

“DAYTSH IZ DOKH YIDISH:”

SHOLEM ALEICHEM'S *MOTL THE CANTOR'S SON*
AS BORN-TRANSLATED LITERATURE¹

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In early January 1914, about a year before his eventual move to America, Sholem Aleichem stopped in the Belgian port town of Antwerp on one of his European reading tours. The next day, the Zionist magazine *Hatikwah* reported enthusiastically that “(e)in tausendköpfiges Publikum” (a crowd of thousands) had gathered in the auditorium of the *Cercle Artistique* to applaud the famous Jewish humorist, who read from both his famous “Schlagers” (sketches) and unpublished manuscripts (“Sholem-Aleichem Abend” 11). This description is striking on several levels. To begin, while Antwerp was one of the central hubs for Jewish migrants traveling to America at the turn of the century, it was far removed from the main publishing centers of Eastern Europe as well as the growing community of Yiddish readers on the other side of the ocean. The reading stint in Antwerp is equally interesting on an ideological level. Sholem Aleichem has come to be remembered as the quintessential diaspora author whose folksy stories evoke the lost world of the *shtetl* (the Yiddish name for a small Jewish community in Eastern Europe), but when visiting Antwerp, he did so at the invitation of the Zionist youth organization Kadimah, and the event was reported on in the monthly of the Belgian Zionist federation.² Finally, the fact that the piece in *Hatikwah* was written in the magazine’s chosen language, German, rather than Yiddish, Hebrew, or another language, is indicative of the linguistic heterogeneity characterizing Jewish communities on the eve of the First World War.³

The geographical, ideological, and linguistic displacements evoked by Sholem Aleichem’s visit to Antwerp pose interesting challenges for the student of world literature.⁴ Where should we locate Sholem Aleichem’s oeuvre on what Theo D’haen calls the “Gall-Peters map of world literature” (289), or a literary map that is not disproportionately skewed towards dominant European languages? If, as David Damrosch suggests, world literature refers to works that circulate beyond their “home base” (4),

how do we approach the oeuvre of authors who never had a real home to begin with, or whose home was wherever they laid their hats? I want to broach these questions by way of Sholem Aleichem's final and unfinished story cycle *Motl Peyse dem Khazns* (*Motl, the Cantor's Son*), which narrates the journey of a widow and her children from the fictional Ukrainian *shtetl* Kasrilevke to America. Along the way, the emigrants pass through Brody, Lemberg (the Yiddish name of present-day Lviv), Cracow, Vienna, and Antwerp, to finally end up in London, where they board a steamer to America. What makes Sholem Aleichem's story so interesting, apart from the fact that it evokes eerie associations with the plight of migrants in the present age, is that it chronicles the tragic demise of Eastern European Jewish life through the eyes of the widow's youngest son Motl, whose comic observations contrast sharply with the gravity of the events but also undermine the taken-for-granted conjunction between language, territory, and identity that is at the heart of debates about world literature today.⁵

394 American critics, who have been the most vocal perpetuators of Sholem Aleichem's legacy after the Second World War, have shown most interest, perhaps naturally, in the second (unfinished) story cycle, which takes place in the United States. Thus, in an otherwise insightful analysis of the language play in the novel, Lawrence Rosenwald focuses exclusively on the American scenes, arguing that the sketches in the first part merely serve to "prepare the characters for the quasi-Platonic dialogues on language in the second" (103). Contrary to Rosenwald, I believe the first cycle to be no less interesting than the second, both linguistically and ideologically. Moreover, interpretations such as Rosenwald's seem to hinge on an all-too-stark opposition between what is often called the "Old Country" as a place of persecution and misery on the one hand and America as the locus of renewal and regeneration on the other hand. In my view, it is precisely such simplistic oppositions that Sholem Aleichem mildly satirizes in the *Motl* stories by bringing out the delusions of the emigrants through the naïve perspective of an orphan boy.⁶ It also bears remarking that, even though several English editions of *Motl* label the first cycle "Home in Kasrilevke," almost half (ten out of twenty-two) sketches do not actually take place in this *shtetl* but in transit places such as Vienna, Cracow, or Antwerp. Since I believe this is directly relevant to how *Motl* interrogates (traditional and modern) conceptions of "home," I feel justified in directing my attention to the somewhat underanalyzed European sketches.

