Gustav Meyrink's *Golem* and Leo Perutz's *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke*: A literary expression of the Jewish experience during the twentieth century

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Abstract

Gustav Meyrink's novel *Der Golem* [*The Golem*], published in 1915, and Leo Perutz's 1953 novel *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* [*By Night under the Stone Bridge*] communicate the authors' image of the Jewish experience and treatment during the period of the twentieth century. Uncanny and fantastical elements are used throughout both texts to help portray the Jewish condition. Meyrink conveys the animosity between nationalistic Jews and middle-class assimilated Jews and highlights the rising anti-Semitism among Gentiles by associating Jews with the decay and corruption of modernity. At the same time, however, Jews are also depicted as a model of higher spirituality. *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* places the Holocaust within the greater context of Jewish history and conveys Perutz's assessment that the tragedy of the Holocaust is one in a series of devastating events which have plagued the Jewish people. Moreover, the text casts doubt on the benevolence of Jewish and non-Jewish authority figures and even the mercifulness of God. The doubt raised in the novel regarding central Jewish beliefs mirrors the Jewish experience of disorientation and confusion following the horrors of the Holocaust. Perutz also conveys the need for Jewish history to be passed down to future generations as it is their past which helps form their Jewish identity.

Keywords: *Der Golem* [*The Golem*] (Meyrink, Gustav); *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* [*By Night under the Stone Bridge*] (Perutz, Leo); Jewish experience (portrayal of); twentieth century; uncanny and fantastical literature; literary interpretation

The Jewish experience of the first half of the twentieth century, marked by two world wars and the Holocaust, found a means of expression in uncanny literature. Leo Perutz's 1953 novel *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* [*By Night under the Stone Bridge*]¹ and *Der Golem* [*The Golem*]², published in 1915 by Gustav Meyrink, both based on Jewish legend, offer a window into the Jewish experience during this volatile period. A common feature of the two texts is their use of uncanny and fantastical elements as a means of communicating Meyrink's and Perutz's image of the Jewish condition. Meyrink's revival of the Jewish legend of the Golem conveys the animosity between nationalistic Jews and middle-class assimilated Jews, growing anti-Semitism among Gentiles and how this anti-Semitism was

often expressed by associating Jews with the decay and corruption of modernity. However, the Jews are not restricted to a one-dimensional characterisation as Meyrink uses the Jew as a model of higher spirituality. In contrast, Perutz's novel *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* places the Holocaust in the greater context of Jewish history and suggests that the tragedy of the Holocaust was not an isolated event in Jewish history, but rather one in a series of devastating events which have besieged and tormented the Jewish people. Moreover, the text casts doubt on the benevolence of higher authorities and even the mercifulness of God. The Jewish experience of disorientation and confusion following the horrors of the Holocaust is mirrored in Perutz's text through the doubt it raises regarding central

Jewish beliefs. Although Perutz emphasises the calamities which mark Jewish history, the text also expresses the importance for this history to be passed down to future generations of Jews as it is their past, regardless of how grim, which helps form their Jewish identity.

Meyrink's novel reflects the stereotypical anti-Semitic image of the Jew as Jewish figures are imbued with all the characteristics of the mental, sexual and moral corruption of modernity with which they were closely associated. For many, the Jew had become the symbol of the fin de siècle theme of decadence. The Ghetto, the space traditionally associated with the Jew, is depicted as a microcosm of all the negative and repulsive elements of modernity where fantastic and uncanny occurrences abound (Gelbin, 2011: p.75). A Jewish text with a chapter titled *Ibbur*, given to the protagonist by an unknown character, provokes a bizarre sequence of events in which the words in the book "strömten aus einem unsichtbaren Munde" [streamed out from an invisible mouth piece] and morphed into the shapes of slave girls while a naked woman has emerged whose "Wimpern waren so lang wie mein ganzer Körper" [eyelashes were as long as my whole body] (Meyrink, 1994: p.19). Fueling the disorienting and unnerving sensation the Ghetto inspires is the protagonist's belief that "gewisse Stunden des Nachts" [at certain hours of the night], the houses converse in a spectral communion, as "schwaches Beben ... dass sich nicht erklären lässt" [an inexplicable quiver goes through their walls] (Meyrink, 1994: p. 25). The protagonist has dreamt that he has been privy to these meetings and has learnt, to his horror, that the houses are the "eigentlichen Herren der Gasse" [true masters of the streets] (Meyrink, 1994: p.25). The culmination of these fantastic events undermines any sense of permanence or certainty in the novel. As Gelbin (2011: p.100) argues, Meyrink's Jewish Ghetto creates a tangible reminder of the Jewish connection to the horrifying modern world through the use of uncanny and fantastic elements.

