, Siberia remained one of the main themes in Leivick's work. It was a symbolic landscape, but also the setting of painful and tangible personal experiences, as described in his famous poem *Oyfn di vegn Sibirer* (*On the Road to Siberia*) from 1919:

Oyfn di vegn Sibirer  
 Emets nokh itster gefinen a klepl, a shtrikl  
 Fun mayne a tserisenem shukh.  
 A rimenem pas, fun a leymenem krigl a shtikl.  
 A bleter fun heylikn bukh.

Oyfn di taykhn Sibirer  
 Ken emets nokh itster gefinen a tseykhn a shpendl  
 Fun mains a dertrunkenem plit;  
 In vald – a farblutikt-fartriktn bendl,  
 In shney – ayngefroyrene trit (Leivick 1986: 679)<sup>9</sup>.

Leivick's direct experience of oppression, revolt, and imprisonment, as well as the way in which he wove into his writings the details of his own exemplary and symbolic autobiography – his path of suffering and redemption – were undoubtedly highly meaningful for other Jews who had immigrated from Eastern Europe. In particular, for Leivick and for most of his readers, Jewish messianism was closely intertwined with Russian tradition. It is not mere chance that Harshav twice compares him to Dostoevsky; and, according to Roskies (1984: 102), who defined Leivick to be “in many respects the forerunner of the Holocaust survivors”, his persona and writings were based upon notions “close to the heart of the Russian-Jewish intellectuals raised on Tolstoy”. Leivick was linked to more recent Russian culture as well. Initially close to the New York group of modernist Yiddish poets known as “*Di Yunge*”, Leivick focused increasingly on the legends and myths of the Jewish world, which he reinterpreted into forms that clearly reveal the influence of Russian symbolism. Over the years, however, he moved further away from these Russian sources: “one single theme ended up dominating his literary work: the nostalgia of a messianic redeemer, whom he fully expressed in the pièce *The Golem* (1917-1920), entirely set within the Jewish tradition” (Dinse, Liptzin 1978: 132).

*Der goylem. Dramatishe poeme in akht bilder* (*The Golem. Dramatic Poem in Eight Scenes*), first published in New York in 1921<sup>10</sup>, is considered to be “one

<sup>9</sup> “On the road to Siberia / Someone may still uncover a button, a lace / of my torn shoe / a leather belt, a shard of a clay mug, / A page of the holy book. // On the rivers of Siberia / Someone may still uncover a sign, a splinter / of my raft that has drowned; / in the forest, in snow – a ribbon with dried blood, / Footsteps frozen in the ground” (Leivick 1986: 679; translated by B. Harshav and B. Harshav).

<sup>10</sup> Many subsequent editions would later be published in Poland: in Warsaw by Kultur-Lige in 1922, in Vilna by the renowned Kletzkin, and more. There is abundant scholarly literature on the legend of the Golem; in addition to the books included in the Bibliography, see, for example, Idel 1990.

of the epoch-making works not only of Yiddish or Jewish literature, but of world literature as a whole" (Eidherr 2012: 21). It was first staged in Hebrew at the Habima theatre in Moscow in 1925, and soon became – and still is – one of that theatre's most successful plays. The premier was directed by Boris Veršilov, who, two years later and still in Moscow, also directed its first performance in Yiddish (cf. Zylberzweig 1934: 1059). The history of the artificial man incapable of bridling his instinct for violence was apparently interpreted by many contemporary readers as criticism of the Bolshevik revolution and Leivick was attacked by some communist Yiddish writers and accused of anti-Soviet 'pessimism' – a response which did not prevent him from being triumphantly welcomed on a trip to Moscow and to his home town in 1925.

The remainder of Leivick's life unfolds in important public acknowledgments<sup>11</sup>, political disappointment, and illness. It is difficult to imagine how hard it must have been for him, as one of the most illustrious contributors to the communist Yiddish press, to have given up writing for it in 1929 (following the Jewish communists' vote of support for the Hebron massacre)<sup>12</sup>, or the desperation that persuaded him to break off any relations with the socialist Yiddish cultural organizations that he had helped to found in 1939 following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. His sufferings in this period were also exacerbated by tuberculosis, which obliged him to undergo long periods of hospitalization and consequent isolation from the outside world.