My argument in relation to these stories is two-fold. First, I draw on Rebecca Walkowitz's concept of "born translated" novels—novels that incorporate translation into their original design—to bring out Sholem Aleichem's submerged critique of ideological master narratives in the face of Jewish migration and hardship. In a second movement, I offer a comparison of three English translations of *Motl* that have kept the work alive for English-speaking readers (and by extension world readers) after the Holocaust. In line with Walkowitz's reasoning, I will argue that, while rendering the Yiddish original in another language is by no means an easy task that inevitably leads to a flattening out of its multilingual wordplay, these translations deserve to be stud-

ied comparatively as different realizations of the original. I conclude that valuing the open-endedness of literary texts in this way allows us to rethink some of the received oppositions that drive forward recent debates about world literature.

BORN-TRANSLATED MOTL

In *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*, Rebecca Walkowitz draws attention to what she calls born-translated novels, or novels that “build translation into their form” (6). Such novels, Walkowitz suggests, are typically “*written for translation*,” that is, they from the outset target multiple audiences across language borders (4). Equally included in this category are novels “*written as translations*,” or original novels that present themselves as translations or that in other ways thematize translation on a diegetic level (Walkowitz also uses the term “diegetic translations”). Finally, born-translated novels are often “*written from translation*,” meaning that they use translation “as a spur to literary innovation” (4). Walkowitz gives the example of J.M. Coetzee’s *Childhood of Jesus*, a novel inspired by and modelled on Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, which in its turn presents itself as a fake translation from Arabic into Spanish.⁷ Born-translated novels deepen our understanding of world literature in at least two ways. They urge us to rethink our object of study by showing how what we consider to be a relatively self-contained literary work includes various editions, rewritings, and translations. And, insofar as they defy conventional textual, linguistic, and geographical divisions, born-translated novels ask us to revise the methodologies we conventionally use to interpret and classify literature by complicating received oppositions between domestic and foreign, monolingual and multilingual, and national and international.

Walkowitz is mainly interested in contemporary novels, which in her view “have expanded the register of self-translation and multilingualism in unprecedented ways” (45). However, one need not wait for the process of globalization and the rise of new media to study the importance of translation for literary production: Sholem Aleichem’s *Motl* qualifies as a born-translated novel in precisely the three ways suggested above. Although he now counts as one of the “classic” Yiddish writers along with Mendele Moykher Sforim (pen name of Sholem Abramovitch) and Y.L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem’s literary reputation rested from the beginning on the translation of his work into other languages, initially mainly co-territorial languages such as Russian. Like Mendele and Peretz, Sholem Aleichem was a bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew writer who, moreover, only turned to Yiddish in the early 1880s. He adopted the pen name Sholem Aleichem (meaning, simply, “How do you do?”), initially to conceal his dabbling in low-prestige Yiddish, often referred to as *zhargón* (jargon), from his Russian-speaking, upper-class family.⁸ Today, we remember Sholem Aleichem mainly because of the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is loosely adapted from the monologues *Tevye der Milkhiker* (imperfectly translated as *Tevye the Dairyman*).

Like most of his other sketches, the Tevye stories were originally serialized in various Yiddish newspapers, but Sholem Aleichem continued to revise them until his death in 1916. All this makes it difficult to isolate an “original” distinct from its rewritings, translations, and adaptations.

A similar fluidity characterizes the publication history of *Motl Peyse dem Khazns*. Although the work remained unfinished upon the author’s death in 1916, the first installments first appeared in 1907 in Yiddish periodicals in America and Lithuania (then part of the Russian Empire). However, the Lithuanian periodical folded because of financial constraints, while the American publisher discontinued the *Motl* series three chapters shy of the end of the book’s first part, invoking irregular submissions and contract violation (some sketches had appeared in a London periodical). Probably due to these setbacks, the author did not return to the story until his definitive relocation to America in 1914. By then, the first European cycle had appeared as a standalone novel (the 1911 Progres edition published in Warsaw). But, as Dan Miron indicates, this edition was heavily influenced by the 1910 Bialik-Ravnitski Hebrew translation, which was marketed as a children’s book (Miron, *Image* 187). It was not until 1920 that the entire *Motl* series as we know it today came out in the Folksfond edition of Sholem Aleichem’s collected works.⁹ This uneven publication history already hints at the difficulties with which Yiddish writers often had to contend, lacking established national institutions, publishing infrastructure, or even a standardized spelling. The easiest way to find an audience was by way of translation, which reached a wider orbit than the original and sometimes conditioned how the latter was to be read and rewritten.

