

## Translating History into Art: The Influences of Cyprian Kamil Norwid in Abraham Sutzkever's Poetry

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### ABSTRACT

*Our paper traces the development of Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever's imaginative engagement with the Polish Romantic Cyprian Norwid. Sutzkever expressed a strong affinity with Norwid in his youth due to commonalities in their artistic vision. He also saw in this poetic dialogue a means to transcend the crisis in Polish-Jewish relations. In order to demonstrate the aesthetic and political stakes of this relationship, we discuss Sutzkever's early poem "Cyprian Norwid" and his translations of Polish poetry into Yiddish in the 1930s. It has previously been assumed by scholars that Sutzkever's postwar poem "Tsu Poyln" (To Poland) marked a definitive break with Polish literary culture. However, as we show, Sutzkever continued to be influenced by Norwid through his period of poetic maturation. Many of Sutzkever's postwar poems are framed as subtle responses to Norwid's—commenting and expanding upon the latter's philosophical and aesthetic responses to Polish history. As an indelible representation of human fragility and transitoriness, art constitutes, for Sutzkever, the best response he can give to the losses and tragedies which he witnessed.*

**Y**iddish literary historian Khone Shmeruk observed that as Yiddish literature developed in interwar Poland, it was marked by the paradox of its intimate—but also highly tense—relationship with Polish literary history. On the one hand, Yiddish writers of the period expressed a strong awareness of their cultural distinctiveness and social alienation, as they confronted the rise of Polish nationalism and its antisemitic offshoots. On the other hand, their

contact with Polish literature was more pronounced—and more conscious—than it had been for their predecessors; many of them actively mined Polish history and literature for motifs through which they could communicate the ambivalences of their cultural and national attachments. Shmeruk pointed to poet Abraham Sutzkever's ode "Tsu Poyln" (To Poland; 1946) as emblematic of this "complicated theme" within Yiddish literature. Although the poem was staged as a bitter farewell and searing indictment of Poland, much of its rhetorical power was derived from the way it wove references to Polish literature into its interpretation of recent history. As Shmeruk suggested in the conclusion of his essay, "Sutzkever's relationship to Polish poetry is a serious matter that is worthy of major research."<sup>1</sup>

To shed more light on the complexities that Shmeruk began to unravel, this article explores the development of Sutzkever's relationship with Polish literature, with a focus on his engagement with the figure of Cyprian Kamil Norwid (1821–83), the leading and most enigmatic figure of the last stages of Polish romanticism. We argue that Sutzkever's relationship with Norwid can be divided into two distinct stages, with the transition between the two marked by "Tsu Poyln." At the beginning of his artistic career in Vilna in the 1930s, Sutzkever's interaction with Norwid's poetry is quite overt; we show how he actively wrote about and translated Norwid as part of his search for artistic models and his efforts to channel the "anxiety of influence." Sutzkever's Yiddish Norwidiana is critical in helping us to understand how the young poet sought to distinguish himself from his peers by establishing cosmopolitan credentials and expressing a faith in the universal language of poetry. By resisting demands to reflect Jewish sociopolitical realities in his poetry, and instead to seek out precursors who, like him, were drawn to writing as a means to communicate moral, intellectual, and artistic refinement, he demonstrated his poetic self-confidence and independence. After the Holocaust, even as he sharply departed from this open celebration of Polish literary influences, Sutzkever did not, as "Tsu Poyln" might suggest, entirely reject them. In the second part of the essay, we show how Sutzkever's more mature, postwar metaphysical lyrics continue his dialogue with Norwid, though in a more oblique and subtle fashion. It is through his poetic response to, and development of, Norwid's philosophical reflections on the imperiled status of his native country

and its relationship to his artistic creation that Sutzkever formulates the metaphysical standpoint through which he addresses the tragedies he and his people underwent. Sutzkever's involvement with Norwid's poetry, then, powerfully illustrates the depth, the limits, and the contradictions of this period of intensive Polish-Yiddish cultural interrelations.

It is not coincidental that Sutzkever's efforts to establish himself as an inheritor of Polish literature emerged at the precise moment when Polish Jewry felt itself increasingly embattled. The 1930s were, of course, a chaotic and anxious political period for local Jews. Not only were they sandwiched between two totalitarian regimes, Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, but at home they had to contend with the pernicious effects of Polish nationalism. While he was still a teenager, one of Sutzkever's earliest mentors, Max Weinreich,<sup>2</sup> lost an eye in an act of antisemitic violence. As he reached adulthood, Sutzkever found that social contacts between youth of different national groups were severely limited. At Vilna's Stefan Batory University, for instance, students were increasingly segregated according to nationality and often physically threatened in its courtyards. In 1931, a Polish student was accidentally killed during clashes between Jewish and Polish students. Radical elements called for the number of Jews at the university to be sharply reduced, and Jews found themselves increasingly unwelcome in most campus organizations. The ghetto benches (forcing Jews to sit at the sides or back of classes) were introduced across Poland following the death of President Piłsudski in 1935. They became symbols of an atmosphere in which popular anti-Semitism was complemented by official anti-Jewish policies inspired by the right-wing *Endecja* (National-Democratic) party and its offshoots. Vilna witnessed anti-Jewish riots, bans on the sale of kosher meat, forced Polonization of Yiddish signs, and boycotts of Jewish-owned businesses. Such attacks—whether physical, social, or economic—forced Jews to rely on their own resources, further enhancing the divide between Jews and Poles.<sup>3</sup> Sutzkever himself was attacked in 1938 while on his way home.<sup>4</sup> Despite such an atmosphere, his artistic reaction was counter-intuitive: rather than follow the trend of his fellow writers in the literary group *Yung-Vilne*,<sup>5</sup> whose leftist sympathies prompted them to reflect the degenerating social and economic realities in their writing, Sutzkever sought to craft alternative worlds that might transcend temporal divisions. To that effect, he experi-

mented with the creation of a bridge to coterritorial literature. He believed that Yiddish writing in Poland had a natural kinship with Polish literature, based on shared history and landscape; Polish literature needed to be respected as part of the literary inheritance of contemporary Yiddish writers if Yiddish literature were ever to be accepted beyond Jewish circles as native to Poland. These commitments, of course, were fueled by the myth of a Polish-Jewish brotherhood,<sup>6</sup> which political developments through the 1930s exposed as a minority's cultural fantasy. Sutzkever also was undoubtedly familiar with Arn Tsaytlin's 1932 drama *Esterke* that evoked an encounter between the leading Romantic figures of Polish and Yiddish literature—Adam Mickiewicz and Y. L. Peretz—in order to probe the “mystery” of Polish-Yiddish relations; the Peretz character's admission that “I know who you are, but who I am . . . you do not know”<sup>7</sup> expressed the frustration of Tsaytlin's generation who remained anonymous to their neighbors, despite the competitive republic of letters they were building in Yiddish. Nonetheless, Sutzkever's interest in Polish poetry was a conscious act of mediation designed to challenge the cultural divisiveness of his environment.

#### SUTZKEVER AND “CYPRIAN NORWID”

One of the centerpieces of Sutzkever's first volume of poetry, *Lider* (1937), was the eight-part ballad “Cyprian Norwid.” It was composed over the summer of 1936 and appeared almost simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic several months later.<sup>8</sup> As this was the only sketch of any writer to be included in Sutzkever's debut collection, the reader must consider why Norwid was offered so prominent a place. Part of the answer is connected to the Polish literary environment in which Sutzkever came of age. Unlike many of his fellow Yiddish poets in Yung-Vilne who benefited from the city's secular Yiddish schools, Sutzkever had graduated from a Polish Jewish elementary school. His interest in Polish literature was enhanced further in the early 1930s through his friendship with Mikhoel (Miki) Czernichow. Miki was the son of attorney Josef Czernikhow, one of Jewish Vilna's most prominent community leaders and intellectuals. Sutzkever was a frequent guest in the Czernikhow home, and vacationed with the family at their

summer residence in nearby Wolokumpie where the two young men, under the tutelage of Miki's parents, would spend evenings reading everything from the Polish Romantics and Russian classics to Edgar Allan Poe. This environment provided Sutzkever with a love for world literature, and ignited his imagination with novel sounds, rhythms, and thematic possibilities.

Sutzkever received a more scholarly overview of Polish literature by sitting in on classes with Manfred Krydl at Stefan Batory University. Krydl was a leading scholar of Polish Romanticism, and also a committed social progressive who was repelled by the xenophobic streak within Polish nationalism that targeted Jewish students. Through Krydl, Sutzkever gained an intimate familiarity with many of the leading literary figures of Polish Romanticism, especially Adam Mickiewicz, and exiles such as Juliusz Słowacki, Zygmunt Krasiński, and Cyprian Norwid. Though Mickiewicz (born in Nowogródek, near Vilna) was the best-known Polish romantic in Jewish intellectual circles,<sup>9</sup> Sutzkever was drawn to the inherent difficulty of Norwid's verse, to his innovative use of archaisms<sup>10</sup> that made room for neologisms and new rhymes, to his unexpected line breaks and enjambment, and to his musicality.

Sutzkever's earliest years as a writer also coincided with a mini-boom in Polish Norwidiana, spearheaded by the avant-garde writers of Skamander and the Kraków Vanguard who embraced Norwid as a precursor to their modernist form and as an example of the philosophical artist willing to resist the popular expectations of the street, all of which appealed to Sutzkever as he attempted to eke out his poetic orientation. His composition "Cyprian Norwid" took place in the same atmosphere that gave birth to similar efforts by his Polish contemporaries,<sup>11</sup> including Jan Lechoń's "Norwid," Światopełk Karpiński's "U Norwida" (At Norwid's), Jerzy Liebert's "Rozmowa o Norwidzie" (Conversation about Norwid), and even Julian Tuwim's "Rzecz czarnoleska" (Matter of Czarnolas).<sup>12</sup> Yet these Polish lyrics were brief and often impressionistic in quality, designed to use their admiration of Norwid to make a writer look sophisticated or to score artistic points. Liebert's "Rozmowa o Norwidzie" is a useful example. Its setting is a social gathering in a private home. A copy of a Norwid volume lies on the parlor table. Its fancy ribbons and glistening golden cover call attention to its pristine condition, suggesting that the book functions as an ostentatious symbol of cultivation rather than as some-

thing to be seriously read. When a guest at the gathering is asked to weigh in on its contents, his hands move towards its pages “unwillingly.” His hesitancy, and the subsequent response of other guests to the mention of Norwid, underscore the writer’s paradoxical place in the Polish imagination. On the one hand, the pride of place accorded to the volume in the salon points to the literary pretension of Polish high society that feels that it must acknowledge one of its most difficult Romantic figures as a matter of national self-respect. On the other hand, nobody is sophisticated enough a reader to consider sitting down with the volume to try to experience the ways in which it organizes a vision of history that made Norwid an outcast in his time. As one interlocutor self-incriminatingly admits, “Wszystko jest tu niejasne, wolę proste książki” (Everything in here is unclear. I prefer simple books). The polite conversation among guests continues: “Some people reproached its obscurity, others the complexity of the sentences / Is the love portrayed in the poem real or imagined? / The most beautiful poetry should consist of simple words. . . .”<sup>13</sup> The conversation is interrupted by a white rose tossed into the crowd, meant to symbolize the futile attempt of perfectly realized beauty to break through the idle chatter of the haute bourgeoisie. The entire scene suggests the degree to which the guests are immune to interruptions of the sublime, and thus deaf to the transcendent possibilities of Norwid’s artistry. Only the poem’s narrator pauses to take in the sights and aromas. Liebert’s attempt to resuscitate Norwid’s reputation, then, serves a convenient purpose in that it allows him to offer a critical reading of the middle-brow tastes of his imagined readers. The poem is far less about Norwid than it is about Liebert’s desire to position himself as a serious writer by appropriating the myth of Norwid.

