A Literary Monument for the Vanished World of Lithuanian Jewry:

The Work of the Yiddish Writer Chaim Grade

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Abstract

This thesis offers new perspectives on the Yiddish poet and novelist Chaim Grade, examining his reflections on the world of historic Lithuanian Jewry from the outset of his career through his post-Holocaust novels. Chapter one explores the gap between the historical reality of interwar Vilna and its literary representation in his novel *Di agune* and questions the widely accepted view of this work as a credible historical source.

Chapter two deals with Grade's depiction of his experience as a student in a Novaredok Musar yeshiva, contrasting the depiction of this yeshiva in the poem *Musernikes* (1938) and the novel *Tsemakh atlas* (1967). The writer's shift from a fierce condemnation of the Novaredok Yeshiva to a more moderate and affectionate view as a post-Holocaust writer is explained as the older Grade's attempt to reconcile his art and identity as a modern Jew with the religious world he had forsaken.

Résumé

Cette thèse présente de nouvelles perspectives sur l'œuvre du poète et écrivain yiddish, Chaim Grade, examine ses pensées sur la communauté juive de la Lituanie historique, et retrace son travail à ses débuts, abordant également ses écrits après l'Holocauste. Le premier chapitre traite de l'écart entre la réalité historique de Vilna pendant l'entre-deux-guerres et la représentation littéraire dans son roman *Di agune*, mettant en doute l'opinion fort répandue selon laquelle cette œuvre constitue une source historique crédible.

Le deuxième chapitre examine la représentation que fait Grade de son expérience comme étudiant au yeshiva de l'École Novaredok Musar, ce qui contraste avec la représentation de cette école dans le poème *Musernikes* (1938) et dans le roman *Tsemakh atlas* (1967). Le changement dans sa pensée d'une condamnation virulente du yeshiva Novaredok à une opinion plus modérée après l'Holocauste constitue son effort à concilier son art, son identité en tant que Juif dans le monde actuel et la religion qu'il a abandonnée.

Introduction

At the end of World War II, after five years as a refugee in the Soviet Union, the Yiddish poet Chaim Grade found himself back in Vilna, the city of his childhood and youth. In Vilna (lovingly known in Jewish tradition as *Yerushalayim deLita*, "the Jerusalem of Lithuania"), the city famed for its long history as a center of Torah study and for its influential role as the cradle of the modern Jewish currents of Enlightenment, Hebraism, Yiddishism, Zionism and socialism, Grade was directly confronted with the enormity of the destruction and loss wreaked by the Holocaust. Overwhelmed by the annihilation of the entire Jewish community of Vilna by the Nazis, Grade realized that he was now the orphan of his family, neighbours and friends, of the entire rich and variegated Jewish cultural world which the Nazis had destroyed.

In order to understand the intricate story of the Lithuanian Jewish writer, Chaim Grade, whose career encompassed various geographic locations and literary genres (poetry, short stories, novels and literary autobiography), a brief explanation of Grade's homeland, historic Lithuania (known in Yiddish as *Lite*), and his city, Vilna, must be given. The medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania encompassed not only the territory in which the Lithuanian nationality was concentrated but also northeastern Poland and Belorussia, and other territories as well. Historic Lithuania was a multiethnic territory inhabited by Lithuanians, Poles, Belorussians, Jews, Letts, Russians and others. Its character was shaped by geographic, economic and political factors over centuries. Despite the changing political boundaries imposed upon historic Lithuania in the course of time, its multiethnic population retained much in common. The Jewish type of historic

Lithuania is known as a "Litvak" (Yiddish plural "Litvakes"), a Lithuanian Jew, with reference to this broad territory, and not solely to ethnic Lithuania, i.e. the present day Republic of Lithuania. Historic Lithuania was the only significant territory of Jewish Eastern Europe in which Hasidism did not become the majority expression of Judaism. The traditional orthodox opponents of Hasidism, the Mithnagdim ("opponents" in Hebrew) dominated Jewish religious life in most of this territory.