Motl can thus productively be approached as a born-translated novel (even though the word “novel” already evokes a finality that the Yiddish feuilleton sketches never possessed). First of all, the story was *written for translation*, since Sholem Aleichem from the beginning invited the translation of his Yiddish fiction into other, more widespread languages, predominantly Russian and Hebrew. After the Second World War, as will be discussed below, English translations kept his work alive for American, and by extension, world readers. At the same time, *Motl* was *written from translation*, given that the book versions of the Yiddish original were often less authoritative than, and were even modelled on, its translations into more prestigious languages. Finally, the story was *written as translation* insofar as it uses translation as a central diegetic trope. *Motl* filters the dissolution of Eastern European Jewish life at the time of the pogroms through the childish consciousness of a boy-narrator, whose age varies between five and thirteen depending on the edition. It can be argued that *Motl* functions as an uncertified translator of sorts, as he constantly interprets the things he witnesses through the prism of his own forward-looking worldview. The irony of the sketches resides in the fact that what we are reading are, as the subtitle indicates, “ksovim fun a yingl a yosm,” writings of an orphan boy. Hardly literate in one language (he can make out printed words but not handwriting), which, as he gradually discovers, is but one among many, *Motl* nevertheless figures as the “writer”

of the story.

Framing *Motl* as a born-translated novel has implications for how we make sense of the novel's ideological intent. As has often been noted, the stories do not confront the pogroms directly and, in fact, only broach the topic about halfway into the European cycle, long after the emigrants have left Kasrilevke. In the chapter entitled "Mit di emigrantn" ("Among the Emigrants"), in which the family is temporarily stranded in Cracow, Motl enters into a spirited exchange with another boy named Kopl about the meaning of a pogrom. Motl does not know what the word means, assuming it is some kind of fair, and asks Kopl for advice. The latter becomes increasingly exasperated by the former's insistent questions, crying out: "Na dir gor far vos! 's Iz dokh a pogrom!" (214), which can be roughly translated as "Get out of here with your 'why's'. It is a pogrom!" This passage, which significantly does not appear in the 1911 edition, has been read in different, sometimes oppositional ways. In the early 1940s, the Soviet Yiddishist Meir Wiener argued that the naïve conversation between the two children "exposes the senseless brutality of the murderous Black Hundreds with much greater bitterness than in the 'prophetic' ranting of Bialik" (Wiener 43).¹⁰ In counterpoint to Wiener, Olga Litvak has recently argued that the story of the orphan boy represents Sholem Aleichem's own "ideological orphanhood" (31). Litvak suggests that, in sharp contrast to Bialik, Sholem Aleichem never managed to respond adequately to the pogroms and therefore failed in his responsibility as a Jewish writer.

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Wiener's and Litvak's divergent interpretations are at least in part given in by ideological considerations. For Wiener, Sholem Aleichem's humoristic writings elide national concerns by addressing the universal plight of the toiling masses. This perspective holds little appeal for Litvak, a Russian-born historian who built her career in the United States after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and who is intent on debunking American nostalgia for the lost Jewish homelands in Eastern Europe. Here, I want to show that the pogrom passage can be approached from another angle, namely as a reflection on the disjunction between language and belonging. After being rebuffed by Kopl, Motl returns to an earlier discussion about the German word for horseradish, to which Kopl triumphantly responds that the word is the same in German as in Yiddish, because "daytsh iz dokh yidish" (214), German is after all Yiddish. At first sight, this seemingly futile semantic discussion offers comic relief and distraction from uncomfortable realities Motl does not understand. Yet, it also bears a more profound lesson: Traumatic histories often cannot be addressed directly but rather manifest themselves metonymically by leaving a pungent taste of past troubles.¹¹ Kopl, who significantly speaks with "a geshpaltene lip," a split lip (212), is no less a fool than the naïve Motl, for not only does he fail to provide a definition of pogrom, he also does not grasp the non-identity of languages.¹²