It is possible to interpret the figure of the Golem as yet another example that draws the connection between the Jewish people and the perversity of the modern world. The Golem, a "künstlichen Menschen...den einst hier im Ghetto ein kabbalakundiger Rabbiner aus dem Elemente formte und ihn zu einem gedankenlosen, automatischen Dasein berief" [that man-made being that long ago a rabbi versed in Cabbala formed from elemental matter and invested with mindless and automatic life] was the Jewish creation that blurred the line between life and death (Meyrink, 1994: p.26). In its very being, the Golem represents man's challenge to natural laws and to barriers of human power. The Golem is the product of an inverse world where man assumes the God-like power of creation; however, the result of such power is a perverse and distorted form of life, with no real sense of permanent identity as the Golem is neither truly dead nor alive. Lorenz (1998: p. 290) notes that the Jewish people, as the source of this supernatural ability, are connected to the destruction of the traditional order. Moreover, Shapiro (1997: p.69) highlights how Meyrink solidifies this conclusion by

depicting the Jewish people as "strange", in their phantom-like demeanour, mirroring their own creation of the Golem, as they straddle "the border between life and death."

Meyrink also draws attention to anti-Semitic stereotypes through his depiction of the Ghetto. Jewish inhabitants are portrayed as morally and sexually perverse, corroded by mental weaknesses which physically manifests in their "warped and contorted" bodies (Gelbin, 2011: p.101). Gelbin notes that these characteristics reinforce the association between the Jewish people and a "degenerate and catastrophic modernity" marked by "urban decadence and disease" (p.100). One of the key Jewish figures in the novel, the junk-shop owner Aaron Wassertrum, possesses many of the vices associated with the Jewish Ghetto. His internal corruption finds expression through his disfiguring "klaffenden Oberlippe" [gapping harelip] and his "starres, grässliches Gesicht" [horrible, expressionless face] (Meyrink, 1994: p.12). The Ghetto is a place where Wassertrum thrives and his profession as a junk-shop owner further tie Wassertrum to the decay associated with modernity.

Moreover, Wassertrum embodies the moral and sexual perversion which thrives in the Jewish Ghetto and "evinces the powerful anti-Semitic association of the Jew with the heightened sexual preoccupation" (Gelbin, 2011: p.103). Although no one in the Ghetto seems to know exactly how many children Wassertrum has fathered, it is clear that many of them are the product of either physical rape or his powers of seduction (Gelbin, 2011: p.103). This is dramatically demonstrated by Charousek, a Czech student, who reveals to the narrator that Wassertrum used "infernalischen Mitteln" [fiendish means] to persuade his mother to let him have his way with her (Meyrink, 1994: p.113).