The historic capital of this territory, Vilna, has experienced a number of transformations during its long history. It became a Polish city, Wilno, due to the fact of Polish political domination for a long period as well as the demographic fact that it was home to an ethnic Polish majority, located in a predominantly Belorussian ethnic region without significant numbers of ethnic Lithuanians. Historically, Vilna had a numerically as well as economically and culturally significant Jewish minority up until the Holocaust. Historic Lithuania and its capital were incorporated into the Tsarist Russian Empire as a result of the partitions of Poland in the late eighteenth century. Russian language and culture became a significant factor and the capital city became known in Russian as Vilna.[1] The collapse of the Tsarist Empire and the restoration of Poland in November, 1918, in the form of the interbellum Polish Republic, saw the city become the Polish Wilno again. It was occupied by the Soviets in September, 1939, and briefly turned over to the interwar Lithuanian Republic, in the last days of its existence, as that nation's historic capital. Lithuania with Vilna were annexed to the Soviet Union in June, 1940 and then experienced the devastating Nazi German occupation. Today the city is known as Vilnius, the capital of the renewed Republic of Lithuania.

[1] This transliteration of the Russian name is close to the Jewish name of the city in Yiddish, Vilne. Therefore the widely recognized name Vilna will be used to convey the Jewish designation of the city.

In spite of the precarious political state that characterized historic Lithuania, the Jews who were living in this region succeeded in maintaining a strong religious, cultural and political identity as Lithuanian Jews. This identity was based on linguistic, socio-economic and religious factors. Only against this backdrop of the entangled identity of historic Lithuania and that of Vilna as the capital of three different cultures: Lithuanian, Polish, and Lithuanian-Jewish, can the remarkable case of Chaim Grade as a Lithuanian-Jewish writer be comprehended. The Yiddish poet who was born in the last days of tsarist Vilna and made his debut as a poet in Polish Wilno, was left spiritually homeless in the wake of the Holocaust, mourning the destruction of the Jewish world of historic Lithuania and its capital Vilna. It is this Vilna and this world of the *Litvakes* (Lithuanian Jews) that occupies the central place in the work of Grade from the time he managed to flee the city during the Nazi-German invasion until his death in New York City, some forty years later.

If the feeling that one's poetry is no longer relevant and the apprehension that one will be abandoned by one's audience is common for poets in general, for Grade, these feelings were intensified by his new condition as a post-Holocaust writer. Both his prewar audience of secular Yiddish readers and the Orthodox Vilna in which he grew up were destroyed by the Nazis. The precarious future of the Yiddish language, a language that had thrived in Vilna up till the German invasion of the city in 1941, only aggravated Grade's position as an artist.[2] Henceforth, he realized that his role would be that of a living relic of the lost Jewish spiritual world. In his post-war autobiography *My Mother*

[2] For Grade's pessimistic forecast concerning the future of Yiddish language and literature, see Morton A. Reicheck, "A Writer in a Search of an Audience: Profile of Chaim Grade," *Present Tense* 5, no.4 (1978): 45.

Sabbath Days, Grade asserts that he joined the realm of "the literature of mourning"[3] not out of free choice:

> Since my return to Vilna, I have roamed through the seven little alleys that once made up the Ghetto. The narrow alleyways enmesh and imprison me, like subterranean passages, like caves filled with ancient graves. Orphaned, they cast a spell upon me; their emptiness hovers in my brain, they attach themselves to me like seven chains of stone. Yet I have no desire to free myself of them. I want them to carve themselves still into my body, into my flesh.[4]

Grade's lamentation for Jewish Vilna as well as his inability to set his mind free from its memories are key factors of any study of Grade's position as a post-Holocaust writer.

As a prewar writer whose poems tended, like many other poets of his generation, to focus on the experience of the individual who is overwhelmed by social and global forces, Grade shifts in his postwar poetry and prose to lament the Holocaust as a national catastrophe.[5] Like many other Yiddish and Hebrew writers of his era, the act of writing about the destruction reinforced in him a sense of collective responsibility for the Jewish People in general and, particularly, for the Holocaust survivors. Grade's new mission became to preserve the memories of the vanished religious civilization of Eastern European Jewry as he felt that "it is the will of God for me to leave a monument for a world that perished."[6] This thesis offers new perspectives on Grade's writing by exploring its development from his prewar period in Vilna up through his postwar monumental novels that portray the life of the Litvakes in interbellum Poland and their distinctive culture and various religious currents. Before turning to an analysis of the

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[3] Susan A. Slotnick, "Chaim Grade's Central Concern: On the Occasion of His 70th Birthday," *Jewish Book Annual* 37 (1979-1980): 106.