Of the dozens of Polish language lyrics dedicated to Norwid in the interwar period, Sutzkever’s Yiddish ballad was the most monumental, both in terms of its length and artistic control (eight sections comprised of forty-three iambic quatrains) and its exploration of the complexities of Norwid’s biography (it contains scenes of his birth and childhood in Warsaw, his student life in Florence where he studied sculpture, his émigré experiences in Paris where he befriended fellow Poles Chopin and Słowacki, his torment over the failed Polish uprising in 1863, and his anonymous death at a French asylum). Moreover, none of the Polish poems devoted to Norwid occupy the same featured place in their respective volumes as “Cyprian

Norwid" did in Sutzkever's *Lider*, where it appears in the very center of the book as the concluding poem in the section *Farb un klang* (Colors and Sounds), devoted to Sutzkever's exploration of the most elemental aspects of poetry. By holding up Norwid, above all other poets, as a literary model, Sutzkever claimed the entirety of the Polish literary tradition as his birthright, and by anchoring his volume with a tribute to a writer recently rediscovered by a generation of Polish modernists, he signaled that he was in step with avant-garde trends.

Indeed, one reason why Sutzkever was so attracted to Norwid was due to perceived similarities in biography and critical reception. Norwid was born into an impoverished noble family and was orphaned as a boy. Sutzkever possessed the closest thing Jews had to aristocracy—a refined rabbinic pedigree—and he too found himself an orphan when his father died of a heart attack while the poet was still a boy. Norwid went into self-imposed exile in France when he was twenty-one. The condition of exile was something that Sutzkever too intimately understood; his family had spent World War I as refugees in Siberia. Most significantly, however, Norwid appealed to Sutzkever as a representative of the estrangement of the artist from society. Norwid's bohemian personality, the obscurity of his verse, and his rejection both of the utilitarian, rational demands of Enlightenment poetry and the conventions of Romanticism<sup>14</sup> struck a chord in Sutzkever, who found himself on the periphery of Yung-Vilne. Both Norwid and Sutzkever were criticized for their resistance to utilitarian uses for art. The latter read Norwid's lack of political association with figures from the Great Polish Emigration as a justification for his own refusal to harness his art to the contentious politics of the Jewish street. Sutzkever's determination to have his poetry rise above politics was mocked and resented by some of his colleagues who were put off by his refined aesthetic posture.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, Norwid's conviction that "a writer participates in history through his art"<sup>16</sup> resonated with Sutzkever to mean that true creative achievement translates across national boundaries to forge a universal language of human experience. As Czesław Miłosz explains it, Norwid believed that "the artist should be an organizer of the national imagination."<sup>17</sup> At the same time, Norwid's close friendship in Paris with Chopin, another Polish émigré, also convinced him that true art must transcend its national context. Sutzkever was moved by the Polish writer's ability to balance a love for

nation against an even greater commitment to universal artistic communicability. In short, then, Sutzkever believed he could both articulate his emerging poetic philosophy *and* transcend the poisoned relations between Poles and Jews by using Norwid to underscore the community of faith between artists. As the poem suggests:

There must be a light that all of humanity can feel, can see,	S' darf zayn a likht vos ale mentshn zoln filn, zen
A love that is beauty and a beauty that is love.	A libshaft vos iz sheynkayt un a sheynkayt vos iz libe.
Then a brotherhood never before realized	Dan vet a brudershaft vos keynmol iz nokh nisht geven
Will weave all solitary beings into bright celebration.	Farflekhtn ale elnte in likhtiker mesibe. <sup>18</sup>

Sutzkever was still naive enough in 1936 to insist that art rooted in universal principles of transcendent beauty and awe could provide a path for Polish-Jewish rapprochement, if only readers were willing to raise their eyes beyond national divisions to experience, as his poem imagined, “a magic dream woven in gold / where truth is sound, image, and bright exultation.”<sup>19</sup> His apolitical vision of aesthetic kinship—“a brotherhood never before realized”—does political work after all. At the same time, Sutzkever appreciated that art must be rooted in a national consciousness. Thus, “Cyprian Norwid” carefully balances its universal vision against the exile’s attachment to native home: “You love the sad Polish earth / in every crooked hut you see great beauty. / You want your spirit to be heard by every little grass / yet you remain estranged in the most lonesome solitude.”<sup>20</sup> He continues several paragraphs later: “Perhaps you will return to the Fatherland / where the Vistula trembles like a silver ribbon. . . .”<sup>21</sup> Sutzkever’s descriptions here do more than stir up the bond between a Polish poet and his homeland; they also prepare the Yiddish reader for Sutzkever’s own geographic claim to the Polish-Lithuanian landscape. As one critic remarked: “The Norwid poem is the climax of the volume. . . . The love and devotedness he demonstrates for Norwid is often startling . . . I do not possess any personal attachment to



Polish or Poland. But with Sutzkever and the poet he celebrates, my tepid attitude towards Poland dissipates. It is a rare poetic achievement . . . our young poet tears himself free from the Jewish roots of Yiddish.”<sup>22</sup> This contemporary reading reflects the poem’s accomplishment in expanding the thematic borders of Yiddish so that it might translate Jews out of their cultural isolation. At precisely the moment when Polish society was closing in on its Jewish population, Sutzkever crafted a countervision based on the possibilities of mutual respect. To be sure, Sutzkever here also was gesturing with respect to Norwid’s “Żydowie polscy” (The Polish Jews; 1861), which acknowledged Jewish solidarity with the Polish patriotic demonstrations that rocked Warsaw in 1861. The poem is a key text in Polish–Jewish relations, as Opalski and Bartal argue, because “Jews opt in Norwid’s poem for a symbolic choice that is both political (allegiance with Poles) and moral.”<sup>23</sup> “Cyprian Norwid,” then, allowed Sutzkever to reengage the question of the Jewish role in Poland’s national narrative by teasing out the natural affinities between two of history’s long-suffering nations.<sup>24</sup>

In describing the Polish poet, in the very first line, as a bearer of a “crown of thorns,”<sup>25</sup> Sutzkever appropriates the Catholic mythology of Poland as Europe’s martyr into a broader metaphor for the suffering and alienation of the writer. Sutzkever is particularly sharp when he translates the tepid reception accorded to Norwid in that poet’s lifetime into an opportunity to engage his own critics:

What do they know of ephemeral beauty,	Vos veysn zey, di bidne layt, vos loyern arum
Those who, with stupidity and foolish- ness, hover over your four ells?	mit bloferay un narishkayt—in dayne daled ames
Like a fiery flower	fun oysderveylter sheynkayt? Vi a fayerdike blum,
You pricked your heart facing distant panoramas.	farshtekt du host dayn harts in lats fun vayte panorames.
Even the poet in the tavern, <sup>26</sup> with lips like ash,	Afile der poet in shenk, mit lipn vi fun ash,

Does not understand you. He feels your	farshteyt dikh nit: batapt dayn
polished words the same way that	oysgeglitn vort, vi eyner
A man with no eyes touches a woman,	vos hot keyn oygn nit—a froy, un
as he strokes a flask.	shpilt zikh mit der flash.
You bring white love, and people	Du brengst a vayse libshaft, un men
answer you with stones. <sup>27</sup>	entfert dir mit shteyner.

These lines express a profound affinity between the speaker and his subject, and provide Sutzkever with an outlet for his own frustrations about the local literary environment.<sup>28</sup> The invocation of the Jewish concept of the four ells beyond which a religious Jew is not permitted to wander on the Sabbath is, of course, playfully self-referential in a poem about Norwid. It allows Sutzkever to showcase his musicality by yoking together the *daled ames*—a Hebrew expression connoting the self-restraint demanded of traditional Jews—with *panorames*—a word of Greek origin that suggests the freedom and expansiveness of nature and imagination. This tension is at the very heart of what Sutzkever sees as the ultimate poetic challenge, how to balance the particularity of his national commitments against a universal standard of beauty. Sutzkever’s neoclassical interests prompt his fascination with the Grecian Norwid—that is, with his lyric “sculptures”<sup>29</sup>—who recognizes that form is an integral component of message. Sutzkever adopts sculpture as shorthand for the struggles and joys of the creative act.

A few years later, in “Di mirmlne shtot” (The Marble City), he meditates on the artistic accomplishments of Ancient Greece and takes them as a model for himself: “The sculptor and his chisel, the painter / by his rainbow pallet, the poet / by the heavenly truth of earthly words. / This is how blessed harmony is forged / out of brotherhood/ everyone on his own, like the stars. . . .”<sup>30</sup> Sutzkever acknowledges the inherent tension between the solitude of individual creativity (“everyone on his own”) and the artistic end product that, if executed correctly, inspires humanity as a whole (“harmony forged out of brotherhood”). For our purposes, however, it is relevant that Sutzkever’s “Di mirmlne shtot” is preceded by a epigram—printed in Polish—from Norwid’s “Wczora-i-ja” (Yesterday-and-I; 1860): “W uszach mi szumi (a nie znam z teorji / Co burza?), / Wiec snie I czuje, jak sie

tom historji / Zmarmurza. . .”<sup>31</sup> (There is a buzzing in my ear [and theory does not tell me, / How to discern a storm?] / So I am dreaming, and I feel the volumes of history / Turn into marble.) The epigram functions on several levels simultaneously. It is deliberately exotic to Yiddish readers who do not read Polish; by including it, Sutzkever signals that until they manage to decode it they will be missing something fundamental in the way in which the poem is in dialogue with the coterritorial literary tradition. On the level of meaning, the epigram reveals Norwid’s (and Sutzkever’s) understanding of the function of the poet in relation to history. It suggests that although the poet is aware of an atmosphere of turmoil around him (“There is a buzzing in my ear”; “How to discern a storm?”) it is not necessarily the responsibility of the poet to represent it. At the same time, the burden of history weighs down upon him and demands an independent vision of existence (the dreams) to serve as a counterweight, even an antidote, to what seems to be an inevitable coalescence of external forces. The epigram provides Sutzkever with permission in “Di mirmine shtot” to transcend the realities of his own European city and to concentrate instead on the countervision offered up by that which has been marbleized (and eternalized) in the art of the ancient world: “the dream,” “the hymn,” “the temple of love,” “the heavenly orchestra.”

One might have expected that Sutzkever’s interest in Norwid would have led to friendships with young Polish poets, or that his poem would have caught the eye of Polish critics and broadened interest in the country’s active Yiddish literary scene. Indeed, though he hoped that “Cyprian Norwid” might offer up a model of spiritual brotherhood that could rise above national divisions, the poem barely made a ripple. This was, perhaps, to be expected considering the limited contacts and cooperation between Polish and Yiddish writers at this time. A few years earlier, the Polish PEN club (supposedly dedicated to the fellowship of writers rather than to politics) was so adamant in refusing to welcome Yiddish writers into their circle and to counteract antisemitism that Yiddish writers were forced to petition the international committee of PEN for permission to open up their own branch in Poland. By the mid-1930s, the paucity of interest in translation of contemporary Yiddish literature into Polish, and the prejudice that was an inherent part of Polish nationalism, did not encourage the types of cross-cultural interactions that Sutzkever imagined.