The pogrom passage therefore brings out that languages are not "equivalent units" (Walkowitz 44). Motl's account of his family's emigration to America is at the same time the story of his language learning, or his acquisition of what Roman Jakobson calls the metalingual language function, which focuses attention on the verbal code

(86). It probably takes a child to realize the complexity of such metalingual operations, without which translation, and more generally abstract thought, is unthinkable. During the family's peripatetic journey to America, Motl gradually comes to realize that there are many different people in the world speaking many different languages. He also comes to understand that all these languages are but imperfect instruments for understanding reality. One of the running gags in the European cycle is that of Motl's mother, who is constantly reminded by her children that her crying will ruin her eyes. The irony resides in the juxtaposition of the biblical reference to weeping Zion and the prosaic reality of medical inspections in European exit ports.¹³ In the Antwerp sequence, a swindler promises to cure Motl's mother's eyes, saying to the gullible emigrants that "In Amerike iz a vort a vort" ("in America, a word is a word," 252). The reader knows that things are not so simple, of course, and this is precisely how Sholem Aleichem mildly critiques etiologies of exile and suffering that project one particular narrative as defining for the Jewish people as such.

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BORN AGAIN MOTL

The language games in *Motl* inevitably raise the question: How is one to translate a novel that was "born translated"? The difficulties involved in rendering Sholem Aleichem's multilingual humor into another language have become proverbial. In an oft-cited letter to the Yiddish author, Maxim Gorky expresses his regret that the Russian translation of *Motl* failed to transmit "the sad and soulful humour of the original" (qtd. in Hoffman 155). Interestingly enough, Gorky, who actively promoted the Russian translations of Sholem Aleichem's work, did not understand Yiddish and hence had no basis to compare the original and the translation, but still he believed that something was lost in translation: "I say—one feels it!" (qtd. in Hoffman 155). Most debates on translation are framed in precisely this way. According to such a logic of compromise, translation allows an author working in a minor language to gain access to world literature, which, however, comes at the heavy price of rupturing the exclusive link between one's native language and culture (necessarily in the singular). However, Walkowitz's concept of born translated novels, or literature that has a commitment to "keep being translated" (31), suggests that such a link between language and birthright is never self-evident to begin with. Comparing translations, and how they activate different aspects of the original to which they inevitably belong, is one way of showing how this works.

Since the Holocaust, Sholem Aleichem's work has survived mainly through English translations for the American market, which target readers interested in the lost world of Eastern European Jewry. It was not until 1953 that *Motl* was first translated into English by Sholem Aleichem's granddaughter Tamara Kahana, who catered to a mainstream American readership by, among other things, excising problematic references to non-Jews (Benziman). Almost half a century after Kahana's version

(reprinted in 1999), Yale University's New Yiddish Library brought out a new translation by Hillel Halkin, an American Jew who moved to Israel in 1970 and translates from both Yiddish and Hebrew. Finally, in 2009, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the author's birth, Penguin published a translation by Aliza Shevrin, an American translator who teaches Yiddish at the Jewish Community Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. While produced for an English-language readership, Shevrin's version hebraicizes the characters' names and includes an introduction by leading Israeli Yiddishist Dan Miron, which is indicative of the ways in which various national traditions continue to reshape Sholem Aleichem's oeuvre today.

