Should literature be taught as space of imagination or as a tool for building social conscience? This is a question heard and asked often these days. Given the current challenges facing the humanities – declining enrollment, profit-based measures of educational success, technological incursions on learning practices, and public leaders who proudly assert that they do not read – many scholars seek new ways to articulate the value of their profession, to defend literature in the public sphere. Martha Nussbaum has famously argued that the humanities are crucial for creating and maintaining a “people-sensitive democracy” (Nussbaum 2010, 25). Not all are pleased with this line of thinking. Nussbaum’s detractors complain that, in arguing for the ultimate “use” of the humanities, she echoes the instrumentalism of those who want to destroy these same fields. Ben Saunders puts it this way: “We value money instrumentally, because it allows us to consume other things that we value intrinsically. Art and culture, I suggest, are such goods: worth spending money on because we value them in themselves, rather than regarding them as investments expected to produce some further benefit, either economic or political” (Saunders 2013, 250).

I would like to move away from the dichotomy between instrumental outcomes (strengthening democracy) versus intrinsic value (aesthetic or experiential pleasure) by thinking instead about the capacity of literature to produce presence – a notion that has been richly developed by the critic Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Gumbrecht defines presence as “a spatial relationship to the world and its objects. Something that is ‘present’ is supposed to be tangible for human hands, which implies that, conversely, it can have an immediate impact on human bodies.” (Gumbrecht 2004, xiii). Perhaps counterintuitively, since literature is often considered an art of words rather than objects, Gumbrecht argues that certain texts have the ability to create presence, both by making readers more alive to the sensations of the moment that they are currently living, more attentive to the other human faces before them and also by re-presenting moments of the past, calling them up into the physical space of here and now (Gumbrecht 2003).

I believe that Yiddish literature has an especially valuable presence to produce today, particularly when taught in contemporary Israel. I first arrived at this proposition in the spring of 2018, my first teaching at Tel Aviv University. As part of an introductory course on Yiddish literature, I taught the classic fiction, Di
*kliatshe [The Mare]* by Mendele Moykher-Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh)¹ (1873). *Di kliatshe* tells the story of a model student of modernity who meets a talking horse. The protagonist is a young man named Isroelik who lives alone with his mother in a *shtetl* in the Pale of Settlement. Despite the implications of his given name (literally “Little Israel”), Isroelik is determined to transcend the spatial and practical littleness of his Jewish life – by means of attaining a university education. He wants to become a doctor, a profession that would grant him the right to live in the Russian interior, beyond the Pale of Settlement. This relocation would allow him to dress like everyone else, act like everyone else, and even fall in love like everyone else. As Mendele puts it, “Isroelik wants to become a *mentsh* – a person.” (Abramovitsh 1873, 9). Committed to social acceptance by means of rational self-improvement, Isroelik studies day and night for the university entrance exams. In the midst of his preparations, he hallucinates an encounter with an old, beaten-down female horse. In what should have been Isroelik’s first warning sign that the world is perhaps less rational than he had hoped, the horse speaks Yiddish (in addition to her native *fiddish*-*horsish*). The mare, who actually houses the soul of a centuries-old Jewish prince, gives Isroelik a lesson in Jewish history, the main point of which is that rationality has never prevented cruelty. In depicting professors who were transmogrified into dogs, as one example, the mare asserts, “They had minds like people, but the hearts and mouths of dogs.” (Abramovitsh 1873, 23). Post-hallucination, Isroelik’s mother echoes the horse’s message. She urges Isroelik to lay off the books and explains that bribes, not intelligence, typically offer Jews access to the gentle metropolis.

Disregarding the warnings of both his mother and his new horse companion, Isroelik heads to the big city, presumably Kiev, to take his exams. Despite his capacities in mathematics, foreign languages and science, Isroelik is given an exam that he cannot pass:

\[\text{Di lerer zaynen gesezn ongebotn in mundirn mit meshene knep un gekukt azoy shtreng, azoy glaykh vi ikh hob geganvet oder gekoylet a mentshn, zey hobn gekukt azoy vi yene tsaytn a stanavoy, vos dos ershte borukh-hobe iz ba im geven: ‘Iskudeva? Ya tebi!...Pasport mayesh?! [...]}\]

\[\text{Es farshet yzik, az fun zeyer barukh-hobe, hob ikh bald farloren dem kurasz un shoyn nisht gevust vos mit mir tut zikh. Oyb dos take meynt der posek, hobn di lerer derlangt zeyer vunsh, vos derlangen heyst...Bald deruf hot zikh gevendet tsu mir a lerer...[mit]}\]

\[\text{aza mine hot er tsu mir zikh gevendent un mikh mekhabed geven mit a posuk fun danen, fun dortn, biz me iz aruf af a mayse, akurat af der bobe yaga! Ikh hob mikh fardreyt,}\]

¹ Sh. Y. Abramovitch, 1835–1917.
The teachers sat there, dressed in uniforms with brass buttons. They looked at me, as harshly as if I had robbed or killed someone. They looked at me like a policeman from those days, whose first words of welcome were: “Isn’t that you? I’ll give you... Got a passport?!"