Even at home, Sutzkever and his friends in Yung-Vilne had limited contact with their Polish peers. At the same moment, for instance, that Yung-Vilne stormed the city's Yiddish cultural scene, a group of young Polish writers at the city's university was congregating around the miscellany *Żagary* (Brushwood). Similarities between the groups are remarkable. Both were defined by their progressive politics, and both exhibited a catastrophist streak in their publications that was expressed through a perception of reality that saw the world degenerating into crisis and chaos. Since the modern city was a dangerous hub of political, social, and economic degeneracy, both forwarded an antiurban poetics that embraced the natural landscape as an uncorrupted, purifying alternative reality. Czesław Miłosz's pantheism, Aleksander Rymkiewicz's expression of love for the forests and lakes of Lithuania, and Jerzy Putrament's "Droga lesna" (Forest Road; 1938) found remarkable local Yiddish counterparts in Elkhonen Vogler's *A bletl in vint* (A Leaf in the Wind; 1935) and *Tsvey beriozes baym trakt* (Two Birch Trees on the Highway; 1939), and in Sutzkever's ecstatic *Valdiks* (Of the Forest; 1940) that were equally interested in exploring and claiming the region's orchards, lakes, forests, and fields.<sup>32</sup> Despite these shared aesthetic interests, contacts between Yung-Vilne and the literary group *Żagary* were extremely limited and unofficial. Yung-Vilne was never invited to work with *Żagary* to share a joint evening or publication. Though *Żagary* sponsored "Literary Wednesdays," Yung-Vilne writers such as Sutzkever rarely attended. Thus, any similarities between the groups were not a function of real-life collaboration but rather a product of shared time, place, and generation. One of the founders of *Żagary*, future Nobel laureate Czesław Miłosz, bluntly recalls: "Jewish and non-Jewish Wilno lived separate lives."<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere he adds: "There was no bridge between these two groups in our city. The Catholic and Jewish communities . . . lived within the same walls, yet as if on different planets. . . . Only at the university did we gather in the same lecture halls, and even there student organizations were divided into Polish, Jewish, Lithuanian and Byelorussian. Thus the barriers were kept up in accordance with an unwritten law."<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, Yung-Vilne and *Żagary* inhabited coterritorial yet entirely separate cultural worlds.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, given that many leading Polish modernist poets were Jewish, especially those associated with the literary group *Skamander* (and others, such as Dvora Vogel in Lwów, wrote in both Hebrew and Polish), the invisible wall

between Polish and Yiddish literary high culture underlined tensions not only between Poles and Jews but also between Polish-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jewry. In centers such as Warsaw, where the assimilated, middle- and upper-class Jews predominantly spoke Polish, Yiddish was regarded as the language of the working class or of those Jews too parochial to adapt to Polish culture. In Jewish Vilna, by contrast, Polish culture never had the same prestige as Russian, which had been the language of high culture prior to Vilna's incorporation into Poland following World War I. Vilna's Jewish intellectual elite consciously congealed around Yiddish in the interwar period as an expression of Jewish civic pride, unity, and distinctiveness, a factor that further distinguished the city's culture from other Jewish urban centers in Poland. Sutzkever's tribute to Norwid, then, was a conscious effort to bridge both national and linguistic divides.

#### THE POLITICS OF TRANSLATION: NORWID, MICKIEWICZ, SŁOWACKI

In spite of the fact that the social resonance of Sutzkever's engagement with Norwid's works was very limited, he did not cease to explore ever new ways of interacting with Polish Romantic poetry. In the early summer of 1939, Sutzkever's interest in Norwid was manifested again when he published three Yiddish translations of Norwid in the local press. In a letter to Arn-Glants Leyeles in New York he confessed the degree to which these translations came "almost like a commandment to me."<sup>36</sup> "Mayn lidl" ("Moja piosenka" [My Song]), "Di sheynkayt fun tsayt"<sup>37</sup> ("Piękno czasu" [The Beauty of Time]), and "Shopins klavir"<sup>38</sup> ("Fortepian Szopena" [Chopin's Piano]) underscore the degree to which Sutzkever carefully mined Norwid for works in which he could communicate the tension between the dark historical moment and his faith in art as an antidote to all that corrupts.

For instance, his translation of "Piękno czasu" (a provocative, counterintuitive title considering its publication in 1939) allowed him to acknowledge the political turmoil of that summer ("lilies wilted, roses exhausted") while concurrently mounting an attack on the superficial state of contemporary aesthetic taste: "People today seek out beauty less and less / . . . they only look for that which is

attractive / and which intoxicates with its appearance!" The poem's second stanza, with its allusion to Urania, the Greek muse of astronomy associated with universal love, provides an opportunity for the speaker to question how he is to balance the "thunder" below (the turmoil of the human sphere) against Urania's "charm" (the transcendent wonders of the universe). The speaker accepts that his own artistic performance at this difficult moment will determine whether he will withstand the test of time and "still be known once in the grave." Sutzkever's translation of Norwid perfectly communicates his mood, and promotes a vision of art that is meant to counter hysteria with equanimity and refinement.

By contrast, his translation of "Fortepian Szopena" (1863–65), Norwid's threnody about the failed 1863 Polish insurrection against tsarist rule, provided a vehicle through which to comment on the moral value of national resistance against tyranny. Norwid, who befriended Chopin in Paris, considered the composer a model of the Polish cultural ideal, a figure whose compositions captured the folk melodies, spirit, myths, and historical memory of the nation and transformed them into a universal artistic achievement for the world. This, according to Norwid, is the Romantic essence of a national artist: "And in that music there was Poland. . . ." At the same time, he acknowledges the neoclassical principles of his music's construction "as if it were some ancient [Greek] virtue," "some model of Periclean perfection." It is the synthesis, Norwid suggests, of romantic and neoclassical ideals, of the highest standards of the national spirit and universal standards of artistic beauty, that permit the rare artist to achieve universal importance. This was a model that also stimulated Sutzkever as he struggled with the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Yiddish literary world in Poland and its initial confusion over his exotic experimentations.

The poem's climax, set in the aftermath of the attempted assassination of Count Berg during the Polish insurrection against tsarist rule, recalls an attack by a group of Cossacks on the Zamoyski palace in Warsaw. The marauders set fire to the piano that Chopin had used in crafting some of his most important compositions, and tossed it out the window into the street below. The fate of Chopin's piano thus comes to symbolize Polish art sharing in the martyrdom of the Polish nation. Sutzkever was moved by Norwid's notion that "man's noble thought is trampled upon by human fury . . . [Poland], taken from the zenith of complete

perfection in history, Orpheus' body torn to pieces by a thousand passions." His translation of such a work in light of ongoing antisemitic attacks and anti-Jewish legislation invited his Yiddish readership to interpret the poem as a metaphor for their own times. In Yiddish, Chopin's piano as the "lofty ideal bursting against the pavement" is representative not only of a transformative moment in modern Polish nationalism, but also of contemporary realities in which the dream of Polish-Jewish brotherhood is shattered by the dangerous mob mentality on the Polish street. However, in translation the roles of victim and victimizer are confused. The degenerate rioters can be read both in the context of the poem's composition—as Cossacks—or in the context of its translation—as Poles; the martyrdom of Orpheus is simultaneously that of both Polish and Yiddish culture. Polish poetry is invoked to suggest that Jews, not Poles, have taken on the mantle of Europe's sacrificial victim. In so doing, Sutzkever appropriates the metaphor of Poland as the persecuted "Jew" of Europe and domesticates it in Yiddish.

Though Chopin's piano (that is, the physical instrument of culture) is destroyed by barbarians, nothing, the poem implies, can destroy the nation's spirit itself so long as the people continue to believe in it: "A yom ha-din lid lomir fartsien: / Frey zikh kumendiker yoyresh! / Der bruk hot gegebn a yomer. / Der gayst hot dergreykht di shteyner." (Let us start singing a Day of Judgment melody: / Rejoice future heirs! / The pavement let out a groan. / The spirit has reached the stones.) In translation, the poem's enigmatic ending allows Sutzkever to introduce the Jewish vocabulary of judgment and renewal in order to promote his vision of cultural steadfastness and (re)generation. His Yiddish "yom ha-din lid" resonates differently from the Polish "sądne pienie" (call of judgment); it carries within it echoes from Jewish liturgy and historical allusions to past traumas in ways that the Polish original does not, and its appeal for "judgment" (and justice) is informed by a contemporary sense of Polish Jewry as a besieged minority. Nonetheless, though the "ideal" (in Sutzkever's mind, of a Polish-Jewish symbiosis) may lay shattered at their feet, the poem suggests that the battle against despair can only be accomplished through collective rededication to beauty from the ground up. Nations are judged by history through their cultural resilience. The poem invites readers to regard the fate of Chopin's piano—the contest between the human capacities for beauty and bestiality—as a question of universal concern. Its fate, and the Poles' subsequent

response to it, reads the story of Polish cultural resistance against tyranny as a model for East European Jewry. However, it simultaneously promotes a parallel reading in which this gem of Polish literary history, when rendered into Yiddish, indicts the Poles themselves for their present behavior toward the country's Jews. Sutzkever's translation of Norwid's poem, then, attests both to the achievements of Polish culture and to its dangers.

Only a few short months after the publication of the Yiddish translations of Norwid, Vilna ceased to exist as a Polish city. Beginning in September 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, the city changed hands several times, forcing the local population to adapt to new political realities.<sup>39</sup> When the Red Army rolled into Vilna on September 19<sup>th</sup>, the front-page of the city's leading Yiddish newspaper, *Vilner tog*, responded to the end of Polish rule with the headline "Jewish Vilna Receives the Red Army Festively."<sup>40</sup> Zalmen Reyzin, the paper's editor, probably thought that such a greeting was politic, considering the alternatives; it expressed the widespread hope on the street that Jewish life and Yiddish culture might find new protection and freedoms under Soviet rule. Reyzin did not survive to see his dreams realized. He was arrested along with dozens of other local Jewish leaders and never heard from again.

Only forty days later, the Soviets withdrew from the city and turned it over to Lithuanian rule, which lasted almost eight months, from October 28<sup>th</sup>, 1939 until June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1940. During this time, Vilna (renamed Vilnius by the authorities) was proclaimed the capital of the tiny Lithuanian state and was de-Polonized. Though the Lithuanian forces celebrated the reintegration of Vilnius into Lithuania with pogroms, the succeeding months were marked by relative political and cultural freedom for Vilna Jewry. Sandwiched between two totalitarian empires, the city remained the only major Jewish cultural center in Eastern Europe where Jews were free to express themselves openly. The political landscape changed once again in June 1940 when the Red Army reoccupied Vilnius as part of its annexation of the Baltic States. This newest period of Soviet rule, which lasted until the Nazi occupation of the city a year later, was a political earthquake for the city's Jews. All Yiddish educational and cultural institutions fell under the control of Stalin's commissars. On one occasion, while Sutzkever was visiting his wife Freyde in the bibliography section of YIVO, the most impor-



tant Yiddish research institute in the world, he was accosted by one of her colleagues who urged him to publicly apologize for his modernist degeneracy and his friendship with the “Trotskyist” Leyeles (a major figure of American Yiddish modernism), now a political crime. When the Soviet authorities shut down all independent Yiddish publishing in Lithuania, the only remaining local forum for publication was the new, Soviet-sanctioned daily *Vilner emes*. The paper downplayed news about the fate of Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland while attempting to construct a new Soviet identity by highlighting fraternity between the city’s four major groups: Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, and Belorussians.