After the Shoah, Leivick was the first among Yiddish poets and writers in the United States to give voice to the widespread sense of disorientation and feeling of guilt for the catastrophe that many of his writings – including *The Golem* – seemed to have disturbingly foreshadowed. As early as 1945, he published in New York a collection of poems entitled *In Treblinka bin ikh nit geven (I Was Never in Treblinka)*, in which he wonders how God could possibly not feel ashamed of his own existence before a humanity so degraded; he goes on to argue that one cannot differentiate between the Shoah's victims, all equally martyred by a barbaric power, and claims solidarity with 'the drowned': "I was never in Treblinka / not in the death camp of Majdanek. / But I stand upon their threshold / at their very edge" (cf. Schwarz 2008: 197).

Leivick died in New York in 1962. He had spent the last four years of his life paralyzed and unable to speak, visited constantly by writers and friends. He was compared to the *starets* Zosima of *The Brothers Karamazov* in both his own outlook and in the devotion that others demonstrated to him (Harshav, Harshav 1986: 677).

In 1957, a few years before his death, Leivick gave a speech entitled "*Der Yid – der Yikhud*" ("The Jew – The Individual") on the tenth anniversary of the

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<sup>11</sup> In 1936, Leivick represented Yiddish literature at the PEN Club's world conference in Buenos Aires; in 1958, he was granted a honorary doctorate by the Hebrew Union College; in 1961, he was awarded the medal of the National Jewish Welfare Board.

<sup>12</sup> On this event, cf. Nahshon 1998, particularly pp. 136 ff.

creation of the state of Israel at the foot of the biblical Mount Moriah, the site of the binding of Isaac. Once more presenting his own experience as symbolic of the experience of the Jewish people, Leivick turned in the last part of his speech to the narration of four events that had taken place when he was about seven years old, “four events of a single day [that] left a permanent imprint upon my entire life and became the undertone of all my later poems and plays, the undertone of my existence as a Jew and of my fate as a Jew...” (Landis 1966: 115). Specifically, as he was walking to the kheyder on a “bright, sunny winter day, cold and quiet, as often happens in the towns of White Russia” (*Ivi*: 116), Leivick recalled that he had happened to pass by “the Polish church”, where he was assaulted by a tall and sturdy Pole, who threw him to the ground amidst mounds of snow, yelling “Dirty Jew! When you pass our Church you have to take our hat off! You dirty Jew!” Young Leivick struggled to his feet with difficulty and ran in shock to the *kheyder*. The lesson that day was on the binding of Isaac and when Leivick heard Abraham described as lifting the knife, he burst into hysterical tears. Though the teacher tried to comfort Leivick – it was just a test, Isaac was not slaughtered! – the child remained unconsolated, whimpering back, “But what would have happened had the angel *come one moment too late?*” (*Ibidem*; italics in the text). Despite the teacher’s reassurances that the angel “could not have been late”, that childhood fear – Leivick averred – would never leave him.

Returning home on that same day, young Leivick walked past the estate of Count Yassevitch<sup>13</sup>, who, everyone knew, had a mad son that he kept locked up. Young Leivick felt an irresistible urge to go and see with his own eyes “this man of pain and suffering” (*Ibidem*) and, standing before the iron-grated window, caught sight of him: “silent and motionless, he stood looking at me. Great terrifying eyes. The man himself – a giant, the black hair of his head and face disheveled, wild. I stared at him as if entranced, as if gazing into an abyss that drew me” (*Ivi*: 117). When the monster’s eyes met the child’s, young Leivick felt his knees tremble. “To save myself I thought up a trick”. He touched his tongue to the grate’s freezing cold iron, where it stuck to the metal and began to bleed copiously. It was a game, Leivick recalled, invented to entertain the prisoner, to show him that he wanted to cheer him up. Russian nineteenth-century novels often tell of pranks played on village idiots and greeted with general hilarity, but in this case, Leivick inverts the expected prank to punish himself.

The four events of Leivick’s narration (the anti-Semitic attack; the feeling of powerlessness and terror at the mere *possibility* of a catastrophe; the figure of the man behind the grate; the combination of strong physical pain and copiously shed blood) seem to foreshadow and summarize the plot of *The Golem*. Two keys to understanding these events may be found in the child/adult and the Jew/non-Jew relationships that are brought up and reversed several times (Goodhart 1992: 95 ff.). In the first episode, the sudden and unjustified act of anti-Semitic

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<sup>13</sup> Also spelled Jasiewicz. I have been unable to find any information confirming the historical existence of the Count, although this surname was very common in that region.