[4] Chaim Grade, *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, trans. Channa Kleinerman-Goldstein and Inna Hecker (New York, 1987), 335. For the role of this novel as a reconstruction of the writer's memories for future generations see Yechiel Szeintuch, "Chaim Grade as Poet of the Holocaust," *Jewish Book Annual* 48 (1990-1991): 155.

[5] Slotnick, 109.

[6] Reicheck, 40.

major questions of this study, it is important to present a few biographical details about the writer.

As noted above, Chaim Grade was born in Vilna, in the tsarist Pale of Settlement in 1910. His father was a Maskil, an adherent of the Jewish Enlightenment movement (Haskalah), and his mother was a fruit peddler. Whereas his father, Reb Shlomo Mordechai, an advocate of this secular movement, appears in Grade's novels on occasion, it is the writer's mother, the poor, pious and strictly orthodox fruit peddler Vella, who represents a central character throughout Grade's oeuvre. As a child, Grade was a yeshiva scholar and attended several yeshivas in Vilna, Bielsk, Olkenik and Bialystok.[7] These yeshivas were affiliated with the Novaredok extremist branch of the Musar movement, a distinctly Lithuanian current for the education of the individual toward moral perfection, established by Rabbi Israel (Lipkin) Salanter in the 1840s. In addition, Grade spent seven years under the tutelage of the revered Lithuanian-Jewish rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz (1878-1953), commonly known as the Hazon Ish ("Man of Vision").[8] At the age of twenty-two he left the yeshiva world and began writing secular poetry. Soon after, he acquired distinguished recognition and became a member of the Yiddish literary group Yung Vilne ("Young Vilna"), a group that played a significant role in modern Yiddish poetry and the growth of Yiddishism in the prewar years.[9]

During the years from 1941 to 1946 Grade found refuge in the Soviet Union. At the end of the war he was repatriated to Poland. However, doubting the likelihood of the

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[7] "Khayim Grade," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur,* vol. 2 (New York, 1958), 335-36.

[8] In the orthodox world, rabbis are often called by the title of their major book. . The Hazon Ish, one of the supreme Talmudic scholars of Lithuanian Jewry in the first half of the twentieth century, is known by the title of his commentary on several parts of the *Shulhan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law)..

[9] "Khayim Grade," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur,* 336.

resurrection of Jewish life there, he moved to Paris where he took part in the post-war reorganization of Yiddish culture. In 1948 he arrived in New York as a delegate to the founding conference of the Congress for Jewish Culture (Alveltlekher Yidisher Kultur-Kongres) and chose New York as his permanent home until his death on the 26th of June, 1982. In New York, he began his association with the Yiddish daily *Tog-Morgn Zhurnal,* where he published his poetry, serialized fiction and memoirs. Throughout his fifty years as a poet and novelist Grade became one of the most prominent figures in Yiddish literature. The writer Eli Wiesel titled him, in 1974, "one of the great if - not the greatest – of living Yiddish novelists."[10]

The major goal of this thesis is a literary and historical examination of the vicissitudes of Grade's career as both a prewar and postwar writer. It shall offer insight to his unique conception of Lithuanian-Jewish life, the image of Vilna as its ultimate center, and the Musar Movement of which he was an adherent in his youth. By examining the various artistic stages that Grade went through during his career, several historical and poetic aspects shall be discussed.