Despite this overtly negative portrayal of the Jewish people in *The Golem*, exemplified in their connection to the fantastic and uncanny, the novel does not restrict the Jews to a one dimensional characterisation. Gelbin (2011: p.99) argues that for Meyrink, the Jews also represent a model of spiritual nobility and the Ghetto as a place which awakens "spiritual sensitivities" and offers a world beyond normal human limitations, rules, and time. Fantastic sequences emphasises the fluidity of identity in the Ghetto as "Wesen hat Bestand" [none of the beings having any permanence] and the sudden amalgamation of a male and female figure materializing from the text of the *Ibbur* demonstrates this further as they morph into "eine einzige Gestalt...ein Hermaphrodit" [a single figure, a hermaphrodite] (Meyrink, 1994: p.20). These two diametrically opposed poles between the constructive and destructive elements of Judaism are represented through the junk-shop owner Aaron Wassertrum and the protagonist's neighbour Hillel (Gelbin, 2011, p. 111) as he is "in jedem Atom das Gegenteil von Wassertrum" [the opposite of Wassertrum in every atom of his being] (Meyrink, 1994: p.115). The internal corruption of Wassertrum finds its antithesis in Hillel as he is content in his poverty and learned in the Torah and Talmud. Hillel offers a window into Jewish mysticism and a higher

spirituality completely divested from the corrupt and perverse world of Wassertrum's Ghetto (Gelbon, 2011: p.111). Hillel's inner constitution manifests itself in the "Ebenmaß" [elegant portions] of his body with the "schmale, feine Schnitt des Gesichtes" [slim, delicate lines of his face] hinting at his connection to a higher spiritual realm (Meyrink, 1994: p.65). Hillel, having "über alles Menschentum...hinausgewaschen" [grown so far beyond humanity] also possesses the unique power of spiritual influence as he is able to heal someone "seelisch...nicht nur körperlich" [spiritually and not just physically] (Meyrink, 1994: p.121,119). Hillel's spiritual nobility highlights the "special access to spirituality that Meyrink attributes to the Jew" (Gelbin, 2011: p.112).

The novel also exposes the potent fear among Christians in Central Europe at the time of the "hidden Jew" who has infiltrated Gentile society and thereby threatened its very structure and stability (Finkelkraut, 1994: p.69). The half-Jewish character Charousek stresses Aaron Wassertrum's malevolence and the uncanny undertones of his power (Finkelkraut, 1994: p.69), stating that Wassertrum "einer von jenen ist, deren Augen durch Mauern zu schauen vermögen" [is one of those men who can see through walls] (Meyrink, 1994: p.28). Charousek also describes with disgust how Wassertrum seduced and raped Christian women, including Charousek's own mother (Meyrink, 1994: p.133). The depiction of Wassertrum's malice, laden with undertones of the uncanny, highlights this deep seated fear of the "hidden Jew's" penetration of Christian society.

While Charousek voices the Gentile fear of the "hidden Jew", he also offers a window into Jewish self-hatred. Charousek harbours contempt for his biological father, Wassertrum, and for his father's people. He hates "sein Blut" [his blood] and explains that such a powerful disdain can only be felt "wie ich es tue, was ein Teil von uns selbst ist" [as deeply as I do, if it is a part of ourselves] (Meyrink, 1994: p.109,112). His contempt is fully demonstrated in the satisfaction he gains from the fact that he is "schwindsüchtig...und Blut spucken muss" [consumptive and spits blood] as he understands his "Körper wehrt sich gegen alles, was von ihm ist, und stößt es mit Abscheu von sich" [body fighting everything which comes from him...spewing it up in disgust] (Meyrink, 1994, p.112). Meyrink's depiction of the fracture and internal strife among Jews reflects the divergence experienced among Jews at the turn of the century.

While Meyrink's adaptation of the Jewish legend of the Golem reflects the widespread hostility felt towards the Jews during the turn of the century in Central Europe, the Jewish author Leo Perutz uses Jewish legend surrounding the fabled characters of Rabbi Löw, Rudolf II and Mordechai Meisl as means of examining the experience of Jewish persecution. In *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* [By Night under the Stone Bridge], Perutz places the Holocaust in the greater context of Jewish history and conveys his assessment that the Holocaust was not an isolated event in Jewish history, but rather one in a series of devastating events which have plagued the Jewish people. The importance Perutz places on

perspective and context in understanding historical events is reflected in the structure of the novel as it comprises a collection of fourteen individual stories, each of which depends on the others to make sense of the greater historical narrative of the Jewish people in Prague. Perutz depicts "die historischen Prozesse in der unberechenbaren Hand des Zufall" [the historical processes in the unpredictable hands of chance]³ (Becker, 2007: p.96) and how, through these arbitrary events of history, the Jewish people have repeatedly been victims of tragedy.