While Poland had done very little to welcome its Jews as equal partners, Sutzkever nonetheless retained strong admiration for Polish literary high culture. He was well aware of Wilno’s status in the Polish national imagination as the City of Poets, and the culture of the new Lithuanian authorities did not command the same respect or familiarity among the city’s Jewish intellectuals as did Russian or Polish high culture. This was the context that prompted him to turn once again to translation from Polish as a vehicle to express the contemporary atmosphere of loss and confusion. He took to translating a fragment from Adam Mickiewicz’s “Sonety krymskie” (Crimean Sonnets), which he published alongside the Polish original in the *Vilner emes* in early 1941.<sup>41</sup> The choice to translate Mickiewicz was deliberate. Not only was he, as the Polish national bard, one of the city’s most treasured sons (during Polish rule its main commercial street was named in his honor), but the sonnets were composed soon after Mickiewicz’s own young Vilna period, when he was exiled to Crimea by the Russians. The specific sonnet that Sutzkever translated, “Stepy akermańskie” (Akerman Steppes), is a melancholic song of yearning for the serenity of his Polish home. Its ambivalent conclusion— “. . . So still, that a voice might reach my ear from Lithuania. / Onward, no one calls”<sup>42</sup>—provides the precise vocabulary needed to communicate the mood of cultural displacement. Mickiewicz’s speaker seeks the comforting resonances of home to soothe his loneliness (the reference here to Lithuania, as in the opening line of *Pan Tadeusz*, was understood to be part of Poland by Mickiewicz), but realizes that he is ultimately on his own in this new wilderness. The sonnet’s mood becomes its message, and the fact that Mickiewicz’s Polish was printed alongside the Yiddish translation underscores Sutzkever’s commitments.

The translation functioned defiantly, resisting the creeping influences of Lithuanian culture by expressing its loyalties to a lost place and cultural ideal. At the same time, it is possible to interpret Sutzkever's publication as a gesture toward Russia. Mickiewicz's Polish celebration of the Russian natural landscape provided Sutzkever with the license, in translation, to acknowledge the possibility that the immediate future for Yiddish culture was no longer in Poland but in the Soviet Union.<sup>43</sup>

The destruction of Vilna Jewry that began several months later had profound effects on Sutzkever's relationship to Poland. His anger and betrayal were best expressed in "Tsu Poyln," where he repudiated his commitment to the Polish-Jewish cultural symbiosis that he had helped to nurture in his formative years as a member of Yung-Vilne. Though the poem was dated "Poland, July-September 1946," in fact it was composed on the road—in Moscow, Łódź, and Paris—in the months of exilic wandering preceding his departure in September 1947 for the Land of Israel.<sup>44</sup> Sutzkever's decision to leave Poland for the Jewish homeland-in-the-making was affected by various factors: his experiences in the Vilna ghetto;<sup>45</sup> his realization after the war that Jewish life in Europe had been so decimated (both in terms of loss of life and in the destruction of its physical landscape) that it would be impossible to rebuild in situ; ongoing manifestations of Polish hostility to the war's Jewish survivors;<sup>46</sup> the dislocation of refugee life in the war's immediate aftermath; and an innate sense of cultural nationalism which dictated that the natural environment for a Jewish poet was in a Jewish atmosphere where work could nurture and be nurtured by the surrounding culture.

As Shmeruk demonstrated, Sutzkever's "Tsu Poyln" made extensive use of citation from Polish poetry in order to convey the degree to which the speaker's break with Polish culture is experienced as a profound rupture, a painful separation from that with which he was once intimate.<sup>47</sup> The intertextual fragments upon which the poem is constructed simultaneously allowed Sutzkever to offer up a historical reading of Polish-Jewish relations and to reflect the fragmented state—the splinters—of his prewar fantasy of a brotherhood of decency. The surplus of literary references in "Tsu Poyln" to Mickiewicz,<sup>48</sup> to Norwid's "Żydowie polscy," and to the contributions of Jewish-born poets such as Bolesław Leśmian<sup>49</sup> and Julian Tuwim (whom he pointedly refers to as "Julian ben Tuwim" in order to underscore his Jewishness)<sup>50</sup> offer up a sustained literary indictment.<sup>51</sup> But the repetition of a frag-

ment from Juliusz Słowacki<sup>52</sup> functions as the work's angry leitmotif. Each of the poem's first four sections concludes with one of the most quoted lines of Polish Romantic poetry, "Smutno mi, Boże!" (I am sad, my God), from Słowacki's poem "Hymn."<sup>53</sup> In Sutzkever's poem the line is printed in Polish, drawing attention to itself as a foreign presence. Poles admired Słowacki's formulation as an expression of Polish national sentiment. But Sutzkever appropriates the line as the *J'accuse* of the Yiddish poet-survivor. Its constant refrain becomes a gnawing reminder of missed historical opportunities between Poles and Jews, and an ironic nonresponse to the sharp rhetorical questions posed by the poem's speaker, as in "vos iz geshen mit der bruderschaft, vos zhe? / Smutno mi, Boże!" (What became of brotherhood, what? / *I am sad, my God!*).

Sutzkever was aware that Słowacki had composed "Hymn" in Alexandria, in part to voice his longing for home during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land. While Słowacki's sadness is born of a traveler's nostalgia for Poland, the Yiddish speaker's invocation of the same line suggests precisely the opposite, a compulsory leavetaking *from* Poland. Both Słowacki and Sutzkever may have been writing while journeying toward Jerusalem, but their orientation toward Poland *as home* is radically different. Ultimately, Sutzkever determines that language is fate. Indeed, the poem's final section aggressively eradicates Słowacki's Polish trace by translating it into Yiddish as "S'iz mir umetik, got mayner!," an understated formulation that attests to his post-war emotional exhaustion. Once rendered into Yiddish, the citation takes on entirely new meaning in the context of the destruction of European Jewry. Although the same words are used in both Polish and Yiddish, Sutzkever implies that the Jewish poet's sadness over the destruction of Polish Jewry is in no way comparable to the sentimental melancholy of a Polish pilgrim whose homeland, after all, still exists. We suggest here that the move from Polish citation to Yiddish translation prepares readers for a reorientation from the object of the poem's title "Tsu Poyln," toward its very opposite—the radical spatial dislocation and mourning of the Polish Jewish refugee en route to a new life elsewhere.

What is more, despite having concluded all previous sections with Słowacki's line, Sutzkever denies his readers' expectations at the very end of the poem by substituting a native literary citation in its place. As the poem's speaker walks

through Warsaw's ruins for the last time, he is tormented by the challenge of memorialization: "Vi lozt men iber/ dem eymek-habokhe, di shtiber, di griber? / Vi shtelt men der pustkayt a denkmol, a tseykhn, / es zol tsu mayn eynikls eynikl greykhn? / Vos tut men, der nekhtn zol vern nisgale / dem morgn?"<sup>54</sup> (How can I go and leave behind / All that there was in this valley of sorrow? How shall I raise a monument to this emptiness here? / What can I do so that a sign should appear / that will show my grandchild's grandchild all our yesterdays / tomorrow?). The poem's answer is that no physical memorial on Polish territory can possibly do justice to the magnitude of the destruction. The only response to national catastrophe is national rebirth. Consequently, the speaker imagines himself transporting the Warsaw tomb of Y. L. Peretz, one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature and the guiding cultural force of secular Polish Jewry, to the Land of Israel so that his legacy can become an inheritance to future generations.<sup>55</sup> This fantasy of cultural transmission results in Sutzkever's decision to end the poem not with Słowacki's line (with which he had concluded all of its previous sections), but rather with a fragment from Peretz's neoromantic drama *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain):<sup>56</sup> "Ot azoy geyen mir, di neshomes flakern" (And off we go, our souls ablaze). The burning souls imagined by Peretz and channeled by Sutzkever belittle the self-indulgent sadness of Słowacki's words with a mood of defiant determination; at the same time, Sutzkever cannot free himself from the bitter truth that Peretz's words were perverted and literalized by history when millions of Jewish souls were confined to flames of the crematoria. By moving from Polish citation ("Smutno mi, Boże!"), to the ways in which the same words take on a different meaning in Yiddish translation ("S'iz mir umetik, got mayner!"), to Yiddish counter-citation ("Ot azoy geyen mir, di neshomes flakern"), Sutzkever manages to conclude his engagement with Polish culture by subverting it and then replacing it with a defiant Yiddish statement of national self-confidence.

#### THE SPATIALITY OF TIME

But perhaps the break with the Polish romantic tradition was not as definitive as "Tsu Poyln" suggests. Indeed, though Sutzkever's prewar experimentation with

overt references to Norwid (and other figures of Polish romanticism) came to an abrupt end with his departure from Poland after the war, Sutzkever's poetic dialogue with Norwid did, in fact, continue as he reached poetic maturity—albeit assuming subtler tones. The influences of Norwid remain prominent, traceable in similarities of tropes and imagery, as well as in the premises of Sutzkever's metaphysical reflections. In light of the violent ideological and historical transitions they experienced, both poets express a distinct fascination with time, issues of permanence, and the ephemeral. Exploring the interrelations of eternity, time, and space, they construct strikingly similar complex interpretations of the tensions between the universal and the specific, the archetypal and the idiosyncratic, as they try to come closer to the meaning of individual life and define it against infinity. This junction of poetic ideas would confirm that Sutzkever retained strong links with Norwid well into his later years, consciously refining and expanding the philosophical system and artistic tropes he first encountered in his reading of Norwid.

The basic metaphysical insight that Sutzkever seems to have adopted from Norwid, traceable in all phases of the two authors' poetry, is the belief that time is a set of preexistent, infinite spaces, which one cannot freely explore due to one's confinement to history and inevitable mortality. In the metaphoric language of their works, time forms a landscape of simultaneously existing past, present, and future moments, whose succession is only a misconception imposed upon the transitory subject who traverses them. Indeed—as they underline—though human experience does not allow one to move between times as freely as one might move through space, their poetry undercuts the claim that the present instant that we inhabit is in any way superior to or more real than those that precede or follow it. Instead, the strongly interrelated “past time and present,” the “given un faran,”<sup>57</sup> along with the “eternity of the future,”<sup>58</sup> are intuited to be equally viable, adjacent spaces of existence, in spite of the fact that this cannot be proven empirically.

Consider Norwid's lines:

The past is now, only a bit further away:	P r z e s z ł o ś ć—jest to d z i ś, tylko cokolwiek dalej,
The village our wheels leave behind,	Za kołami to wieś,

Not a something, somewhere,      Nie jakieś tam coś, gdzieś,  
Where humans have never been      Gdzie nigdy ludzie nie bywali.<sup>59</sup>  
found.

and Sutzkever's:

Thus are entwined the past and the now      Azoy iz farbroydert geven un faran  
Thus are entangled a woman and a man.      Azoy is farglidert a froy un a man<sup>60</sup>

By comparing the metaphysical relation between the past and the present to a physical, everyday community of human beings—inhabitants of two adjacent villages or intertwined lovers—the two poets propose a counterintuitive vision of the different temporal realms as both self-sufficient and engaging in constant communication, suggesting that the distinction between diachrony and synchrony exists only within the human mind.

This awareness of the eternity and unity of past, present, and future history is sharply contrasted by both poets with the limited access to time available to the human subject. In another stanza from Norwid's poem quoted above, life is likened to an unstoppable cart-ride through time<sup>61</sup> that limits our experience of its spaces to a fleeting impression. Evoking space as a metaphor of time, Sutzkever compares the individual's confinement to the present to an imprisonment within the boundaries of a fixed territory:

In the entire universe there is no fissure      Iz nito  
Through which your time, thief-like,      In unifers a shpeltele  
Could steal across the border.      Durkh velkhn s'zol zikh ganvenish  
Adurkhglikhn, dayn zayt,  
                aribershvartsn  
Di grenetsn.<sup>62</sup>

Endowed with an intuition of the eternity latent in the world he inhabits—but forcibly tied to the limitations imposed upon him by his subordination to historical time—the human being is haunted by a sense of loss, and a desire for escape.