[..] Of course, their welcome made me lose all my courage and my bearings. If that was their aim [posek], then they fulfilled it as well as anyone can fulfill anything. A teacher soon turned to me... He turned to me with such a face and honored me by spitting out one question after another, a verse [posek] from here, a verse [posek] from there, until we came to a fairytale about none other than Baba Yaga! My head began to spin, my mind ran adrift and crawled back to Boyberik. The teachers did me the honor of laughing at me, this time with happy faces and that brought an end to my exam, an end to my efforts; it ended, shut down all my hopes!²

Famously, this passage deals a brutal blow to the Jewish Enlightenment program, dramatizing the impotence of its promise (Wisse 2000, 330–336; Pines 2018, 24–47).

Even if Jews were to turn themselves into more universalist, rational beings, that would still not erase the particularist loyalties, the irrationality and the prejudice of non-Jewish society. Mendele echoes this narrative message on multiple formal levels. For one, he represents the examiner’s voice in its aural original, as Yisroelik would have heard it, a combination of Russian and Ukrainian. Inserting this Slavic quote in the midst of the Yiddish text, Mendele refutes the existence of a translingual, transcultural space in which Jews and Slavs can meet as equals; They can only encounter one another with difference, each through their own tongue and their own lens.

While the brass buttons and militaristic look of the examiners intimidate Yisroelik, it is ultimately literature that obstructs Yisroelik’s entrance into the enlightened world. He is drilled on Baba Yaga, a Slavic folk character that any non-Jewish applicant would easily recognize from bedtime stories and elementary school recitations. Professors of Slavic heritage, the dominant culture in this setting, seek to valorize their non-rational, non-materialistic cultural legacy by incorporating it into the required university curriculum. In the abstract, I doubt that anyone in the humanities today would object to such a goal. Adding complexity, the Ukrainian culture and language, which appears in the text from time to time, has historically undergone its own subordination to Russian lan-

² In translating this passage, I consulted Moykher-Sforim 1991, 335.
guage and culture. Nonetheless, in this moment, the formal study of literature and folklore becomes a tool for excluding cultural outsiders, in this case Jews. Mendele wrote Di kliatshe in 1873. In 1881, the assassination of Tsar Alexander II lead to a wave of violent pogroms and further legal restrictions on Jews in Russia. In 1897 the first Zionist Congress took place in Basel. Isroelik’s exam scene brings us into this specific historical moment in all of its emotional repercussions. Emancipation had failed the Jews of Eastern Europe and, in light of this brutal disappointment, Jews sought new solutions to poverty and exclusion, national sovereignty among them. Teaching this passage in contemporary Israel, this historical moment is actually not as accessible as one would think. So thoroughly exposed to slogans about the necessity of Jewish self-reliance, some of my students seemed to lack opportunities to pause on sensations of Jewish powerlessness. Faced with a nearly constant demand to correct for history, they seemed ill at ease with stepping inside history. On its simplest level, the scene asks us to be empathic witnesses to Jewish history, especially moments in which the dynamics of power differed substantially from those today.

Were it only for this memory of rejection and exclusion, rendered as a mood rather than an action plan, the text might be worth teaching. But, in my case, this scene from Di kliatshe produced an additional, riskier effect as well. When I first taught this text in an introductory course, the class included students of various Jewish backgrounds and one Palestinian woman. In studying this passage together as a group, there was no hiding the fact that we were in danger of reenacting the very narrative on the page. Yiddish – in an Israeli context, and at its reductive worst – could become a folkloric code of the ethnic group in power. Baba Yaga could easily be turned into Bobe Yente, the rich and challenging tones of the Yiddish corpus turned into comforting nostalgia. And all this could be activated in class as a way to convey to this Palestinian student among us that, if she would like to excel in the place where she lives, she had best internalize “our” cultural narratives. Literature has physical powers within Mendele’s scene: It is the force that blocks Isroelik’s entry into the more comfortable, universalizing zone of the metropolis. Beyond the text, in our classroom, the text had a different physical power – it required us to see the people who were right before us. The act of looking is in fact key to the passage. “Looking,” “face” and “turning toward” are words that appear repeatedly: Under the right circumstances, this narrative passage can give the reader stage directions.