The uncanny and fantastic elements in the novel further reinforce this assessment and also provide a means of expressing the enduring suffering of the Jewish people. In the narrative *Die Sarabande* [The Saraband], Rabbi Löw's "zauberische Kraft" [magic power] conjures up an image of the Ecce homo on the wall of a crumbling building; however, it is not the traditional depiction of Christ but rather an image of "das Judentum, das durch die Jahrhunderte hindurch verfolgte und verhöhnte Judentum" [the Jews, persecuted and derided through the centuries] (Perutz, 1988: p.64). Although the Ecce homo soon physically disappears, as the "Jahre, Wind und Wetter" [time, wind and weather] have left "keine Spuren" [no trace] of the image, what the Ecce homo represents, namely Jewish suffering, is a timeless reality for the Jewish people (Perutz, 1988: p.64). Perutz explains that even in contemporary times the suffering expressed in the Ecce homo can be seen in the momentary "Blick" [look] of an "alten jüdischen Hausierer" [an old Jewish peddler] being harassed by street-children who yell after him "Jud! Jud!" [Jew! Jew!] (Perutz, 1988: p.64).

The *Epilog* [Epilogue], the concluding installment in the series of short stories, provides the final image of Jewish suffering as the narrator vividly remembers his last visit to the Jewish Ghetto in Prague as it was being torn down, with no building, street or house being spared. The one place of Jewish refuge had been taken, and with it, a piece of Jewish identity (Perutz, 1988: p.266). Perutz connects the image of the Ghetto's destruction with the Holocaust as the "dicke Wolke von rötlich-grauem Staub" [thick cloud of reddish grey dust], rising up to the sky, which mirrors the clouds of ash that ascended from the burning of Jewish bodies in the concentration camps (Perutz, 1988: p.266).

In addition to confronting the tragic pattern of Jewish history, *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* casts doubt on the benevolence of higher authorities and even the mercifulness of God. This reflects the Jewish experience of disorientation and uncertainty following the Holocaust which undermined the Jewish peoples' conviction in central Jewish beliefs. Key to this examination is Perutz's scrutiny of authority figures, particularly Emperor Rudolf II and Rabbi Löw, as he "indicts the mighty, Jews and non-Jews, for carrying out their high-handed designs at the expense of the innocent" (Lorenz, 1998: p.291). Esther, the wife of Mordechai Meisl, provides a dramatic example of the complete subjugation of the Jewish people to greater powers as she embodies the "realistic aspects of the Golem legend" (Lorenz, 1998: p.291); neither Rabbi Löw nor the Emperor

ever contemplate Esther's own desire, but use her as a tool for their own purposes. Like the Golem, Esther carries out the wishes of both men under the influence of supernatural powers, thus emphasising the perversity of her enslavement, as she has no hope of gaining control or freedom over her own being. The secular authority of Emperor Rudolf II is harshly critiqued by Perutz as the Emperor, infatuated with the beautiful Jewish woman, uses mystical powers to enter a dream-like-state in which he and Esther meet as lovers. Although Rabbi Löw's motives for facilitating their affair are understandable because he fears the expulsion of the Jewish people, Lorenz (1998: p.291) notes that he too comes under criticism for subverting Esther's free will and for using her as a "tool to appease the Christian ruler."