aggression by an adult against a defenseless child does not seem to require any further comment; in the second case, however, Leivick highlights the teacher's inability to comfort the boy, his failure – in spite of all his knowledge – to usefully interpret the biblical narrative and give meaning to its events. The sight of the locked-up man, who looks exactly like the Golem, also foreshadows (albeit in retrospect) the writer's detention, a crucial period in his personal and spiritual life that was instrumental for his self-creation as a messianic figure. The blood that was not shed by Isaac, but flowed instead from the child's absurd injury would also be abundantly shed in *The Golem* and, during the years when Leivick was working on his magnum opus, in the pogroms and summary executions of the Russian Civil War and, later, by the millions of victims of the Shoah; the child's sacrifice had been useless. Leivick thus presents himself as a messianic figure, but not in the image of a triumphant Messiah, the son of David, but according to another Talmudic model provided by Jewish tradition, i.e. that of the suffering Messiah, the son of Joseph, one of the many Messiahs in Jewish narrative that try in vain to redeem their people, and suffer in vain as well. To this Messiah, Jewish tradition offers no chance of victory, but only eternal defeat, doomed to recur over the centuries to one who “was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth” and “he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

The *Talmud* states that the Messiah is a beggar waiting at the gates of Rome. And how can one recognize him? While the other lepers change their bandages all at once, the Messiah does so one bandage at a time, so as not to be late (cf. Facioni 2005: 111 ff.). In Leivick's *The Golem*, however, the miracle-working rabbi, the Maharal of Prague<sup>14</sup>, creates a puppet Messiah who can never be ready, who recoils from his assigned task and refuses to embrace the life he is given, begging his creator with the desperation of a child to leave him in the darkness of non-being.

The first of the eight scenes into which *The Golem* is divided, entitled *Clay*, takes place at night just outside Prague and presents an argument between the rabbi and the shadow of the Golem that he is about to remove from the darkness. Who cares if you do not want to live, says the Maharal to the shadow, “*Es iz deyn rotsn gornisht*” (“Your own desire is nothing”), a great destiny awaits you; “*Du vest bashafn nit azoy zikh lebn*” (“You are created for more than mere life”), he states in a short conversation in which both characters voice prophecies that will become true, “*geheymnisfule veln zikh di maysim dayne. / S'vet keyner fun dayn gvure gornisht visn, / a holts-heker, a vaser-treger vestu zayn*” (“To do your deeds in secrecy and silence. / No one shall know about your furtive

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<sup>14</sup> Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1520-1609), generally known by the Jewish acronym *Maharal* (from *Moreinu ha-Rav Loew, our Master, rabbi Loew*), was one of the leading Jewish thinkers and philosophers of his time. He was a rabbi in the Moravian town of Mikulov, in Prague, and in Poznań. His grave in the Jewish cemetery of Prague, which has remained untouched to this day, is often visited. Legend holds that he was the creator of the Golem.

strength, / You'll be a water carrier, a woodchopper"). The Phantom: "*A golem*". The Rabbi Maharal: "*A sheliakh fun a folk, a groyser gvur*" ("A nation's messenger, a man of might"). The Phantom: "*A meshores – iber vemen tsu geveltikn*" ("A servant to be ordered, to be ruled") (Leivick 2012: 14; Leivick 2006: 117)<sup>15</sup>. The shadow then disappears, after one last unheeded prayer, his apparition soon replaced by the sinister one of the Priest, whose name is Polish – Tadeusz (Tadeusz) – and who hisses to the rabbi:

Nor ze, funvanem kumen dos tsu dir azoyne oygn?  
 Retsikhe shpritsst fun zey un shvartse gvure,  
 Vi kumt retsikhe tsu a rov? Ikh hob shoy'n in mayn lebn,  
 In t'fises un oyf sheyters funem heylikn gerikht,  
 Gezen azoyfil penimer fun yidn,  
 Azoyfil oygn alerleyidike, un keynmol nokh  
 Hot zikh gemakht zikh mir tsu zen a yidns oygn  
 Vos zoln ton a kuk oyf dir mit emeser  
 Gazlonishe retsikhe, beyzn has, vi dayne oygn –  
 Zey zeen oys, vi oygn fun a vilder goylem... (2012: 17)<sup>16</sup>.

The Maharal decides not to heed the feeble voice of the Golem's shadow, disregarding – with "savage" and "hate-filled eyes" – his desperate request to not be created. The rabbi thus deludes himself that he has correctly interpreted God's will, but was this desire for compliance with the divine sufficient justification for the Maharal's own great transformation from a meek rabbi-philosopher who studies the stars into a murderer filled with wild rage? The cynical Tadeusz is certainly right when he sees *retshikhe*, slaughter, in the eyes of the rabbi, when he recognizes him as an alter ego of the Golem.