In trying to analyze the consequences of this confinement to the present, both poets realize that the most pivotal issue they have to address is death, the defining factor of our understanding of historicity. Metaphorically defined by Norwid as an abyss in one's road,<sup>63</sup> death puts an abrupt end to our bodily journey through time, denying the possibility of an infinite experience of its spaces. Exposing the impermanence of human life, it is thus the most dramatic gap that separates the human being from the stability of the eternities one intuits. At the same time, ironically, Sutzkever calls death the one "immortal,"<sup>64</sup> inevitable element of our haphazardly changing lives. As a result, it generates fear as well as fascination, and is viewed as a mysterious point of intersection between the transitory and the eternal, just as likely to bring us everlasting life as annihilation or self-estrangement: "Your own skeleton is sitting / close by, upon a cloud, / Your agony is a dear sight to him."<sup>65</sup> Demonstrating the limits of our historical existence, death becomes a natural center of attention in the two poets' metaphysical reflections, as each investigation of the connection between the human being and eternity has to include a reinterpretation of the disruptive role it has on our everyday experience of time.

### PRESERVING LOST TIMES

The relationship between the human being and time gained all the more priority in the works of both poets following the personal and collective traumas they witnessed. Norwid, a self-imposed exile living in Paris, was faced with the failure of a series of national uprisings that cast doubt on the possibility of regaining Poland's political independence or preserving the nation's coherence and identity. Himself marginalized by the Polish artistic community due to the experimental, abstruse nature of his works, he believed his culture to be in danger of disappearance—which placed his own works on the brink of a doubly irreversible oblivion, with no contemporary audience to support it and little hope of a posterity by which it might be retrieved. In Norwid's highly emotional search for metaphysical security

in spite of the destructive historical and personal events he witnessed, Sutzkever seems to have found a synecdoche for the fate of East European Jewry and Yiddish culture. To address the personally and nationally shattering historical events he faced, Sutzkever reinterpreted and developed his predecessor's search for a resolution of the tension between the infinite spaces of time and human transitoriness, by exploring the possibility of eternal preservation through nature, God, or the innate faculties of the human being.

The first state of timelessness both poets investigate concerns nature, a self-perpetuating, harmonious entity that encloses all beings in an atemporal cycle of renewal—promising to preserve humans from destruction by allowing them to participate in an endless fluctuation of life. This motif, pervasive in Norwid's poetry, was reinforced in Sutzkever by his early fascination with natural beauty, which bordered on pantheism in *Valdiks* (1940), one of the most sustained celebrations of nature in all of Yiddish literature. As Norwid suggests, all parts of nature share a universal spirit of life, a "sea of existence"<sup>66</sup> which permeates and unites them in a way that transcends all individuality. In a harmonious unity of synchrony and diachrony, the natural world "stands still—and flies."<sup>67</sup> Its eternity is dynamic in its continuing movement but effectively static in that it is only repeating certain universal patterns. The poet finds a human approximation of this harmony in the peace one can derive from the cyclicity of rustic life, whose attunement to the rhythms of nature allows one to stop focusing on one's impending death: "you [the countryside] will always have time."<sup>68</sup> Developing this hope of transcendence embedded in Norwid's view on nature, Sutzkever concludes that if the human being were to perceive himself primarily as part of a natural cycle, time would cease to be a measurement of the length of existence, and would simply mete out the rhythm of the unending restoration of life: the spaces of past, present, and future becoming effectively indistinguishable. As he states, in the ox's eyes "one can see the future;"<sup>69</sup> and grass has no age because it will always keep growing:

Scythes have not cut you [grass] down,	S'hot aykh nit kose tsheshnitn
Thunder has not cast you aside	Duner—tshesh toysn,
And the color of your souls remains outside.	Un ayer neshome-kolir iz geblibn fun droysn. <sup>70</sup>



Exposing all of its qualities without fear of their destruction, a constantly self-repeating nature is defined by a certitude of existence derived from its very predictability: the past exists because it is mirrored by the present; the future has to come because the present is extant. In this primeval unity, an individual act of commemoration is made to seem redundant: none of the elements making up the human lives the authors cherish is ever lost, and seemingly departed creatures help to assemble new, fresh instances of life.

Still, while the two poets are fascinated by the effective immortality of nature and the spirit of life that permeates it, they both come to realize that its redemptive power is illusory: the perpetuation it gives is based on a fundamental indifference to the individual life they aim to preserve. In his later poetry, Norwid becomes increasingly aware of the fact that a silent, sublimely inhuman nature, “on the sidetrack of the times,”<sup>71</sup> is grotesquely incompatible with self-assertive human individuality:

I saw a Man with his hands on his head, Shifting his powers all into his feet, Trampling upon the cerulean spring . . . “Look! I’ve made the Spirit of creation polish my own shoes.”	I obaczyłem Męża z rękoma na głowie, Jak kiedy kto przenosi całą swoją siłę W stopy własne—ten deptał modrą Żródła żyłą . . . “P a t r z c i e! . . . j a k D u c h - s t w o r z e n i a o b u w i e m i c z y ś c i!...” <sup>72</sup>
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In this fragment of Norwid’s description of hell, the unity of a conscious human subject with the natural realm is shown to be impossible because of the anthropocentrism that invariably renders any human encounter with nature a pathetic struggle to dominate it. Through this hyperbolic reminder of the fact that we can only define ourselves as individuals in negation of nature’s unity, Norwid exposes the hidden contradiction of our desire to abandon ourselves to its powers. He shows that in “abandoning” ourselves to nature, our goal is invariably self-oriented: to make *our* lives important and meaningful. A similar skepticism

toward the possibility of a genuine return to nature is seen in Sutzkever's postwar poetry; while, in his prewar works, his persona might frequently express the wish to perpetuate himself by joining the flow of natural cycles, he later seems to realize that the underlying aim of such dreams is to personify and subdivide nature, rather than render the human being part of a homogenous, selfless unity. This conclusion is expressed in the irony of his "Tsu a tiger," in which he regrets not having been eaten by a wild animal: "Instead of foolishly resting in the ground— / my blood would have flown within a tiger."<sup>73</sup> By juxtaposing the naturalist image of the human being reduced to mere dirt against the romanticized vision of his life in a vibrant animal body, Sutzkever ridicules the hypocrisy of the way in which we imagine that the cycles of life preserve what we deem precious and noble about humans, forgetting about the more mundane corollaries of any such transformation. To a parallel end, in some of his less ironic poems he more openly expresses an anxiety at how distant a conscious human subject is from nature's indifferent, dynamic solidity:

Now how can this be,	Un vi ken es zayn,
That, suddenly, he should not be?	Er zol plutsem nit zayn?
The seashell at the sea has not changed	Der mushl baym yam iz geblibn der zelber
Since yesterday.	Vos nekhtn. <sup>74</sup>

Skeptical of the possibility of reconciling human individuality with the natural realm, Sutzkever comes to echo Norwid's conclusions: that to honestly perceive the human being as wholly reducible to any other part of nature is tantamount to admitting that the particular lives and histories which we wish to preserve are of no specific significance, and that the annihilating powers of death indeed do turn us into little more than dust.

Cognizant of this gap that forever separates man and nature, the two authors seek an alternative possibility of the redemption and preservation of an individual in the idea of God as the source and goal of all existence, giver of an ultimately timeless afterlife. In their discussions of the role of God in relation to the human being, both poets evoke the benefits of religious faith in making death meaningful

—without, however, fully endorsing such beliefs as an ultimate solution to the personal and historical problems they face. In Norwid, these religious doubts take the form of vague allusions or ambiguities; the main object of his critique is the egotism of the human being, due to which we are in constant danger of misunderstanding the nature and intentions of our Creator. Thus, on the one hand, Norwid usually pictures God as a merciful, personal force endowed with the wisdom of a timelessness prior to historical time. As he underlines, transitoriness and mortality are a predicament which “God did not create,” but which was caused by the fall of man.<sup>75</sup> Unlike indifferent, self-perpetuating nature, God keeps track of individual deeds and personal histories, possessing a full knowledge of everything we have ever been: “closer than any concept you can phrase / Is the Creator to the sense of all your senses; / The soul of all your soul.”<sup>76</sup> To humans, faith in God would therefore seem to offer the hope of both eternity and individuality: if one believes that all is preserved and foretold in the memory of God, then perhaps death is no more than a tearing down of the barriers separating the times in which one lived, giving us free access to the entity of our history. On the other hand, however, even as he sympathizes with the security that this belief provides, Norwid seems hesitant to accept it without reservation; the religious imagery he evokes often breaks into doubt or ambiguity at depictions of the critical moment of passage into the afterlife, emphasizing how drastic a transformation and rupture death involves:

Go on—go on—until, when it is time	Dalej—dalej—aż kiedy stoczyć się
	przyjdzie do grobu
to fall into the grave	I czeluście zobaczym czarne, co czyha
	za drogą,
And we have seen the abyss at the end	Które aby przesadzić Ludzkość nie
of the road,	znajdzie sposobu,
One which Humanity can never	Włócznią twego rumaka zeprzem, jak
transcend	starą
We will urge your horse with a spear,	ostrogą . . . <sup>77</sup>
like with an old spur.	

In this stanza from his rhapsody commemorating the death of a Polish patriotic

hero, Norwid underlines the dramatic leap of faith necessitated in any religious faith—requiring one to suspend belief in one’s daily, sensuous experience of physical reality. The oppressively pessimistic, materialist undertones of the abyss symbolizing the dead hero’s passage to heaven—and the ambivalence of the poet’s suggestion that humanity cannot transcend this abyss—emphasize the detachment of religion from anything human in the current, earthly sense, and the mutual exclusivity of a transcendent and a material view of the self. As this seems to suggest, though the divine power to which we yield ourselves might preserve us, our hope of using it to gain fuller control over our former lives might—again—be an anthropocentric daydream of bringing God down to our own level, and not a self-abandonment to divine perfection.

Sutzkever’s attitude toward God is far more openly skeptical; even though he frequently reflects upon the nature of God and the value of the afterlife God might give, his analyses are almost universally marked with bitterly ironic and rebellious twists, much bolder and more taunting than Norwid’s self-critical hesitancy. In some of his lyrics, Sutzkever praises (or half-praises) God for His palpable activity in the human sphere, echoing the belief system articulated by Norwid.<sup>78</sup> Still, Sutzkever also accuses God of being passive and distant, often picturing the divine as a pantheist force in union with the indifferent spirit of nature, all-pervading but also immovable and inactive. God is everything, yet while “He did indeed create all colors,” “He has no color” of his own;<sup>79</sup> just like the eternity of nature, God’s infinity is awe-inspiring and fascinating, visible to one who moves through time and space, but at the same time ungraspable and distant, or even vaguely threatening. As a result, while Sutzkever does project images of death linked with a continuation of existence, seemingly building upon the belief in a redemptive afterlife, they are not infrequently connected to a traumatic historical context that raises the problem of the morality of the superhuman forces that allowed for death in the first place. This belief that even an eternal afterlife is no explanation for the suffering we experience on earth is powerfully articulated in the poet’s rebellious reinvestigation of the biblical story of Sodom—a mark of divine violence inflicted upon people. As he suggests, a transcendent God cannot substitute—or be reconciled with—our duty to commiserate with the pain suffered by human beings throughout history; after he chooses to sympa-

thize with Sodom's inhabitants, the speaker finds himself confronted with "the Creator's skeleton."<sup>80</sup> Moreover, these images of the divine are intermingled, far more overtly than in Norwid, with irony and doubt concerning the relations between afterlife and historical time, suggesting how little we can ever know of the otherworldly and how paradoxical and drastically different it might be from our subjective dreams and desires. In a passage where the speaker discusses death with certain ghosts he encounters, he incites their anger by stating that since they exist, mortality is an illusion:

They [the dead] love to hear my poems, so I read to them:	Zey hobn lib tzu hern mayne lider un ikh leyen.
I say: there is no such thing as death. I hear them scream:	Ikh zog: nito keyn toyt. Ikh her a yomer:
Death is our life; is there no more life either?	Der toyt iz undzer lebn, iz keyn lebn oykh nit mer? <sup>81</sup>

In a similar manner, he describes the paradox of the death of his father: "My father is no more, / He arose long ago for his resurrection."<sup>82</sup> Through such poignant juxtapositions, Sutzkever gives a far more overtly ironic twist to Norwid's ambivalent descriptions of the afterlife. As he suggests, God's mode of being is just as incompatible with ours as that of nature; any new form of subsistence it may offer inevitably involves a definite breach with—and negation of—our definition of human life. As a result, instead of retrieving and completing the process of our earthly existence, a transcendental divine time denies the validity of all that we experienced and suffered, setting a price for immortality which he refuses to accept.