My aim in comparing these three "active" translations of *Motl* is not to adjudicate among them, but rather to show how the original keeps on being translated (or rather translating itself) in different ways.¹⁴ I will pay particular attention to the first cycle of *Motl*, and more specifically those episodes set in in-between places outside of Kasrilevke, where languages and peoples, Jewish and non-Jewish, mix in interesting ways. A good example is a scene in which the emigrants get into a broil with a station guard on the Russian border while trying to board a train. *Motl*'s older brother Elye proposes to bribe the station master, referring to the latter with the disparaging Hebrew word "orl," meaning an uncircumcised person (*Motl* 168). Whereas Kahana renders this word as "peasant" (115), thus largely neutralizing its negative meaning, the other two translations opt for the more familiar Yiddish epithet "goy." Moreover, Shevrin conveys the interlingual dynamic by specifying that Elye (or Elyahi) is speaking "in a combination of Yiddish and Hebrew" (220). She further inserts a Jewish inflection by translating the phrase "Me darf mitn orl shlag'n a blat" ("we should establish friendly contact with the non-Jew") as "We have to shmear the goy's palm," thus using the familiar Jewish "shm" morpheme that can be found in expressions of the type "libe shmibe," whereby the *shm*-reduplication serves to invalidate or relativize the first word. The substitution of "shmear" for "smear"—Halkin uses the proper English expression "to grease his palm" (115)—can be said to serve a similar ironic purpose here, as it highlights Elye's awkwardness in dealing with the station master.

Sholem Aleichem's parodic intent comes out even more clearly in the scene that follows, where Pinye, one of the emigrants, addresses the station master in Russian. Interestingly, *Motl* the boy-narrator reproduces Pinye's speech and then translates it into Yiddish for the benefit of the reader: "Ikh gib es aykh iber mit zeyn rusisher sprakh un zets es eykh bald iber af undzer loshn" ("I render his words in Russian and then translate them into our tongue"; 168). The first thing to note here is that Pinye's Russian is not actually Russian but Surzhyk. A form of mid-speech between Russian and Ukrainian spoken in rural areas of central and eastern Ukraine, Surzhyk emerged from the increased interaction between Ukrainian villagers and Russian-speaking officials towards the end of the nineteenth century (Bilaniuk 412). Low functionaries were most likely to use Surzhyk in an attempt to distance themselves from their village roots. Precisely this self-denial often made them the object of satire. Considered a lowly dialect, it here serves a function similar to that of *Daytshmerish*, a mix of

German and Yiddish that often figures in Yiddish fiction to parody a Jewish person who inadvertently sprinkles his German with Yiddish words and phrases while trying to sound distinguished. Pinye fails miserably in his attempt to strike a deal with the station master, as his contempt for non-Jews shines through in his use of the disparaging epithet “svinya” (pig). At the same time, it remains unclear how readers are to make sense of this fiasco. Does Pinye unintentionally sabotage his own negotiating efforts by representing the station master as a non-kosher animal, or should we read his speech as a deliberate act of defiance?

This linguistic and moral duplicity proved challenging for all three translators, who not only omit Pinye’s non-translated words but also leave out the fact that he is not speaking “proper” Russian. More importantly, the reader misses out on Motl’s mediating role as a narrator. In the original, Motl not only reproduces Pinye’s speech word-for-word in Hebrew transliteration, but also renders it into Yiddish, finely adding the following gloss: “af yidish kumt dos oys a sakh shener” (“it sounds much better in Yiddish”; 168). The scene reveals Sholem Aleichem’s masterful use of the conceit of the boy-narrator who at once knows less and more than the reader. He knows less because he fails to grasp the full impact of what is happening around him, describing traumatic events as one big adventure. But he knows more because he provides us with an inside narrative of the Jewish emigrants, acting as an uncertified translator who alerts us to the necessity and impossibility of complete translation. In this way, Sholem Aleichem holds up a mirror to the readers, forcing them to question the eschatological narratives by which communities forge an identity out of experiences of shared suffering. In the end, it is Motl’s impossible position as a monolingual translator that allows Sholem Aleichem to bring out both the emigrants’ uneasy adjustment to modern society and their humanity in the face of global changes that defy comprehension.