One of the leading themes in Leivick's text is a conflictual relationship with physical violence – the violence of which the Jews were often passive victims, the violence whose rejection was one of the founding principles of Ashkenazi Judaism, the violence without which rabbis and Jewish notables knew not how to 'save' their people. "The Golem was a typically creative Rabbinical solution to a knotty problem", summarizes Warren Rosenberg (2001: 71). The Golem, half man and half puppet, endowed with supernatural strength but ready to obey every request of his creator, will be the savior of the helpless Jews. He will be the one to stain his hands with blood in obedience to a higher will; thus it has

<sup>15</sup> Quotations in this article from the original Yiddish text of *The Golem* are taken from Leivick 2012, while the English translations (found largely in the notes) are from Leivick 2006.

<sup>16</sup> "But what can cause your eyes to look so strange? / Your eyes shoot slaughter and spurt blackest strength! / How can a rabbi ever think of slaughter? / Throughout my life I've seen all kinds of dungeons, / Auto-da-fés ruled by the holy court. / And I have seen all sorts of Jewish faces, / And I have seen all kinds of Jewish eyes. / But I have never, ever chanced to see / A pair of Jewish eyes imbued with slaughter, / With truest hate as your eyes are now filled. / They look like the eyes of a savage golem..." (2006: 119-120).

been ordered, the Maharal believes. Though violence is here invoked in the pursuit of a just and pure goal and by the purest of all men, it – like the sleep of reason in Goya – “produces monsters”, and feeds upon a hatred that contaminates the rabbi himself, deforming his features.

In the second scene, entitled *Walls*, the Golem is no longer a shadow, but a person. He has a name, Yosl, Joseph, that reminds us of his messianic destiny and a rough-hewn appearance: he is huge and strong, with black hair, a black beard, a stupid smile, and childlike eyes. At first, the Golem can feel only the most primordial, violent feelings: fear and rage. The rabbi seems both disappointed and fascinated by his creature. He teaches him to bend his head if he has to walk through a very low door, to move objects instead of sweeping them away; he teaches him that the sunset is not a fire that will soon devour everything. Nonetheless, not even the rabbi's promise that Yosl will be welcomed as if “at home” soothes Yosl's terror. His rage explodes in an expressionistic outburst, his desperation at finding himself in a world so incomprehensible and threatening recalling scenes in works by other contemporary authors about the tragedy of the First World War:

Es hoybt zikh epes inveynik in mir un vergt,  
 Un klapt, a klinkerey in beyde oymern,  
 Un far di oygn – royt un grin...  
 Un mayne fis zey hoybn zikh, zey viln geyn,  
 Un mayne hent ot gibn zey a khap dikh farn halz  
 Un trogn zikh avek mit dir... vos iz do, zog,  
 Ikh vill ontloyfn un ikh ken nit, [*Shreyt.*]  
 Zog, vos iz do?  
 Ikh vil a sets ton mit a hant dir ibern kop –  
 Un kon zikh nit a rir ton... ze, ikh fal bald um,  
 Ez dreyen zikh di vent arum,  
 Der feyer durkh di shoybn vert alts greser [...]  
 Farlesh dos feyer arum mikh,  
 Nem tsu di vent (2012: 32-33)<sup>17</sup>.

It is only when the Golem sees Dvorel (Deborah), the rabbi's young granddaughter, that he catches a glimpse of that “very first gleam of [his own] very first hope” (2006: 129) that his creator had predicted – not the premonition of a messianic future, but the glimmer of some human warmth, desire, and passion. But Yosl Golem – be he man, Messiah, or animated puppet – does not belong to the human community, for which he can only feel nostalgia, and thus any inti-

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<sup>17</sup> “Something inside me's rising, choking me – / A throbbing, pounding, ringing in my ears, / And red and green loom up before my eyes... / My legs move up; they want to, wish to walk. / My hands – they want to, wish to grab your throat / And carry you away. Tell me, what's here? / I want to run, but I can't even walk. (*Shouts*) / Tell me, what's here? I want my hand to hit / Your head, and yet I cannot move... Watch me, / I'm staggering: the walls are spinning around. / The fire in the windows blazes bigger [...]. / Snuff out the flames and take away the walls” (2006: 127-128).

macy, any possibility of love is barred to him: “He doesn’t really seem to be a Jew”, says the *rebezin* (*Ibidem*); even just looking at the girl will be forbidden to that “guest from very far away”.