Recognizing that a natural or divine force can only give us an improvable, deceptive hope of salvation, both poets become increasingly aware that the perpetuation they envisage has to proceed from the individual alone, and the peculiar qualities of consciousness that originally separated the person from the natural and the divine. A first turn taken by Norwid, which Sutzkever's poetry strongly echoes, is toward celebrating the individual's capacity for memory and conjecture, allowing each human being to create in his mind a separate "universe" of simultaneous past, present, and future events. Norwid's personae travel into



What harm have you done to Athens, o Socrates,	Coś ty Atenom zrobił, Sokratesie,
That its people should give you a statue of gold	Że ci ze złota statuę lud niesie,
After they poisoned you . . .	Otruwszy pierwój . . . <sup>86</sup>

Less cynical about the origins of the imperfections of memory, Sutzkever develops this theme with reference to the trauma inevitable in the remembrance and forgetting of the Holocaust:

Your memory will then resemble An old city buried in shadows. From the outside, your gaze will creep in there	Un s'vet zayn dayn zikorn geglikhn Tsu an alter farshotener shtot. Un dayn droysiker blik vet dort krikhn
Like a mole, a mole.	Vi a krot, vi a krot. <sup>87</sup>

Traveling—like Norwid—to the realms of the past preserved in his mind, Sutzkever transforms the earlier poet's jubilant image of a homecoming sailor into a shameful and humiliated mole "digging back" to the ruins of a shadowy time. Far from univocally beneficial in shaping our inner lives, memory burdens us both by its lacunae and by the images it refuses to let go of, making us aware of the history we will never be able to recollect, but also preserving in our minds the events we wish had not happened at all. Simultaneously too permanent and too transient, it is a "melted mirror / that already saw / to the depths of its vision," continually reminding us of the limited control we have over the "borrowed time"<sup>88</sup> from whose accumulation we derive our identity.

## RECONCILIATION THROUGH ART

Disenchantments with the eternities of nature and of God, and with the blatant imperfections of memory, mark Sutzkever's gradual passage into the more abstract, aesthetic mysticism which came to dominate his later works, and which

draws from the metaphysical outlooks on the relation of the human being and art developed in Norwid's maturing poetry.

The metaphysical assumptions that led the poets to this elevation of art over time are not identical, and rely strongly on the respective philosophical systems of their times. Norwid's views can be seen as predominantly Hegelian; much of his poetry suggests that the ultimate goal of humanity is to unite all individual narratives and consciousnesses into an omniscient and universally transparent collective Spirit. As a result, Norwid is greatly concerned with the relationship between the mental and physical aspects of human activity: searching for links between socioeconomic and spiritual progress and trying to conjoin subjective accounts of historical experience into one truth that would not betray or overlook the nuances of individuals' particular lives.

Sutzkever's poetry reinterprets the tropes used by Norwid within a modernist, subjective framework. Sutzkever's goal is not to unite himself with a Hegelian Spirit of history, or to reach a redeeming collective consciousness. According to him, the inextricable link of each individual with the times in which he lives makes it impossible to fuse these separate consciousnesses into a universally transparent, objective viewpoint. Rather, what he attempts to do is emphasize the irretrievable absences generated in our collective history by the perishing of successive human beings, instilling in his audience the need to recognize and mourn their lost specificity.

In spite of these philosophical divergences, the two writers develop quite similar aesthetic approaches to the relationships between individuals and the historical transformations they incur. Both authors single out art as the sole human creation capable of giving permanence to the personal, historicized perspective that informs our actual experience of the world—enclosing an individual situation in a form that is comprehensible and transmissible to a potentially infinite series of future generations. As metaphorically defined by Norwid, artistic creation is the only way in which one can leave scratches on the surface of time,<sup>89</sup> making a broader audience share and relive the specificity of a particular situation:

He who can bring back into the male,	Ale—jeśli on w starca, w męża, w
female and aged	kobietę



The fear their forefather trembled with when seeing	Powrócił strach ów, z jakim Dziad ich drżał
The comet of the one who came first As he was standing over earth ..... This man has truly set down his times.	Patrząc na p i e r w s z e g o k o m e t ę Gdy po pierwszy raz nad globem stał .....: to - Dziejopis! <sup>90</sup>

Speaking of the poet as a “chronicler of deeds” (the direct translation of his neologism *Dziejopis*), Norwid suggests that the poet can become the mouthpiece of the historical consciousness of his entire nation. Proposing a set of similar tropes to expose the role of his works in shaping future generations’ vision of the past, Sutzkever suggests that his art engraves the smile of a person murdered in Maidanek onto the souls of all future humans, continually confronting them with the unique tragedy it conveys.<sup>91</sup> This immortal value of art, made all the more visible by its survival of even the most drastic historical tribulations, is articulated by the two poets in a strikingly similar manner in “Fortepian Szopena” and “Ven der taykh iz aroys fun di bregn” (When the River Flooded Its Bank). The latter, written by Sutzkever in the 1960s, reworks the central allegory of “Fortepian Szopena,” the poem he had translated into Yiddish more than two decades earlier. Through its connection with art, the instrument imprints its destruction upon the minds of those who see it, becoming a metaphor for their individual or collective tragedies. Norwid writes:

The building then caught fire, burned lower,	—Gmach się zajął ogniem, przygaś znów,
Burned high—and then—I see the foreheads	Znów zapłonął— —i oto—pod ścianę
Of mourning-bedecked widows as they are pushed	Widzę czoła ożałobionych wdów
With rifle-butts—against the wall	Kolbami pchane— —
And then again, I see through the blinding smoke,	I znów widzę, acz dymem oślepiam,

As, past the columns of the entrance	Jak przez ganków kolumny,
An object is heaved out, an object	Sprzęt, podobny do trumny
Coffin-like—and it has fallen . . . your	Wydźwigają . . . runął . . . runął—
p i a n o . . .	
it has fallen!	T w ó j F o r t e p i a n ! <sup>92</sup>

Sutzkever's reaction to this striking image is as follows:

But I was made envious of only one	Nor geven bin ikh eyns af an emes
thing:	mekane
A piano swum by, its bottom burst	S'iz geshvumen, vi untergeshosn, a
open,	piane,
Weeping like rain with Chopin,	Un af ir hot gekhlipet Shopen, vi a
	regn,
When the river flooded its banks!	Ven der taykh iz aroys fun di bregn!
Years later, I understood: the piano at	Yorn shpeter benumen dem sod, az di
sunset,	piane in shkie
With its black curved wing and torn	Mitn shvartsn geboygenem fligl
garb of mourning	bagleyt fun a krie
Had been secretly cast towards my fate	Iz geven gor an arn, mayn goyrl
as its coffin.	antkegen. <sup>93</sup>

On the one hand, Norwid sees in the destruction of the piano the synecdoche of the downfall of all the ideals of Chopin's nation. On the other hand, the fact that his nation's tragedy has thus been inextricably linked with an object of art brings him hope for the country's renewal. This is because the poem he is writing (and Chopin's music), now permanently linked with this precise moment in history, will make the horror and sense of loss he feels resonate in the minds of future generations. For Sutzkever's speaker, the destroyed piano, whose music echoes the surrounding flood, is a "coffin." Even as it constitutes an obvious image of death, this coffin also offers a counterintuitive hope of preservation. With such a resting

place, the dead speaker can be sure to be remembered throughout the ages. While it continues to reverberate with the despair and loss that inspired its creation, art is continually reborn as its meanings continue to be recognized by each human being whose sensibility it touches. For both poets, though a work of art can thus become a permanent presence in the culture of a given community, its permanence does not compromise or falsify the ephemerality of the instant by which it was inspired. In this manner, art can successfully conjoin the temporal and the eternal in a harmonious, human construct.

This recognition of the power bestowed upon human beings by their ability to create art is celebrated in a number of highly enthusiastic statements made by both poets, positing art as an adequate human response to death, worthy of being worshiped as the most crucial human activity. For Norwid, it becomes a hoard of human thought, a spiritual testament for future generations, which “proves to each century / That a particular truth was not—is not—unknown,”<sup>94</sup> and whose victory allows us to reach from our “Babylon” to the “Jerusalem”<sup>95</sup> that future generations will create. As Sutzkever underlines, were it not for art, “life, camel-like, would be down on its knees before death”;<sup>96</sup> it is “the chosen tree,”<sup>97</sup> the contrast to the darkness of the “shadow” of time.<sup>98</sup>

However, in a paradoxical turnaround shared by both poets, this elevation of art does not lead them to the celebration of it merely as a means of transcending human life and achieving a dreamt-of eternity—becoming, instead, the hub of a reappraisal of, and reconciliation with, life’s transitory nature. Even as it renders an instant of individual time accessible to future generations, art underlines all the more powerfully that one cannot define a human being by removing him or her from the historical and the ephemeral; indeed, it is by sympathizing with the struggle against death and destruction preserved in the art of past generations that we identify our ancestors as beings such as ourselves. Recognizing this, Norwid begins to refer to art as proof of the intrinsic value of transitory human activity, a confirmation of the fact that the only form of transcendence available to us is a union with and recognition of the historical processes in which we live. As he comes to conclude, we manifest our significance as human beings not by affixing our lives to a repetitive pattern or a set of transcendent universals, but by recognizing and commemorating the specificity of the times in which we

live, since it is based on the particular, historical deeds that we undertake that future generations will define and evaluate us.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, by making us aware of the constant changes resulting from the historical processes we set in motion, art affirms the value of our efforts by showing that they are part of a larger “work of the ages,” a continually self-perfecting human struggle aimed toward elaborating an increasingly better, more humane civilization.<sup>100</sup> Consequently, it forces us to realize that our dreams of a timeless eternity are essentially misguided: while it is the flow of time that causes us to perish, it is the same flow of time that allows us to perceive ourselves as independent, unique individuals, and to appreciate the utility of our work for the generations that follow:

So let the age of Kolchides remain history,	Niechże więc Kolchów wiek sobie nie wraca,
I hold my present life to be as prized:	Współczesność w równej mam cenie:
Heroes rise as long as there is work to be accomplished	Heroizm będzie trwał, dopóki praca;
We will have work to do till all creation dies.	Praca?—dopóki stworzenie! . . . <sup>101</sup>

While we continue to recognize past heroes as worthy of emulation, their deeds cannot be removed from their particular historical context; we can only hope to achieve similar greatness and perfection of character by effectuating changes in our own time and reacting to the particular situation we have at hand. Even as this stanza emphasizes the value of physical labor, in later parts of the same poem Norwid goes on to object to any dreams of a socialist utopia, a stable social model that will no longer require perfection. This is because the shared imperative to struggle forward is the only permanent indication of our humanity, and the principal standard based on which we can define and evaluate our accomplishments as human beings.