The first aspect deals with the relationship between history and literature, i.e. to what extent is a literary work that is aimed at preserving the memory of vanished Lithuanian Jewry a reliable historical source. It will trace the way historical studies differ from the type of memoirs and narratives that were incorporated into Grade's post-war novels and short stories. The first chapter of this study will address this issue, not only from a theoretical standpoint, but, also, through an extensive discussion of Grade's detailed and artistic rendition of Jewish life in interwar Polish Lithuania as it appears in

[10] Richard Shepard, "The World of Chaim Grade," *Moment* 5, no.8 (1980): 41.

the novel *Di agune*. This chapter will use the question of internal politics in the Jewish community as a case study to place historical reality vis à vis its literary image.

The second chapter is dedicated to a comparison between two different accounts of the Novaredok yeshiva, the extremist branch of Lithuanian Yeshivas to which the young Grade belonged before his break with religion. The chapter will explore the major reasons for Grade's shift from a negative and critical view of Novaredok in his early work, the poem *Musernikes,* to a more benign and affirmative approach to this school in his monumental novel *Tsemakh atlas*. The shift in the writer's standpoint regarding this issue will be examined through a theoretical discussion of the difference between two modes of writing, poetry and prose.

Grade, though removed from religious practice, comes to reconciliation with the world of orthodox Lithuanian-Jewish society. Though he was a secular artist, he incorporated the rabbinic heritage of Lithuanian Jewry into his works. The unique religiosity that suffuses his later works will be examined in accordance with his roles of both artist and of Holocaust survivor. In light of his status as a post-Holocaust Yiddish writer he can be viewed as the preserver of Lithuanian-Jewish culture for future generations. An analysis of the interplay of art and religion in his prose will be based on the novel *Tsemakh atlas* and the philosophical essay "Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner" ("My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner"). By juxtaposing historical studies with an analysis of his major works and by penetrating the development of Grade as an artist throughout his career, we can better understand the panorama of Lithuanian Jewish life that Grade's work reflects.

Chapter I

The Poetics of Jewish Authority

Theoretical Background

In the conclusion of an article based on an interview with Chaim Grade, conducted four years before he died, the interviewer Morton Reichek summarizes the profound importance of Grade's oeuvre:

> He writes novels of ideas that examine the ethical and legal qualities of Judaism and the confrontation between Orthodox and secular values.... but more significant, Grade's writing represents a primary source of Jewish history. He is an archivist who has assembled authentic source material for the future study of East European yeshiva life.[11]

Similarly, the celebrated Yiddish literature critic Shloyme Bickel compares Grade's works to those of his spiritual ancestor S. Y. Abramovitch (Mendele Moykher Sforim), arguing that his novel *Tsemach atlas* may constitute a basis for a "reconstruction of the vanished life of scholars, Rabbis and Musarists of the former Jewish Lithuania...."[12] One may infer from these two accounts that historiography was Chaim Grade's preoccupation, especially in the realm of the prose section of his oeuvre.

The statements put forth by Reichek and Bickel are merely two examples of the general view of scholars who argue, unequivocally, that Grade's works are reliable historical testimonies given to the reader in the form of literature. This claim is made by other literary critics and institutions as well. For instance, the American Academy for Jewish Studies decided, in 1967, to grant Grade a citation and an award that had been

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[11] Reichek, "A Writer in a Search," 41.
[12] Shloyme Bickel, *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1970), 371.

given, up to that point, only to works of scholarship. It granted him such distinction as a result of the belief that "Grade's work has a superb historical value as a lofty monument to a world that vanished and exists no longer."[13] The critic Curt Leviant goes even further, arguing that Grade's historical novels are not a documentation of the annihilated world of Lithuanian Jewry, but a resurrection of this milieu.[14]

While it would be difficult to repudiate the credibility of the historical reality of novels like *Tsemakh atlas*, *Di agune*,[15] the autobiographical novel *Der mames shabosim* (*My Mother's Sabbath Days*) and many of Grade's short stories, the certainty with which both literary critics and historians approach this Yiddish writer's work ought to be questioned. This chapter will investigate the distinction between historical and literary modes of writing as they are demonstrated in Grade's works. Discussion of this question will focus on the reconstruction of Jewish authority in historic Lithuania as it is presented in *Di agune,* a novel that belongs to Grade's postwar period after his immigration to the United States.