In the following scene, *Through Darkness*, the distance between the Golem and the community that he is supposed to protect continues to grow. When the biblical God had called Abraham, the patriarch had answered with the single word: *Hinneni*, Here I am, and it is from this absolute readiness that Jewish sacred history was born. The relationship between the Golem and the rabbi may also be seen as a degraded version of this narrative from the Book of Genesis: God-Maharal will not call Yosl, but Yosl will think he has heard the call, and when he, like Abraham, leaves everything to answer: “*Ikh bin do*”, “I’m here!”, the only response he receives is the spiteful laughter of young boys:

Kh’hob moyre far dayn kuk, far iedn vort.  
 Un shtendik dakht zikh mir, ikh her dayn kol:  
 “Vu bistu, kum aher”. Ikh tu a sets  
 Di hak in holts areyn un entfere: “do bin ikh”.  
 Un ale nehmen lakhn, iberkrimen: do bin ikh... (2012: 51)<sup>18</sup>.

It is from Yosl’s feelings of fear and absolute loneliness that a sense of dependence on the Maharal and of heartbreaking nostalgia for him arise in the Golem: “*Zo iz gut mit dir. / Ven du volst stendik zeyn mit mir, nit lozn mir aleyh...*” (2012: 53) (“I feel so good with you! / If you wished to be with me constantly / You wouldn’t leave me by myself...”, 2006: 138). Many times throughout the drama does the Golem repeat this request, even crouching down at the rabbi’s feet “like a dog!”, and many times does the Maharal turn his face away. After all, for the Golem, God – the Maharal – is exactly that “wholly Other” that the German philosophers wrote about, a God that man can perceive only in the awareness of his desertion, an absent God for whom man can feel only unredeemable nostalgia<sup>19</sup>.

In the meantime, events come to a head. “*Klange geyen um fun moyl tsu moyl*” (“rumors rushing round from mouth to mouth”), reb Bassevi complains when visiting the Maharal, “*un ikh aleyh [...] bin ikh nit zeyer ruhik, rebe*” (“And I [...], / I myself, Rabbi, feel so queasy now”, 2012: 56; 2006: 140-141). It is known that on Passover, the Christians, led by the priest Tadeush, will set up a provocation and accuse the Jews of ritual murder – and, once again, blood will be shed, the blood of the child killed in order to cast blame on the Jews... “Rabbi, what do they want of us?”, his guest asks. And the rabbi answers:

<sup>18</sup> “I’m frightened of your glaring eyes. / I’m terrified of every word you utter. / I always think that I can hear your voice: / ‘Where are you now?’ I smash the ax into / The wood, and then I answer you: ‘I’m here!’ / And everyone laughs and mimics me: ‘I’m here!’” (2006: 137).

<sup>19</sup> The expression “*Ganz Andere*” was first used in reference to God by theologian Rudolf Otto (2004: 28 ff.) in 1917 and later by several thinkers, including Max Horkheimer.

Men vil fun unz a fule, reb Basevi. Gor a sakh, a sakh...  
 Nor gebn konen mir zey gornisht, gornisht, hert mir?  
 Un epes konen mir – o, io, mir konen, reb Basevi,  
 mir viln ober nit. Mir viln nit... mir hobn  
 Tsu alts un alemen fun gor der velt  
 Nor tsugerirt zikh mit eyn shpits fun finger,  
 Gor fun der zeyt a hoykh geton mit unzer otem,  
 Un alts un ale fun der gantser velt  
 Vet trogn shoyn oyf eybik unzer finger,  
 Un shturems, virblendike shturems veln oysbrekhn  
 Fun unzer leykhtn oysgehoykhtn otem...(2012: 59-60)<sup>20</sup>.

The fourth scene, *Beggars*, is set among the poor who are quartered in the Fifth Tower, a sort of timeless non-place belonging to no one, perhaps a reference to the Minsk Tower where Leivick himself had been imprisoned. Tadeush wants to throw the Jews out of even that horrible shelter: he dreams of dancing “*arum fun flam fun sheyterhoifns*” (“around the flaming stake”), and ridicules the Jews’ passiveness, their being “*eybik, eybik, greyt tsu geyn*” (“always, always ready to go away”, 2012: 104-105; 2006: 171-172).

According to a well-known prophecy, the Messiah will come when the world is either completely good or when it is completely evil. In either case, mankind will have to be ready to welcome him and to accept change. Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav nonetheless argued that the coming of the Messiah, “will change nothing, except that the fools will suddenly be ashamed of their foolishness” (Mandel 1963: 19). Gershom Scholem, one of the most authoritative historians of Jewish thought who wrote about the “catastrophic character of redemption”, defined the messianic era as the “final catastrophe” (Scholem 1995: 12)<sup>21</sup>. In his view, ‘true’ messianic liberation is only possible through a bold undertaking, the courageous assumption of responsibility that lies almost at the limit of human power.