Using a similar sequence of poetic paradoxes, Sutzkever also expresses a reconciliation with the transitory nature of life, stating that an individual existence is valuable only if it is seen as constantly fragile and endangered, rather than artificially affixed to broad, atemporal universals. He comes to imagine the cyclical flow of hours as stiffening, making it the “chain binding the neck” of the unsympathetic God on whose

help humanity cannot rely.<sup>102</sup> As he underlines, the most important truth an artist conveys in the miraculous act of “writ[ing] a second / So an eternity should stay”<sup>103</sup> is that any celebration of human life has to proceed through an acknowledgment and affirmation of its ephemeral quality; without accepting the constant possibility of loss, and the inevitable movement from an inaccessible past into an uncertain future as an inherent factor shaping our nature and our goals, one cannot hope to define or preserve the essential character of the human being. This conclusion is symbolically illustrated in his “Grine akvarium” (Green Aquarium), in which the speaker, confronted with the vision of his dead lover enclosed in a green aquarium full of souls, tries to reunite her with his world by destroying the security of her new abode:

—M’ken nit nenter, di shoyb, di shoyb . . .

—Neyn, di grenets vet bald farshvindn, ot tsezets ikh di grine shoyb mitn kop—  
Nokhn tsvelftn zets hot geplatst der akvarium.

Vu zenen di lipn, vu iz der kol?

Un di toyte, di toyte,—zenen zey geshtorbn?<sup>104</sup>

—One cannot get closer, the glass, the glass . . .

—No, the border will soon vanish, I will shatter the green pane with my head—  
After the twelfth blow, the aquarium was smashed.

Where are the lips, where is the voice?

And the dead, the dead—have they died?

In this fragment, the speaker shows his continuing love for the dead woman by bringing her back into human history, refusing to renounce the bond between them as dissolved by a universal law of nature. Shattering the stable containment of the aquarium—and making his lover’s preservation dependent on his memory alone—he renders her loss all the more painful and irreconcilable. Still, it is only this constant pain and recognition of the absence of the dead woman, whose remembrance he struggles to save from perishing, that makes the lovers’ attachment laudable and worthwhile. The respective conclusions that Norwid and Sutzkever reach, that the individual can be preserved in a prospective collective consciousness, or in other individuals’ recognition of his absence, do not provide an easy liberation from

the despair with which they witnessed the tragedies of their communities. Still, these conclusions do allow them to confirm the importance both of their individual sentiments and of the poetry that expressed them: both artists feel they are preserving the true essence of their histories precisely through their refusal to transcend or negate the flow of time in which the events they witnessed were played out.

As we have thus attempted to argue, the tropes and the metaphysical concerns of Norwid and Sutzkever bear a striking, continuing resemblance. Since, in his postwar poetry, Sutzkever selects images of the interrelations between human time and eternity parallel to Norwid's, and engages them in very similar intricate aesthetic arguments, this affinity appears far more than accidental. Rather, it suggests that Sutzkever remained conscious of, and influenced by, the poetic and metaphysical investigations made by his Polish predecessor. Developing Norwid's thoughts in a modern context, and using them to address issues of the Holocaust and his personal history, Sutzkever allowed his early Polish influences to persist, in a more mature, less imitative, and more discursive form. In Sutzkever's prewar engagement with Norwid, the similarities the younger poet produces are more superficial, stylistic, or autobiographical. As Sutzkever's poetry reaches its full artistic heights, this relationship expands into deeper philosophical and symbolic realms, becoming all the more pervasive even as it seems to disappear from the surface level of the text. Indeed, while their poetic dialogue grew increasingly more abstract—from the local-autobiographical, through an attempt at a reconciliation with the tragedies of his nation's history, to a far more universal account of the role of art in defining human time—Sutzkever's persistency in developing Norwid's metaphysical tropes cannot be said to have waned. The inspiration he derived from a Polish Romantic would suggest that the particular Polish-Jewish cultural trends that flourished—but were also cut short—in modernist Poland have proven to have a more long-lasting influence than may have been supposed, perpetuating themselves onto the postmodern and becoming part of a genuine artistic development, not merely a reminiscence.

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## NOTES

- The authors would like to thank Professor Ruth R. Wisse for introducing them to the works of Abraham Sutzkever. This essay is the collaborative result of research completed for a Harvard University course project and a forthcoming manuscript on Sutzkever and his contemporaries. We also thank the anonymous reviewers of *Prooftexts* for their suggestions on initial drafts of this article. All translations are our own, unless otherwise noted.
- 1 Khone Shmeruk, "Avrom Sutzkever un poylishe poezye: Juliusz Słowacki in der poeme 'Tsu Poyln,'" in *Yikhes fun lid*, ed. Shmeruk, Dov Sadan et al. (Tel Aviv: Yoyvl-komitet, 1983), 280.
  - 2 Max Weinreich not only was a foremost Yiddish linguist and director of YIVO, the leading Yiddish-language research institute in the world, but also the head of Bin, a scouting organization for local youth that sought to build self-respect, collective responsibility, an intimacy with the local landscape, and a commitment to Yiddish culture. Bin was established, in part, because Jews were not welcome in the Polish scouts.
  - 3 For more on the radicalization of antisemitism in Polish political life in this period, see Emanuel Melzer, *No Way Out: The Politics of Polish Jewry, 1935–1939* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1997).
  - 4 In a letter to Leyeles (19 May 1938) after the attack, Sutzkever admitted: "I was hurt by it both physically and in other ways. My only consolation is that revenge will come one day." Sutzkever's correspondence with Leyeles can be found in the Leyeles archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York City.
  - 5 For more on Yung-Vilne, see Avrom Novershtern, "Yung-Vilne: The Political Dimension of Literature," in *The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars*, ed. Y. Gutman, J. Reinharz, Kh. Shmeruk (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1989), 383–98; and Justin Cammy, "The Politics of Home, The Culture of Place: 'Yung Vilna: Miscellany of Literature and Art,'" in *Judische Kultur(en) im Neuen Europa: Wilna 1918–1939*, ed. Marina Dmitrieva and Heidemarie Petersen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 117–33.
  - 6 One of the most popular of these folktales was the Esterke story, a legend based on the supposed marriage of the fourteenth-century Polish King Casimir the Great to his Jewish mistress. Though the story has multiple variants, most accept that their relationship resulted in the birth of two sons (who were raised as Christians) and two or three daughters (who remained part of the Jewish community). This

established a model for two faiths, united by mutual admiration, living together in the same land. The king's love for Esterke was seen by Jews as testament to his respect for their culture and to Poland's recognition of its Jews as a core part of its national fabric. By the twentieth century, Yiddish writers as varied as Y. L. Peretz, Joseph Opatoshu, Z. Segalowitz, Sh. Imber, and Arn Tsaytlin adapted the legend in their creative work. For a comprehensive analysis of ways in which the Esterke motif influenced Polish and Yiddish literature, see Khone Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1985).

- 7 Shmeruk, *Esterke*, 5.
- 8 Sutzkever, "Tsiprian Norwid," *Lider* (Warsaw: Bibliotek fun yidishn PEN-klub, 1937), 45–52; *Inzikh* (New York, February 1937), 34–39.
- 9 Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*, with its famous opening line expressing his love for his homeland ("O Lithuania, my country, you / are like good health; I never realized until now / how precious you are / until I lost you . . .") and its portrayal of the Jew Jankiel (one of the earliest positive images of a Jew in modern Polish literature) was a natural favorite among Jews. Mickiewicz's efforts to recruit a Jewish legion during the Polish patriotic demonstrations were also remembered with fondness.
- 10 Norwid may have been one of the influences that prompted Sutzkever to experiment with archaisms when he set out to write a series of poems in "Old Yiddish" in the late 1930s.
- 11 Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu also included Norwid as a character in his historical novel *1863* (1926).
- 12 For more on this, see Stanislaw Barańczak, "Using and Abusing Norwid: Modern Polish Poetry in Search of a Tradition," in *Cyprian Norwid: Poet-Thinker-Craftsman*, ed. Boleslaw Mazur and George Gomori (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, 1988), 169. See also George Gomori, *Cyprian Norwid* (New York: Twayne, 1974). Gomori explains that the preceding generation of writers of Young Poland "admired [Norwid] more than they understood him. They appreciated his personality, his voice in the wilderness, his ideas, his frustrations—in short, his legend. . . ." However, by the interwar period he was "the most often quoted Polish poet" in "intellectual and artistic circles." Gomori, 143–44.
- 13 Jerzy Liebert, *Poezja-proza* (Warsaw: Biblioteka Wiezi, 1976), 1:133.



- 14 Barańczak suggests that Norwid's isolation in his lifetime was a result of his "artistic impenetrability, elevated diction and tortuous syntax, mystical obscurity, the supernatural weight of words uttered by a prophet uttering eternal truths"; these same "opaque" qualities sparked renewed interest in him in the interwar period. See Barańczak, 173–74. Similarly, Gomori notes that Norwid was attacked for his "queer hieroglyphics in print." Gomori, 136.
- 15 Sutzkever's initial application for membership in Yung-Vilne was rejected. Later, the group's editor, Shmerke Kaczerginski, allegedly challenged him: "We're living in a time of steel, not of crystal" (in Yiddish, "fun shtol un nit krishtol"). See David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 229.
- 16 Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 273.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 274.
- 18 *Lider*, 48.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 22 Y. A. Vaysman, "Vegn yungn A. Sutzkever," *Inzikh* (August 1937): 20–21. For other reviews see *Haynt* (Warsaw, 9 April 1937), *Yidisher kurier* (15 August 1937), and the Polish-language Jewish paper *Nasz Przegląd* (4 July 1937).
- 23 Magdalena Opalski and Israel Bartal, *Poles and Jews: A Failed Brotherhood* (Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 1992), 45.
- 24 As Opalski and Bartal explain, Norwid's poem put him in conversation with Mickiewicz's call in "Skład zasad" (Declaration of Principles; 1848) for "a brotherhood and respect for Israel, our older brother." Mickiewicz regarded the Jews as a dignified model of people who clung to its heritage against all odds. He believed that when Jews stood together with Poles, who saw themselves as Europe's sacrificial Christ, together they participated in a drama that had potential messianic meaning. Though Norwid differed from Mickiewicz in the sense that he resisted the view of Israel as an "older brother," fearing that this would undermine Christianity's claim as the new Chosen People, the poem's appreciation of Jewish solidarity with Poland at its moment of rebellion nonetheless demonstrated a shared fate. See Opalski and Bartal, 48.

- 25 *Lider*, 45.
- 26 Sutzkever's own "In a dikhter shenk" (In a Poet's Tavern) takes up this setting again and serves as the poet's own opportunity to admonish his fellow Yiddish writers—beholden to representing the socioeconomic and political climate—for their lack of artistry and vision. See *Valdiks* (Vilna: Yidishn literatn-fareyn un PEN-klub, 1940), 103–8.
- 27 *Lider*, 45–46.
- 28 In a letter to his confidante Arn Glants-Leyeles (28 November 1937) in New York, he quotes another Polish writer to express his disappointment at the degree to which politics affected critical reception: "Our critics are spiritual invalids. . . . Those who prattle on today . . . about socialism have already lost all poetic sensitivity. They don't realize that they are slaves. It reminds me of Słowacki's fine verse: 'They shout about freedom, [but] freedom is like possession of a flute. / If an ignoramous grabs hold of it / he will destroy his lungs and harm his neighbor's ears.'"
- 29 *Lider*, 47.
- 30 *Valdiks*, 68–71.
- 31 "Wczora-i-ja," in Cyprian Norwid, *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie ruin, mowie—: wybór poezji* (Łódź: Wydawn. Łódzkie, 1988), 126.
- 32 Rymkiewicz's "The Pathfinder" (1936)—a polar fairy tale designed to express the emotional doom that dominated Żagary—shares its frozen setting with Sutzkever's Siberian sonnet sequence that appeared the same year, though the sunny mood of the Yiddish poet was its is diametric opposite.
- 33 Czesław Miłosz, *Beginning with My Streets* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991), 35.
- 34 Czesław Miłosz, *Native Realm: A Search for Self-Definition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 92. Only after the war was Miłosz made aware of the existence of a concomitant group of young Yiddish writers concerned with many of the same artistic issues as Żagary and sharing its leftist leanings. "We, in the very city where those [Yiddish] books were printed, knew literally nothing about them. Several fell into my hands many years later when I bought them in New York—I had to learn English in order to make contact with something that had been only an arm's reach away" (*Native Realm*, 98). Even Sutzkever's contacts with one of the leading (albeit Jewish) figures of Polish literature in this period, Julian Tuwim (1894–1954), did not manage to attract significant interest within the broader

Polish literary world about current trends in Yiddish literature. Sutzkever was introduced to Tuwim at the artists' café Ziemiańska in Warsaw in 1935. Tuwim was so excited by Sutzkever's reading that he begged him to continue. This excitement, however, did not translate into any significant exposure for Sutzkever within Polish circles. See Daniel Kac, *Wilno Jerozolima było. Rzecz o Abrahamie Sutzkeverze* (Sejny: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2004), 42.