Whereas postmodern critical theorists such as, for instance, the school of deconstruction, tend to equate the discipline of historiography with that of prose,[16] it seems that in the field of Yiddish literature the correspondence of these two disciplines does not stem from a postmodernist model. As such, it can be discussed in its own specific context. It was Dan Miron who first explored the gap between historical reality

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[13] Shaul Liberman, "Al Hayyim Grade hamesaper," *Bitsaron* 3, no. 9-10 (1981): 29-30; Mordechai Halamish, *Yidish batefutsot: 'Al sofrim umeshorerim*, (Tel Aviv 1993), 89.

[14] Curt Leviant, "Introduction," in Chaim Grade, *The Agunah*, 10. The critic Y. Yanasovitch also makes use of the verb "to resurrect" (*mekhaye meysim zayn*) in reference to Grade's postwar prose. See Yitskhok Yanasovitch , "Khayim grade der prozayiker," *Di Godene Keyt* 102 (1980): 42.

[15] Chaim Grade, *Di agune*, New York: CYCO-Bicher, 1961. All English citations of *Di Agune* have been taken from: Chaim Grade, *The Agunah*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York, 1974).

[16] Menahem Brinker, *Sovev Sifrut: Maamarim 'al gevul hafilosofya vetorat hasifrut vehaomanut* (Jerusalem, 2000), 305.

and the literary image of the Jewish *shtetl* (town) in the works of the masters of Yiddish literature, S.Y Abramovitch, S. Rabinovitch and I.L Peretz.[17] Miron criticizes the conventional accounts of past literary critics who trusted the historical credibility of the masters and sometimes even went so far as to suggest that the history of Jewish *shtetl* life in Russia could be reconstructed from Abramovitch's literary works alone.[18] It seems that this general, though dubious, approach towards historical and literary writing is reflected in the aforementioned accounts of Chaim Grade's work as well.

Due to the particular nature of Grade's novelistic works as deliberate acts of historical reconstruction, it is not surprising that, in his case, the borders between fiction and history are blurred. In fact, one can even argue that Grade's intentions to reconstruct Jewish life in historic Lithuania were even stronger than those of his literary predecessors. While many factors motivated the masters to offer a mimetic depiction of East European Jewish life in their works, none of them had been confronted with the total destruction of Jewish life in this part of the world. It is true that Sholem Aleichem and, especially, Peretz aspired to reflect the image of the *shtetl* as the Jewish population of tsarist Russia was undergoing an accelerating process of urbanization and immigration that was dissolving *shtetl* life. However, in Grade's case, the writer's chief motivation to recount the history of Jewish life in historic Lithuania did not come in response to such a gradual change but, rather, stemmed from one more drastic. It is important to note that although Grade's stress on what he saw as historical reconstruction was very strong, , this does not render the distinction between literary image and historical reality invalid. A

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[17] Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, NY, 2000), 7.

[18] This remark on the historical value of Abramovitch's work was made by one of the most noted critics of Modern Hebrew Literature, David Frischmann, in his famous 1910 essay on the Yiddish master. See Ibid., 6-7.

historical and theoretical discussion of the nature of this distinction may shed new light on the following analysis of Grade's reconstruction of Lithuanian Jewish life in his novel *Di agune.*

The history of the tension between the disciplines of history and literature goes back to Plato's *The Republic*. In the tenth book of his masterpiece, Plato manifests his antagonism towards Homer's canon and towards art in general.[19] According to Plato, in contrast to a craftsman who imitates the divine ideal of his object, the artist merely creates an imitation of an imitation. Being twice removed from the truth, any kind of artistic manifestation is conceived by Plato as a dangerous illusion.

Aristotle, as opposed to his predecessor, was the first philosopher to establish a scientific study of genres and a distinction between literature and history in his *Poetics*. For Aristotle, it is in the imagination embodied in the drama that the audience is able to overcome the particular and conceive the general.[20] Art, thus, does not alienate the reader or viewer from the truth. On the contrary, it is a precondition for its achievement.