In the scene *Unbidden*, Prophet Elias and the Messiah are two beggars, one old and one young, both with sore hands and feet and waiting for dawn at the outskirts of Prague. As noted above, however, no redeemer may come without having been called for. Who cares if the young Messiah feels that “*zayn harts hot zikh farbenkt far eykh*” (“his heart is filled with yearning [...], longing”) for his people (2012: 110; 2006: 180). The time is not yet ripe; the awaited Messiah can only be the Last One, who marks the end of time. It is the Maharal himself who sends the two miserable beggars away. And, as one can only respond to violence with vio-

<sup>20</sup> “They want a great deal of us, Reb Bassevi. / But we can give them nothing, do you hear? / Yet if we can – oh, reb Bassevi, if / We can, we do not want to, do not want to... / With a mere fingertip we touched the world / And everything and everyone it holds. / Standing aside, we merely breathed a breath / On the entire world, and everything / And everyone it holds will bear the imprint / Of our touch until the end of time. / And storms will rage and whirlwinds will erupt / From our mild and our gentle breathing (2006: 143).

<sup>21</sup> Consider the “bold statement” of a third-century sage of the Talmud: “May he come, but I do not want to see him” (Scholem 1995: 12).

lence, the young Messiah, the beggar-Messiah, now bitterly predicts the coming of the Golem, whose only resource is force:

Fun den man, vos trogt zayn tseylem  
 Tsu dem betler mitn zakh,  
 kumt der oysleyzer, der goylem,  
 mit a fist un mit a hak (2012: 112)<sup>22</sup>.

In scene six, *Revelations*, the Golem wakes up in the Fifth Tower, where the Maharal had imprisoned him together with beggars and victims of the pogroms. Here, the puppet suddenly reveals his messianic role; the time set for his birth has come: his way of speaking becomes refined, he becomes aware of the ugliness of his body, of his glassy eyes, is pervaded by “*likhtikeyt fun eyne-ni're*” (“a brightness of invisibility”, *Ivi*: 133; 2006: 189). Nevertheless, the power that he has suddenly acquired does not mean that the Golem is moving away from his creator: even in the midst of rage and desperation, his words still maintain a “*vink oyf mayn tsurikker; an onzog oyf mayn benkenish un libshaft*” (“A hint of my return, a trace, a touch, / a sign of all my love and all my longing”, 2012: 150; 2006: 202). I am – reiterates the Golem – “always waiting for him”, I am “*eybik zeyner*” (“forever his”, 2012: 150-151; 2006: 202).

In the penultimate scene, *In the Cave*, the plot draws to a close. In the dark tunnels of the Fifth Tower that connect cathedral with synagogue, Tadeush and a monk carefully carry sealed bottles containing the blood of the child they have killed. Blood is the key word in the last pages of the poem, the blood which the Golem smells from afar. Only he will be able to prevent the final slaughter, but the means by which he can do so are the same as those used by Tadeush and his fellows. “*Durkh toyt un blut un letstn otem*” (“Through death and blood and final breath”, 2012: 166; 2006: 210), the Maharal teaches him, preparing him for the attack. The Golem tries to brace up, repeating the terrible formula, but he is continually tormented by nightmares and phantoms he cannot explain. Deserted by the Maharal and lost in the airless underground tunnels, he finds the bottles with the blood and probably intends to murder Tadeush and his assistant. But visions haunt him: the Golem is visited by a deformed image of the Maharal who insults him, “*dos ponim – beyz mit retsikhe, dos moyl tsunoyfgeprest*” (“an icy rage on his features [...], his lips clenched”, 2012: 173; 2006: 216), a choir of dead people, a man with the large cross, a young pilgrim. When the real Maharal finally reaches him and encourages him to complete his tragic mission, the Golem once more begs to be left in the tunnels, in the underground world to which he belongs – before suddenly casting off his messianic role and returning to his former state, that of a naïve being who suffers the torments of nostalgia, he rises all at once, gapes, embraces Rabbi: “*Rebe, rebe, du bist do? O, rebe mayner!*” (“Oh, Rabbi, Rabbi – you are here, my rabbi?”, 2012: 198; 2006: 236).

<sup>22</sup> “From the man who bears the cross / To the beggar with his pack, / Comes the golem, the redeemer, / With his fist and with his axe” (2006: 174).