No less interesting than the interplay between Yiddish and co-territorial languages is how Motl makes sense of the language of Jews “fun der zayt grenets,” Jews from the other side of the Russian border. Thus, once in Austria-Hungary, the emigrants stumble upon a Jew whose speech sounds strange to Motl: “Take undzer loshn, nor mit pasekhn” (“our language, only with pasekhs,” 179). The “pasekh” is a diacritical mark used to differentiate between the sounds “ey” and “ay” in Yiddish. Many texts simply omit it, leaving it up to the reader to figure out the right pronunciation of apparent heteronyms. Since the pasekh does not exist in Latin script, the translators are compelled to find a creative solution. Whereas Halkin simply states that the Jew “talked our language, but he didn’t talk it like we do” (185), Shevrin follows Kahana’s lead (124) by having the Jew pronounce “broad *ah*’s” (227). For Sholem Aleichem, the differences between Russian and Austrian Yiddish were a rich source of jokes, as when Motl reflects on the words for watch in both dialects, which sets off a chain of phonetic and semantic displacements: “Lemoshl, nemt, ashteyger, a zeygerl. Dokht zikh, vos kon shoyt zayn mer poshet fun a zeygerl? Heyst dos ba kire-daytsh nit a zeygerl, not a ‘hor.’ Un a hor iz ba im ‘a har.’ A har iz ba im ‘a her.’ Aher iz ba

im 'hir-hir.' Az me zogt kire-daytsh, zol men gleybn!" (191) These homonymic puns understandably caused considerable difficulties for the translators. While Shevrin leaves them out altogether, Kahana turns them into interlingual puns, with English and German as stand-ins for the two dialects of Yiddish: "For instance, take a word with *watch*. What could be simpler? Well, in German it isn't a watch but an *Uhr*. *Hair* is called by them *Haar*, and a man is called *Herr*" (133). Halkin opts for the same solution, although his translation reveals the presence of Yiddish as an excluded third in the language pairs. The phrase "He calls a hair a *har*, which means a gentleman" (190) only makes sense if the reader takes Motl at his word that in Ukrainian Yiddish a gentleman means "har." Significantly, Halkin leaves out the distinction between different words for watch ("zeygerl" and "hor") that sparks Motl's linguistic escapade.

That Motl lingers on the Yiddish words for *watch* is not without broader significance, however, as his linguistic musings reflect the incompatible temporalities of Jewish existence in Eastern Europe.¹⁵ Motl's word games thus confront the reader with the fluidity and mobility of the Yiddish language and of Jewish identity. As Motl meets new people along the way, he is forced into the conclusion that the correspondence between words and things is a matter of convention rather than a fact of nature. In London, he is relieved that "Me kon reydn yidish, vi in der heym. Dos heyst: halb Yidish, halb Rusish" (286). While both Kahana (200) and Shevrin (276) translate this literally, indicating that the English Jews speak "half Yiddish, half Russian," Halkin offers a more liberal interpretation: "The good thing about the English... is that they don't speak German. The bad thing is that they speak something worse" (232). The deeper meaning of the passage is of course that even at home in the quasi-mythical Kasrilevke—"in der heym"—Jews speak "something worse," a language impregnated with words and phrases from cultures from which they were often physically excluded.

Far from assigning praise or blame, my point in comparing the translations by Kahana, Halkin, and Shevrin has been to bring out this "something worse" in Sholem Aleichem's original, or its inherent susceptibility to continual translation. Arguably, the translations of Halkin and Shevrin address a reader more versed in Jewish tradition than Kahana's, but they also project a version of the Jewish tradition that is more Hebraicized and perhaps comes across as more unitary than it ever was for Sholem Aleichem, whose work was written before the distinction between Yiddish and Hebrew, or between diaspora nationalism and Zionism, hardened into a permanent schism in Jewish communities. Paradoxically, a translation may thus reinforce the exclusive connection between language and cultural belonging that it by its very existence serves to question, which underscores the need to study translations comparatively. Clearly, all three translations create a slightly different Motl, and each deserves to be studied as a partial manifestation of the original alongside the various Yiddish editions of the text. Each highlights how the original is a living, translated thing that takes on different forms as it reaches audiences disparate in time and space.