Traces of the dispute between the Platonic and the Aristotelian evaluation of art as a form of mimesis can be found in Germany during the nineteenth century. While Hegel contended that well-written historiography reflects the universal as it is incarnated in its details, thus preferring the field of history over literature, the Romantic Movement completely rejected the concept of art as a vehicle for describing reality. Hence, the first Romanticists conceived art, not as the faithful and complete rendition of reality, but, rather, as a higher form of it, an attempt to decipher the very foundations of the external world.

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[19] Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York, 1968), 261.
[20] Brinker, *Sovev Sifrut*, 303.

This dispute sheds light on the precarious and problematic nature of human understanding of reality presented in a given text. Moreover, it shows how each discipline claims to convey a better presentation of reality than the other. According to the literary critic Brinker, the pretensions of both disciplines to depict reality in a full sense should not blur the ancient distinction between the two. These fields do not differ in their approximation of "truth", but in the hermeneutic context that forms their basis.[21] This statement is especially crucial to a discussion of bordering sub-genres, such as the historical novel, the memoir and the autobiography, whose resemblance to a specific historical context is stronger.

A historian's commitment to relate only historical facts distinguishes his hermeneutic approach from that of the novelist, whose stories may juxtapose imaginary figures to historical ones. A novelist, as opposed to a historian, is more committed to the aesthetic aspects of his work than to adherence to historical reliability. That is, given his role as a creator of a fictive reality (that he bases on historical context), he may not be committed to distinguishing between historic facts and individual speculation. Moreover, a historian analyzing a particular phenomenon in a particular historical context is always committed to a broad presentation of all factors involved, irrespective of his own affiliation or individual judgment. Conversely, a novelist is permitted, through the medium of prose, to render only a partial illustration of that phenomenon, magnifying historical figures, events or currents he favors to emphasize, while overlooking those he does not.

Another factor that determines a text's designation as either historical or literary is the way in which it is conceived and evaluated by the reader. This appraisal is culturally

[21] Ibid., 306-307.

and historically contingent. While typically, literary works are valued for their aesthetic value and historical works for their historical accounts, a classical historical work can be read in another period only for its aesthetic value, whereas old historical novels may sometimes be of interest only because of the ethnographical materials they include.[22] Grade's autobiographical novel *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, for instance, stands right on the border between fiction and historiography. This novel provides an example of work that can be read from either a literary or a historical perspective. Though it is not committed to recounting a sequence of facts from an objective standpoint, there are no other sources to verify the credibility of its plot as a true representation of Grade's personal story. However, a comparison between the historical background of *Di agune,* (in which the author presents Jewish life in interwar Vilna), and its literary reality is a more realistic venture.

This task can be engaged from two different directions. Firstly, it is possible to compare references to historical facts in the story, with those in historical works. However, the recognition of Grade's works as a genuine historical source would render this avenue pointless. Irrespective of whether or not we would find inaccuracies in our comparison, our theoretical question concerning differentiation between historical and literary realities would remain valid. The second direction for addressing this task would be to use an analysis of the literary devices that shape the mimetic presentation of Lithuanian Jewry in *Di agune*. Because in a work of fiction there is no clear borderline separating facts and subjective commentary, a better understanding of how Lithuanian Jewry is reflected in Grade's work can be achieved by drawing a distinction between the author's world-view and the historical reality he depicts.

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[22] Ibid., 107.

Because in *Di agune*, as in many historical novels, the lives of the fictive protagonists are set in a fixed historical and geographical context, it is necessary to examine the way in which the lives of these characters symbolize the image of Lithuanian Jewry. This image, naturally, is prone to the ideological standpoint of the author. It is an abstract array of values that are embedded in every literary work, what the school of structuralism defines as "the ideological facet of focalization."[23] It betrays the authoritative values of the text, its ideological infrastructure, as it can be inferred by its reader. Therefore, the artistic rendition of Jewish Rabbinic leadership in *Di agune* should reflect Grade's implicit ideological view of the text more than a "pure" historical reality.