In the final scene, *The Final Mission*, the Golem, still imprisoned, looks shaggy, unkempt, and sleepy (2006: 237). The rabbi has not visited him for eight days. The memory of that terrible night in the Fifth Tower is still vivid in the larger community: the beggars remember the crying, the solitary Golem, “*a riziker, a shverer*” (“huge and heavy”), and also the fact that as they themselves fled the Tower, “*keynem iz nisht eyngefaln gor tsu rufn im*” (“no one even thought of calling him”, 2012: 208-209; 2006: 240-241). When, at last, the Rabbi comes, he is appalled by the Golem’s appearance: “*Azoy fil umru in dayn harts, azoy fil sine; azoy fil shvartse tayve, kalte beyzkayt!*” (“So much distress and hatred in your heart! – he exclaims – So much dark passion and so much cold fury”, 2012: 213; 2006: 245). And yet, the Rabbi would still like the Golem to learn to live among other Jews, to relish the sound of their prayers. His naiveté is astonishing: the Golem is a stranger to human culture, a misfit. Moreover, the violence that the Rabbi himself has triggered within his creature – indeed, the violence for which the Rabbi created him – cannot be restrained. The result is a grotesque tragedy: the Golem does join the group of people praying at the synagogue, but only in order to slaughter them – and it is only then that the Maharal realizes the destructive power he has released:

Iz dos a shtraf far unzer freyd, Reboyne oylem?  
 Iz doz dayn shtraf far veln rateven zikh?  
 Ti hostu nisht baviligt?  
 [...]  
 Vos ikh hot in mayn ungeduld; in mayn fartsveyflung  
 Gevolt zikh opkern fun iene vegn fun dayn folk,  
 Vos zaynen shtil, geduldik, ful betuekh, eybik?...  
 Mayn zind far veln opnemen baym faynt dos zeynike;  
 Der faynt hot oyfgemant...  
 Ikh hob gevolt farmaydn blut un blut fargosn... (2012: 224)<sup>23</sup>.

But, once again, the Golem pleads with the Rabbi, orders him – “You’ll stay with me!” – and confesses that all that he has done, he has done “*durkh benkenish*”, “for yearning” (*Ibidem*). Dvorel runs in, terrified. The Golem reaches out to her, thinking she has come to be with him. At this point, the Rabbi gathers his strength, entrusts the puppet with his “final mission”, forces him to lie down, and orders him to die (2006: 252-253).

Evening falls. The Maharal orders the faithful to resume the song that marks the beginning of the Shabbat. An Invisible Force seeps into the dark,

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<sup>23</sup> “Oh, Lord, are we now punished for our joy? / Are we chastised for trying now to save / Ourselves? And didn’t you grant your approval? [...] / In my despair, in my intolerance, / I wished to turn my back on all those ways / Of all your people, ways that are eternal, / Ways that are silent, patient, full of faith? / My sin in wanting what the foe lays claim to? / The enemy demanded what was his. / The blood that I desired to save I spilled!” (2006: 248-249). Here again, Leivick highlights the problem of violence being completely alien to Jewish identity.

closed room – it is perhaps the soul of the Golem, perhaps the personification of his craving for love, of his “nostalgia” (Kalk Lubatti 1956: 13), a Force that whispers to the dying puppet before descending onto him:

Dervayl hot zikh mit eynuneysik rege  
Fartsoygt mer, durkh mir, dayn leben;  
Zay dankbar mir far der gerateveter rege,  
Vayl ot fargeyt zi... (2012: 234)<sup>24</sup>.

#### 4. *Conclusions*

Leivick’s tragedy does not provide a unique answer to the great themes it raises. We do not know whether the existence of the Golem was really the realization of God’s will or only the expression of the Maharal’s own Promethean hubris, nor do we learn the meaning of redemption, nor are we given any justification for or decisive condemnation of violence. What is highlighted, however, in this all-male tragedy – essentially as male-centered as is traditional Jewish culture itself – is the relationship between the rabbi and the Golem, simultaneously that of both father/son and God/man<sup>25</sup> – and the lost, yearning, and unconsolated creaturality of the big, clumsy puppet – a true symbol, in this respect, of modern man.

Messianic nostalgia is expressed in Leivick’s work to the fullest degree: either the Messiah will not come or, if he does, he will achieve – for both himself and the world – only disappointment and catastrophe. Such had already been prophesized by the Chassidic masters, reflecting their profound knowledge of ‘mercurial’ life in the Diaspora and of its frail accomplishments<sup>26</sup>. The devising of utopias and conjuring up of complex plans for salvation is pointless, Leivick argues. Humanity’s only way out, he seems to say, is through the acceptance of its own vague, objectless nostalgia.