- 35 For the best comparative reading of the works of Żagary and Yung-Vilne, see Joanna Lisek, "Jung Wilne-Żydowskie Żagary?" in *Jung-Wilne-żydowska grupa artystyczna* (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2005), 195–207.
- 36 The same letter (13 March 1939) suggests that Sutzkever may have intended to publish an entire volume of Yiddish translations of Norwid, rather than just the three that appeared in the press that summer: "A rich Warsaw Jew has agreed to publish them—when they are all ready." Unfortunately, the other translations—if Sutzkever managed to complete them—are not extant. This was the same period in which Sutzkever also tried his hand at translations and adaptations of Old Yiddish, suggesting a conscious effort to firmly anchor himself during turbulent times as the inheritor of two European literary traditions.
- 37 Both poems appeared in the city's Yiddish daily *Undzer tog* (2 June 1939): 6.
- 38 Sutzkever, "Shopins klavir," *Faroyts* (Warsaw, 26 May 1939): 5. All references to the poem are taken from this translation.
- 39 For the most comprehensive study of this political moment, see Dov Levin, *The Lesser of Two Evils: Eastern European Jewry under Soviet Rule, 1939–1941* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1995).
- 40 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 41 We have not been able to locate the issue of *Vilner emes* in which the translation appeared.
- 42 "Stepy akermanśkie," in Adam Mickiewicz, *Dzieła* (Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1993), 1: 235.
- 43 Sutzkever here may have been inspired by Peretz Markish's Crimean cycle of the early 1920s, a canonical work of Soviet Yiddish poetry, that was also a response to Mickiewicz's Crimean sonnets.
- 44 *Poetishe verk* (Tel Aviv, Yovl-komitet, 1963), 1: 567–77. The poem first appeared in New York in *Zamlbikher* 7 (1948).
- 45 Sutzkever's leadership of the ghetto's cultural resistance, the murder of his mother

and infant child, his months as a partisan fighter in the Narocz forest, his daring rescue by the Soviet anti-Fascist committee, his efforts to reclaim Jewish cultural treasures from the ruins of Vilna immediately after the war, and his testimony at the Nuremberg trials are the story of a private poet who took it upon himself to transform his personal tragedy into a vision of national catastrophe and resiliency.

- 46 Sutzkever began to compose “Tsu Poyln” in the wake of the Kielce pogrom (4 July 1946) in which thirty-nine Jews were murdered and eighty-two wounded. Though it was not the only pogrom perpetrated by Poles after the war, it sent shock waves among the war’s survivors.
- 47 Shmeruk, “Sutzkever un poylishe poezye,” 280–91. See also Leonard Prager, “Pridah me-Polin: al ha-poema ‘Tsu Poyln’ me’et Avraham Sutzkever,” *Hulyot* 1 (1983): 148–58.
- 48 The poem contrasts Mickiewicz’s positive portrayal of Jewishness in *Pan Tadeusz* and his efforts to create a Jewish legion in the 1840s against the ultimate “blind[ness]” of this “prophet” whose vision offered up a false promise of acceptance.
- 49 Leśmian (1878–1937) is considered one of the most important avant-garde (modernist) Polish lyricists, whose verse incorporated elements of symbolism, expressionism, fantasy, and neoromanticism.
- 50 Tuwim was among the most important Polish poets of the interwar period and a founder of the literary group Skamander. Though Tuwim was humanist from an assimilated Jewish family that considered itself Polish, history increasingly forced him to make reference to his Jewishness in his writings. He went into exile in 1939 and only returned to Poland after the war. Tuwim’s poem “*My, Żydzi polscy*” (We, Polish Jews; 1944), written in the context of the destruction of European Jewry, marked a critical moment in Polish literature. It called attention to the central role of Jewish writers like himself to the development of modern Polish culture. Tuwim’s epic poem about his childhood in Łódź, *Kwiaty Polskie* (Polish Flowers, 1949; composed 1940–44), shares with Sutzkever’s “Tsu Poyln” the rage of betrayal.
- 51 The poem also borrows heavily from Polish history, referencing the lack of mutuality in the Jews’ love of Poland. For instance, it underscores Polish Jewish patriotism by calling attention to Jews who laid down their lives in the failed defense of Warsaw in 1939.
- 52 Juliusz Słowacki (1809–49) is considered one of Poland’s great romantic poets.
- 53 “Hymn,” in Juliusz Słowacki, *Poezje* (Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1982), 78–80.

- 54 "Tsu Poyln," *Poetishe verk*, 1:574.
- 55 For a discussion on the ways Sutzkever moves from here to craft an accomplished body of Zionist lyrics in Yiddish, see Justin Cammy, "Vision and Redemption: Abraham Sutzkever's Poems of Zion(ism)," in *Yiddish after the Holocaust*, ed. Joseph Sherman (Oxford: Boulevard Books, 2004), 240–65.
- 56 Sutzkever borrowed the title of Peretz's drama for the quarterly journal he founded in Tel Aviv shortly after his arrival. *Di goldene keyt* (1949–95) immediately became one of the most important journals of Yiddish scholarship, providing Yiddish culture with a home in Israel, forging links there between Hebrew and Yiddish literature and between Israel and the Diaspora.
- 57 Untitled poem, dated 1975. *Fun alte un yunge ksav-yadn* (Tel Aviv: Yisroel bukh, 1982), 148.
- 58 "Nie tylko przyszłość wieczna jest—nie tylko! . . . / I przeszłość, owszem, wieczności jest dobą" (There is not only an eternity of the future! / the past is, too, a time eternal), "Post scriptum [I]," in Norwid, *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie ruin, mowie—: wybór poezji*, 139.
- 59 "Przeszłość," *ibid.*, 154.
- 60 Sutzkever, untitled poem, dated 1976. *Fun alte un yunge*, 182.
- 61 "Ale nie byłże jak dziecko, co wozem leci" (Was he not like a child, flying by in a cart), in "Przeszłość," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 154.
- 62 Sutzkever, "Tsviling bruder," *Tsviling bruder: lider fun togbukh 1974–1985* (Tel Aviv: Goldene keyt, 1986), 196.
- 63 "I czeluście zobaczym czarne, co czyha za drogą" (And we will see the black abyss, lurking at the end of the road). See "Bema pamięci żałobny-rapsod," in Norwid and Fieguth, *Vade-Mecum: Gedichtzyklus (1866): polnisch/deutsch* (Munich: Fink, 1981), 45.
- 64 "Vi der toyt umshterblekh [immortal like death]," in "Kleyne elegie afn oyslesh un tkhies-hameysim fun an eyntsik vort," in Sutzkever, *Fun alte un yunge*, 115.
- 65 Sutzkever, "Dos groye fayer," *Poetishe verk*, 2: 213.
- 66 Norwid, "To rzecz ludzka," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 49.
- 67 Norwid, "Marionetki," *Pisma wierszem i proza*. (Warsaw: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1984), 81.
- 68 Norwid, "Wieś," *Vade-mecum*, 100.

- 69 Sutzkever, "Loyblid far an oks," *Poetishe verk*, 2:219.
- 70 Sutzkever, untitled poem, dated 1975. *Alte un yunge*, 161.
- 71 Norwid, "Siberie," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 174.
- 72 Norwid, "Źródło," *Pisma*, 85.
- 73 Sutzkever, "Tsu a tiger," *Poetishe verk*, 2: 226.
- 74 Sutzkever, "Af morgn nokh a nakht in Yafe," *Firkantike oysyes un moyfsim: lider un poemes, 1964–1967* (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt, 1968), 130.
- 75 Norwid, "Przeszłość," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 154.
- 76 "Teofilowi," *ibid.*, 88.
- 77 Norwid, "Bema pamięci żałobny-rapsod," *Vade-mecum*, 45.
- 78 "Nito, un hot bashafn di nitoen un di doen" ([You say] he does not exist, and yet he has created all that is not and all that is). Untitled poem dated 1976, Sutzkever, *Fun alte un yunge*, 190.
- 79 Sutzkever, "Zunga," *Poetishe verk*, 2:185.
- 80 Sutzkever, "Kleyne hymnen tsu Sdom," *ibid.*, 2: 76–78.
- 81 Sutzkever, "Elegish," *Fun alte un yunge*, 78.
- 82 "On my father's yortsayt," in *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 424.
- 83 Norwid, "Italiam! Italiam!," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 57.
- 84 Sutzkever, "Shoen," *Poetishe verk*, 2: 306.
- 85 "O! Po skarby cię wysłałem:/Cóż, kiedy wrócisz z tęsknotą" (I have sent you out to find treasures. / Alas! You return with a longing), "Italiam! Italiam!," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 57.
- 86 "[Coś ty Atenom zrobił, Sokratesie]," *ibid.*, 89.
- 87 Sutzkever, "Vi azoy?," *Lider fun geto* ([New York], Ikuf, 1946), 18.
- 88 "Falling Water," *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, 323.
- 89 Norwid, "Memento," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 142–43.
- 90 Norwid, "Historyk," *ibid.*, 137.
- 91 "Un lozt nit kholemen, un lozt nit shvaygn, reyd: / er shpiglt-oys un shpiglt-ayn dem shmeykhl fun Maydanek" (And he does not allow one to dream, to be silent,

to talk / he reflects in and out the smile of Majdanek), Sutzkever, "Der shmeykhl fun Maydanek," *Firkantike oysyes*, 69.

- 92 Norwid, "Fortepian Szopena," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 112.
- 93 Sutzkever, "Ven der taykh iz aroys fun di bregn," *Firkantike oysyes*, 10–11.
- 94 Norwid, "Sonet do Marcelego Guyskiego," *Pisma wierszem i proza*, 147.
- 95 Norwid, "[Klaskaniem mając obrzękłe prawice]," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 152.
- 96 Sutzkever, "Ode tsu der toyb," *Poetische verk* 2:171.
- 97 "Oysderveylter boym," *ibid.*, 2: 370.
- 98 Sutzkever, "Midber-zun," *Firkantike oysyes*, 134.
- 99 "Wtedy to próba jest, wtedy jest waga, / Ile? Nad sobą wziąłeś panowania" (You only prove yourself, you only matter, / Inasmuch as you take yourself under your own rule), in "W pamiętniku", *ibid.*, 239.
- 100 Norwid, "Socjalizm," *Wam, ja z góry samego siebie*, 155.
- 101 Norwid, "Bohater," *Vade-mecum*, 174.
- 102 Sutzkever, "Elze Lasker-Shiler," *Poetische verk*, 2:287.
- 103 Sutzkever, "Leyenen, shraybn," *Firkantike oysyes*, 93.
- 104 Sutzkever, "Grine akvarium," *Poetische verk*, 2:230.

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