Dan Miron offers a way of reading Di kliatshe comparatively in a way that further enriches the presence produced by this scene. He describes the voice of Mendele, both the author and the character, as “Caliban language,” in reference to the monster-slave character in Shakespeare’s The Tempest (Miron 1973, 34–66). Caliban learns to speak from Prospero, the man who enslaved him:
“You taught me language; and my profit on’t/ Is, I know how to curse. The red 
plague rid you/ For learning me your language!” Caliban stumbles, his sentences 
have awkward interruptions. He has internalized the tongue of power, but adapt-
ed it into his own monster-jargon. To the ears of the other characters in the play, 
Caliban’s voice is supposed to be ugly. But, as delivered to us through Shake-
spere’s pen, it is full of art and dignity. According to Miron, Modern Yiddish lit-
erature was in part born of the desire to find such an ugly-dignified voice for East 
European Jews – to cultivate a creative presence within that voice, rather than to 
emancipate or reform it.

In my Yiddish Literature class, we watched clips of Caliban monologues as 
performed by different actors in various productions. We noted that this ugly-el-
egant voice is incredibly hard to create. We observed how easy it was for actors to 
fall either into the trap of self-mockery, which parallels the satirized Yiddish of 
some works of the Haskalah (think of the embarrassing too-Jewish blabber in 
Shlomo Ettinger’s 1873 Serkele)³, or false tones of self-confidence (which one 
could compare perhaps to some works of Soviet Yiddish poetry).⁴ We gained a 
new appreciation for how Mendele crafts elevated lowliness in his writing. For 
example, in the passage in question, Mendele repeats many words over and 
over: not just “looked,” and “turned to,” but also “verse,” and “welcome,” 
“end.” He dramatizes a limited vocabulary, and thus a low register, but sets 
this basic lexicon into inverted and playful musical arrangements. For example, 
this happens in the sentence: “hobn di lerer derlangt zeyer vuntsh, vos delangen 
heyst./Lit: The teachers fulfilled their wish, as fulfilling could mean.” There is 
also a graceful rocking between self-irony and earnest expressions of pain. 
The last sentence, for instance, begins with protective sarcasm, “The teachers 
did me the honor...”, but ends in earnest, “an end to all of my hopes.” It is 
this candid emotional swinging that allows him to stage his complaint.

In addition to shining new light onto Mendele’s Yiddish style, one of the 
clips that we watched created another, surprising opportunity for producing 
presence. The Caliban rendering that caught our attention was a student produc-
tion of The Tempest from Georgia Southwestern State University in 2008.⁵ The 
clip was not of high production value and the acting and directing appeared 
rough around the edges. But, something about this performance struck a 
chord. Notably, since the play was performed in the American deep south, the 
role of Caliban was played by a black student, while a white student played

³ Printed in Ettinger 1935. The different registers of speech in this play are discussed in Roskies 
2014.
⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGcDBKiKLcE&t=92s (18 June 2019).
the role of the master, Prospero. While some would dismiss this production for typecasting, my students and I were captivated by the emotional charge between the actors on stage. It was a daring reenactment. The student performers re-presented their own pasts, perhaps even their own family histories, and we, their internet viewers thousands of miles away, became their witnesses. The production of presence revealed contagious potential, with one act of self-witnessing through literature engendering another.

This chance encounter, between Mendele, me, my students, Shakespeare, Dan Miron and the actors in Georgia, was one that performed the singularity of literature; the singularity not just of text but of reading. Beyond this chance encounter, I propose that Yiddish literature possesses a broader potential to create new types of presence in contemporary Israel and perhaps elsewhere. Because Yiddish is a Jewish language – but not the one that most students know and speak – it is both familiar and foreign. It thus calls Jewish history in the classroom, but with a space for seeing things differently, outside of set patterns. Perhaps Yiddish literature sounds to my students like Isroelik hears history from the voice of a horse: awkward yet comprehensible, uncanny. As in Isroelik’s exam scene, the Yiddish corpus often explores what it means to be in a position of weakness vis-à-vis the majority culture around you. This then forms the platform for a new literary community, a space of writing and reading together with all the various accents and our dialects of today. This here-ness and with-ness is created through aesthetic as well as narrative means, so that it can be sensed rather than merely told or contemplated. In sum, such a reading experience upends the assumption that, while going about our daily business, we are living in a concrete reality, whereas literature releases us into an alternate dimension. In this case, it seems that all of Mendele’s imaginative genius – the talking horse included – are what enabled us to actually notice our own here and now.

Bibliography


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgcDBKIceU&t=92s (18 June 2019)


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