While Leivick knew that even the greatly yearned for coming of the Messiah would change nothing in the human condition, he also held that continuing to wait for and to believe in his arrival was necessary. In this he resembles the addressee of Kafka’s famous *Message from the Emperor*, a text written during

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<sup>24</sup> “Meanwhile my life is pouring, pouring through me, / Pouring me through that solitary moment, / Grateful now for that salvaged moment here, / For now that moment melts...” (2006: 254).

<sup>25</sup> In the 1991 staging of *Golem*, one of Moni Ovadia’s most successful performances, he ‘softened’ the androcentricity of this work by including a choir consisting of three pregnant women, representing simultaneously both the *Shekinah*, or divine presence, and the only possible way of generating in the human world. Ovadia’s approach was based on his interpretation of the father/son relationship in Leivick’s text, which he emphasized even more explicitly by adding some passages by Kafka, including *Letter to His Father* (cf. Bertolone 2012: 32 ff.).

<sup>26</sup> On Jewish ‘mercuriality’, a concept elaborated by Yuri Slezkine (2004), see the introductory article to this volume by L. Salmon.

the same period as Leivick's *The Golem*. Kafka's figure continues to wait for the arrival of a messenger, even though he is well aware that such waiting is useless, that the messenger will never come. As the narrator explains: "No one will get through here [...]. You, though, will sit at your window and conjure [arrival] up for yourself in your dreams, as evening falls" (2012: 28).

That said, Leivick's 'nostalgic' thought – like twentieth-century Jewish life and thought in general – both recognizes and encompasses a new dialectical element, namely political Zionism, the return to the land of the Fathers, the re-founding of the state of Israel. Following Boym's definitions, Zionism could be considered the expression of 'restorative nostalgia' since it "attempts a trans-historical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym 2001: XVIII). It is difficult, however, to draw a neat boundary between Boym's two varieties of nostalgia – restorative and reflective. For Leivick and many other thinkers and interpreters of the Zionist movement, the re-foundation of the state of Israel was less "a return to the original stasis" or "a perfect snapshot" of a static past (Boym 2001: 49), than an enormous, innovative, and maieutic challenge, oriented towards making Israel a model for other nations, a challenge necessary to face that held no guarantee of success. While Yiddish, to which Leivick chose to attach his destiny, is generally associated – at least in its secular version – with the simultaneous acknowledgement and acceptance of dispersion and of exile, Yiddish language and culture also participated, albeit in often conflicting and troubled ways, in the building of the new country. Israel was, after all, a new reality, not the reproduction of clichés from a bygone era<sup>27</sup>.

Leivick spent the greater part of his life hovering between two idealizations of life in the Diaspora, both of them reflective in mood: on one hand, the idealization of "transcendental homelessness", to use the expression of György Lukács (1985: 41), on the other, the hope-filled vision of Israel, the "future of nostalgia". These two visions culminated after his death, as had often happened in his life, in a symbolic event, namely the creation in Tel Aviv in 1970 of the House of Leivick, a cultural center and museum, as well as the Israeli seat of the association of Yiddish writers and journalists<sup>28</sup>. This institution is one of very few in the state of Israel where the sounds of Hebrew and Yiddish, together with the multiple nostalgias of the Hebrew world, coexist in relative harmony – and both worlds, significantly, are contained in its name: Bet Leyvik, Leyviks Hoys.

*(Translated by Cecilia Pozzi and Sara Dickinson)*

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<sup>27</sup> At the same time, this guttural and poetic idiom of a disinherited and homeless people, a language whose very structure would seem to symbolize exile, necessarily suggested paradox and a sort of bizarre defeatism. Indeed, in the early years of the Israeli state, Ben Gurion led an aggressive campaign against Yiddish culture, which he identified with the humiliation and powerlessness of the Diaspora.

<sup>28</sup> During her speech at the opening of the House of Leivick in 1970, Golda Meir characterized that event as a celebration of "the elimination of the partition between Hebrew and Yiddish" and the end of any "battle between the languages" (Goldsmith 1997: 24).

## Резюме

Лаура Кьюерчоли Мицер

*Тоска и креатурность в Големе Г. Лейвика*

В данной статье рассматриваются некоторые составные элементы 'еврейской тоски', чаще всего воспринимающей метафизический характер. Объектом анализа является пьеса на языке идиш *Голем* (1921) – шедевр русско-еврейского писателя Г. Лейвика. Известная креатура-великан из глины, созданная в VII веке раввином Левом в Праге, становится в произведении Г. Лейвика эмблемой еврейской меланхолической ностальгии. Подобного рода тоска направлена как на онтологически далекого, недостижимого творца и на столь же недостижимую мессианскую эру, так и, парадоксально, на состояние небытия.