Apart from deciphering the ideological values implicit in the text, another sort of literary analysis ought to be addressed. The literary critic Dan Miron enumerates three different readings of *shtetl* stories: discursive, metonymic and metaphoric. The first reading tends to rearrange the data of the text into various categories (religion, economics, education, etc.). The second focuses on descriptive details and evokes the image constructed by the narrative, and the third – the metaphorical reading, "brings together different images and ideas … melts them, makes them interpenetrate one another to form a new cognitive compound."[24] Although all three modes of reading are relevant to Grade's stories, the third one, which is typical of the stories of the masters, shall be overlooked here. [25] As will be illustrated, the stories do not mainly aspire to symbolize a biblical or mythological entity but to convey the image of Lithuanian Jewry from the

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[23] Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. (London: 2002), 83.

[24] Miron, 14.

[25] For a metaphorical reading of *Di Agune* see Sanford Pinsker, "Chaim Grade: The Yiddish writer as Agunah," *Yiddish* 8, no.2 (1992): 55-58. Pinsker suggests that Grade's status as a Yiddish writer is similar to that of an agunah as they are both in a situation of indeterminacy.

perspective of a post-Holocaust writer. The other optional readings underlie the difference between a historical analysis of a story (discursive) and a critical study of the literary life image it conveys (metonymic). The accuracy of the historical data presented by Grade will not be scrutinized here. Hence, the following discussion of *Di agune* will be accorded with the metonymical reading. What requires a thorough investigation is the correspondence between two images of Lithuanian Jewry: those in Grade's stories versus those reflected in various historical materials. A close metonymic reading of *Di agune* is a precondition for a follow-up analysis of the author's ideological point of view. The latter shall be discussed shortly within an analysis of Grade's monumental work *Tsemakh atlas*, where Grade's philosophical views are more conspicuously manifested.

Rabbinic Leadership in *Di agune*

The novel *Di agune* is a portrait of a tragedy with an entirely Jewish theme. It relates the case of the agunah Merl. (The Hebrew word "agunah," Yiddish "agune," refers to a grass widow, i.e. a deserted wife.) Merl is a married woman—oriented toward the burgeoning secular, socialist sector in Jewish life--whose husband did not return from the front at the end of World War I, and his fate remains unknown. According to Halakha (Jewish law), an agunah is a woman who has not received a valid divorce and her husband has disappeared. If there are no valid witnesses to his death, the Halakhic view is that he may be considered still living and that she is legally bound to him and may not remarry. The story is set in Vilna in 1929-30, during the period when the city was in the interbellum republic of Poland. Poland had no civil marriage during that period. As years have passed

since the war's end, Merl is introduced to Kalman Meytess, a simple cantor who is working in the local Jewish cemetery, and the new couple decides to marry.

Kalman appeals to Reb Levi Hurvitz, The Vilna Rabbinic Council's appointed authority over agunahs, in order to obtain the long awaited authorization to marry Merl. Believing that several Halakhic factors might mitigate Merl's indeterminate situation, Kalman is frustrated by Reb Levi's insistence that Halakha, in fact, does not allow for any extenuating circumstances in Merl's case. In Reb Levi's response to Kalman, it is clear that he sees himself as part of two thousand years of successive rabbinic legislation:

> "Where is it written?" Reb Levi said, his beard fluttering as though a storm was brewing there. "It's written in the Mishna, it's written in the Gemara, it's written in Alfasi's Code, it's written in Maimonides, it's written in Joseph Caro's Code of Law," the Rabbi launched out against Kalman and cast bits of learning at him, as though they were fiery blows.[26]

In desperation, Kalman asks for permission to marry Merl from the local Rabbi of Polotsk Street, Reb David Zelver, who concedes, though overstepping the bounds of his authority, to marry the couple and bring an end to the agunah's ordeal. This act is not done as a gesture of rebellion against the authority of Halakha, but, on the contrary, on the grounds of a similar case mentioned in a medieval responsum (*teshuva*) by Rabbi Eliezer of Verdun.

Reb David's decision to interfere in favor of the couple results in an unavoidable clash between him and the Vilna Rabbinic Council headed by Reb Levi. This clash is a fight over what constitutes true commentary on Halakhic tradition, but is, also, as much a struggle for power, authority and pride. Thus, a particular religious judicial issue shapes the entire narrative, leading Merl from a secular and socialist point of departure into the entangled world of Halakha up until the gloomy end: her suicide and the consequent

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[26] Grade, *The Agunah*, 23.

resignation of Reb Levi from his post. Halakha plays such a profound role in the infrastructure of the narrative, that the assertion that the institution of Jewish law dictates the sequence of events in the story as well as the fate of the central protagonists can not be overstated.