CONCLUSION: READING WORLD LITERATURE “SUBJUNCTIVELY”

402 Today, Yiddish fiction exists largely in translation. Without a proper geographical home, the Yiddish language is bound to disappear (even though it may be hard to tell if or when a language ever truly dies), which means that translation functions as the primary mode of survival for this minor but rich body of texts. Consequently, scholarly discussions about Yiddish literature are often framed by a discourse of inevitable loss and partial recovery. One problem with such an approach, however understandable, is that it runs the risk of reifying the assumed connection between language and birthright that the recent resurgence of interest in world literature is designed to transcend. Walkowitz’s inspiring concept of born translated literature offers us a potential way out of this conundrum as it encourages us to widen the scope of our enquiries by integrating translations into our analysis and appreciation of what we consider to be original texts, while cautioning us to read those texts “subjunctively” (177). Such a shift from the indicative to the subjunctive mood presents a fruitful line of inquiry for the study of world literature in general, as it redirects the paradigm’s guiding question from where texts belong to where they might belong.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Julie Hansen, Laure Marcellesi, and Jan Schwarz for comments on drafts of the article.
2. On an earlier visit to Antwerp in 1907, Sholem Aleichem gave readings at both the Zionist and socialist circles (Ronin 300).
3. The linguistic problems inherent in the Zionist movement are suggested in the first issue of *Hatikvah*, published in April 1905, which includes a letter from a Dutch Jew that starts in Dutch but then breaks off in mid-sentence, to continue in German: “Gaarne zal ik, zoo nu en dan ‘n enkel woordje over... Aber ach!—ich hatte ganz vergessen, dass ich deutsch correspondiren soll” (“Every now and then I’d like to say a few words about... But shoot! I had completely forgotten that I should write in German,” 6).
4. For a recent biographical account of Sholem Aleichem, I refer to Dauber.
5. By focusing on Sholem Aleichem’s *Motl* as an example of born-translated literature, I do not want to slight generational, social, and geographical differences in Yiddish literature. While Yiddish writers never had a “home” in the narrow sense of officially sanctioned state institutions, second- and third-generation Yiddish writers in particular did address extensive readerships firmly rooted in Ashkenazi culture. For an overview, see Schwarz.
6. In traditional Jewish communities, a child bereft of its father counted as an orphan and was granted special privileges under Talmudic law.
7. Walkowitz seems to be unaware of Gideon Toury’s seminal work on pseudotranslation (see in particular the second chapter of his *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*). In general, I believe that the conceptual finesses of Walkowitz’s model and the methodology of Descriptive Translation Studies could be mutually enriching.

8. However, the fact that Sholem Aleichem clung to his pen name should be explained positively in terms of the popular success of his stories as well as its association with the developing literary persona of the humorous storyteller (see Miron, *Continuity* 77-78).
9. In what follows, I will use this edition (printed in 1927) rather than Khone Shmeruk's 1997 variorum edition. For the transliteration of the text, I rely on the YIVO transliteration rules. All translations from the Yiddish are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
10. Although he wrote in Yiddish as well, Hayyim Nahman Bialik counts as one of the fathers of Hebrew poetry. His well-known epic poem *Be-ir ha-haregah* (*In the City of Slaughter*) was written in response to the Kishinev pogroms of 1903.
11. In an earlier scene, one of the emigrants expresses her dislike for Lemberg on the ground that, in Yiddish, there is a saying that if you eat something sour, it makes you see Cracow and Lemberg: "s'iz azoy zoyer, az me kon derzen Kroke mit Lemberg" (198).
12. Significantly, Motl's nickname in the Kasrilevke scenes is "leftsen" or "lips" (39) because of the noises he makes while eating. Motl thus in a way confronts the other characters (and the reader) with the material dimension of language, which can be said to complicate the assumed reversibility or translatability of linguistic propositions.
13. Caestecker (62) notes that the medical inspectors in Antwerp often diagnosed eye infections as trachoma, which was a ground for denying passage to America.
14. I take the term "active" (re-)translation from Anthony Pym (1998) to refer to a translation that actively competes for prominence with others in a given culture (as opposed to "passive" ones that are no longer in circulation).
15. This theme is also addressed in another of Sholem Aleichem's stories with a boy-narrator entitled "Der Zeyger." This story, in which the inhabitants of Kasrilevke debate over whether a pendulum clock is fast until it finally strikes thirteen, can be read as an allegory of the competing temporalities of modernity and tradition.

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