Rabbi Löw also comes under scrutiny in *Die Pest in der Judenstadt* [*Pestilence in the Ghetto*]. As the *Kinderpest* [children's pestilence] ravages the Jewish community, the Rabbi is depicted as distracted from the worldly suffering of his Jewish followers. He remains engrossed in the spiritual realm as he sits in "seiner Kammer über das Buch der Geheimnisse gebeugt...verloren in die Unermesslichkeit der Zahlen" [his room, bent over the Book of Secrets...lost as he was in the infinitude of numbers] (Perutz, 1988: p.14). Moreover, for all of the Rabbi's apparent wisdom and supernatural abilities, he only realizes later on that it is the affair he facilitates between Esther and the Emperor that is actually inciting God's wrath. Thus, while Rabbi Löw enjoys extreme power over the Jewish people, as emphasised by his supernatural abilities, he remains out-of touch with the Jewish people and his actions contradict the perception of his seeming benevolence.

Perutz further questions the belief in a merciful God as in the novel it is God who is often a main source of Jewish suffering. One of the starkest depictions of Perutz's critical assessment is found in *Das Gespräch der Hunde* [*Dog Language*]. The narrative tells of Berl Landfahrer, a Jew from the Ghetto who, despite a life of piety and virtue, "war sein ganzes Leben lang vom Unglück verfolgt" [had been unlucky all his life] (Perutz, 1988: p.38). This culminates in his arrest and sentencing to be hanged the very next day. The prison, nicknamed "Python" and "Ramses", recalls Jewish enslavement by the Egyptians and offers a reminder of the long history of Jews being held captive by outside forces (Perutz, 1988: p.38). However, even after a life marked by tragedy, Landfahrer does not lose faith in his "Ewiger und gerechter Gott" [eternal and righteous God] and proclaims "Ich muß ertragen was Er über mich beschlossen hat!" [I must accept what He has decided for me!] (Perutz, 1988: pp.41-42). Perutz presents a critical look at Landfahrer's blind belief that God's "Tun ist ohne Fehle" [actions are without fault] (Perutz, 1988: p.42). The merciful God to whom Landfahrer prays has bequeathed to his devoted follower a life blighted by hapless events. Moreover, when Landfahrer tries to invoke the power of Jewish mysticism of "die Kabbala" [the Kabala] to quiet the dogs in his cell so he can pray, the Jewish mystical powers fail to work (Perutz, 1988: p.44). The supernatural element and its

uselessness to Berl Landfahrer further underscores how the traditional forms of religious belief fail the Jewish people in times of need (Perutz, 1988: p.46). This is in contrast to Meyrink's portrayal of Jewish mysticism as a path to enlightenment, offering a blessed existence beyond normal human constraints and time.

Through this failure of mysticism to alleviate Jewish suffering, the narrative of Berl Landfahrer becomes a metaphor for the Jewish people who, regardless of circumstances, wholly devote themselves to God, but who never reap tangible benefit for their piety. As Berl Landfahrer is fated to spend the rest of his life hunting for his promised wealth, the Jews too await the Promised Land, a place of milk and honey, which God has promised them. Instead they only encounter a hostile world in which they are constantly the victims of tragedy. Ultimately, Landfahrer is not saved by God, but by his fellow Jews who scrape together enough money to buy his freedom. The novel presents a people blinded by the illusion that God will provide answers and protection during hardship when it is in fact their fellow Jews who offer the most tangible hope of help in times of need.

Perutz was not the only author to use literature to grapple with the experiences of Jewish persecution, particularly the Holocaust. Kligerman (2007: p.4) notes that Paul Celan's *Todesfuge* [Death Fugue] conveys the experience of the Holocaust by "confront[ing] the spectator with the catastrophic sense of loss." The recurring terrifying image in *Todesfuge* of "schwarze Milch...wir trinken sie abends/wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts" [black milk...we drink you at dusktime/ we drink you at noontime and dawntime we drink you at night] (as cited in Bekker, 2008: p.160) mirrors Perutz's use of the fantastic in *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* to "induce a visceral response of agitation in the spectator" that reflects the abhorrence towards a world so brutally and blatantly unjust and horrifying (Kligerman, 2007: p.5). This sense of terror, invoked by worlds where black milk is perpetually drunk and where children reappear as ghosts, is further highlighted as these occurrences are not relegated to the safe distance of a fantasy world but rather overlap with real historical events. The intertwining of historical events with the uncanny and fantastic serves to emphasise how a world of once unimaginable horrors has become reality. Moreover, the repetition of the image of "schwarze Milch" [black milk] in Celan's poem symbolises the "haunting return of a traumatic past," much like Perutz recalls tragic Jewish history through the retelling of Jewish suffering and oppression in the fourteen separate narratives (Kligerman, 2007: p.19). Key to both texts is the use of the Jewish female figure as an expression of Jewish suffering. As argued by Kligerman (2007: p.128), Esther epitomizes Jewish subjugation under outside forces through her affair and subsequent death while Sulamith in *Todesfuge*, with her "aschenes Haar" [ashen hair], reflects the "the terrifying faces from Auschwitz" who inevitably meet their death. Through literature, both Perutz and Celan lead the reader into

the world of the Jewish people and, through their vivid imagery, expose it as one which is plagued by tragedy, loss and suffering (Kligerman, 2007: p.12).

Although Perutz emphasises the calamities which mark Jewish history, he also conveys the need for this past to be communicated to future generations as it is their history, regardless of how grim, which helps form their Jewish identity and provides meaning and clarity to the contemporary world (Becker, 2007: p.112). In *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke*, Meisl's Testament provides the concrete means through which Jewish history, in its unglorified form, is passed down with "die Demolierung des Ghettos und das Auftauche des legendären Testaments" [the demolition of the ghetto and the emergence from the past of the legendary will] (Perutz, 1988: p.263). In the face of this destruction, the "Weitergabe der Geschichten" [passing on of stories]⁴ (Becker, 2007: p.113) to younger generations is the "Versuch ihrer Rettung vor dem Vergessen" [attempt to rescue them from oblivion]⁵ (Neuhaus, 1984: p.112). The narrator's last trip into the Ghetto remains "lebhaft und so scharf umrissen im Gedächtnis" [so vividly in my memory] and the uncanny clarity with which the Jewish youth observes the Ghetto in the midst of its very destruction reiterates the importance of memory in the face of ruin (Perutz, 1988: p.262).

Through their use of the uncanny and fantastic, the texts *The Golem* by Gustav Meyrink and *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* by Leo Perutz, both based on Jewish legend, elucidate the Jewish condition during a volatile period in European history. From the lens of a non-Jew, Meyrink's text reflects both Jewish self-hatred and the potent anti-Semitism prevalent in European society at the turn of the century. In the shadow of the Holocaust and from a Jewish perspective, *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* conveys Perutz's assessment that the tragedy of the Holocaust is one in a series of devastating events that have afflicted the Jewish people. The text thus reflects the disorientation and confusion felt by Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust and casts doubt on the benevolence of both secular and religious higher authorities and even on the mercifulness of God. While both Perutz and Meyrink base their novels on Jewish legend, they present diverging approaches and attitudes to Jewish mysticism and legend. Meyrink portrays Jewish mysticism as a means of attaining a higher existence, beyond human suffering, time and limitations. Perutz, in contrast, uses Jewish mysticism as a means of emphasizing and intensifying the experience of Jewish suffering and helplessness. Examined together, the two texts provide powerful insight into the condition and experiences of the Jewish people during the first half of the twentieth century.

Endnotes

1. English translation of quotations from Perutz's *Nachts unter der steinernen Brücke* cited from: Perutz, L. (1989). *By night under the stone bridge*. Trans. E. Mosbacher. London, England: Collins Harvill.
2. English translation of quotations from Meyrink's *Der Golem* cited from: Meyrink, G. (1995). *The Golem*. Trans. M. Mitchell. Riverside, CA: Ariadne.
3. Quote translated by author of this article.
4. Quote translated by author of this article.
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A literary expression of the Jewish experience during the twentieth century (Vito)

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Additional Materials