The centrality of Halakha in the text leads us to the aforementioned distinction between discursive and metonymical readings. From the onset, the historical details of the novel crystallize into the frame of a realistic historical novel. The details regarding protests against the tsarist regime made by the proletariat, the outbreak of the First World War, the occupation of Vilna by the Imperial German army and the ensuing famine, correspond to the exact historical reality of the city at that time.[27] However, what makes *Di agune* a literary representation of Lithuanian Jewry and not a historic account, is not only the mimetic description of Vilna's topography, the elaborated presentation of diverse Jewish classes, or the decline of religion versus the rise of the secular socialist movement.

What renders the novel purely "Lithuanian-Jewish" is the presumption that communal leadership as well as the fate of Vilna's Jews are determined by the authority of the Torah and of the rabbis who enforce its observance. Two central points may clarify Grade's decision to base the nucleus of the plot on a complex and ambiguous Halakhic issue and the turmoil that it leads to: the first, the structure of Jewish authority that occupies such a central place in the history of Lithuanian Jewry, and the second, the distinctive religious dogma of Lithuanian Jewry as it evolved since the end of the

[27] On Vilna under Imperial German occupation, see Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1992), 361-374; Israel Klausner, *Vilna, Yerushalayim deLita: Dorot ahronim 1881-1939*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: 1982), 107-133.

eighteenth century. As we shall see, these two factors create the gap between the plot of *Di agune* and the historical reality on which it is based.

The Heritage of Lithuanian Jewish Politics

By and large, an extensive attempt to explain the emergence of Lithuanian-Jewish culture has scarcely been undertaken. This has to do with the general lack of communal and regionalized research in the field of East European history.[28] Another factor that may account for the neglect of Lithuanian Jewry as a separate entity in the life of East European Jewry is the fact that Lithuania was not an independent political unit for at least three hundred and fifty years. The new Lithuanian state that attained independence in 1918 was much smaller in size than the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and consisted of a Lithuanian ethnic majority. As such, the interbellum independent state of Lithuania did not subsume the majority of the Jewish population of *Litvakes*, the descendants of the Jewish population that had settled in the Grand Duchy in medieval times.[29]

A fundamental study of Lithuanian Jewry is presented by Vital Zajka as an attempt at understanding the socio-historic context that underlay the emergence of the *Litvak* character in East European Jewish folklore.[30] For instance, the existence of a

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[28] Gershon D. Hundert, "Polish Jewish History," *Modern Judaism 10*, no. 3 (1990): 259-70.

[29] The definition of "historic Lithuania," i.e. the territory known to the Jews as *Lite,* was in fact exploited by the Lithuanian independence movement that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. For more information on the fruitless Lithuanian attempt to occupy the old capital of Vilnius by virtue of its large Lithuanian-Jewish population see Antony Polonsky, "The New Jewish Politics and Its Discontents," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, ed. Zvi Gitelman (Pittsburgh, PA, 1997), 47.

[30] Vital Zajka, "The self-perception of Lithuanian-Belarusian Jewry in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Polin* 14 (2001): 19-30. Zajka identifies a similarity between the role that the Grand

Lithuanian Yiddish dialect was, according to Zajka, one of the primary distinctive features of Lithuanian Jewry that aided in distinguishing the community from the rest of East European Jewry. [31] From a socio-economic perspective, the image of the *Litvak* only crystallized by the end of the eighteenth century at the time of the partitioning of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a period of demographic explosion for the Jewish people, of declining Jewish authority and worsening economic conditions.[32] Hence, the *Litvak*, like his Gentile co-territorialist, was destined to be portrayed in Jewish folklore as a poor and pessimistic toiler.[33]

Though both linguistic and economic aspects played roles in the characterization of Lithuanian Jewry, the main concentration of this study is on its communal organization. One of the chief factors that contributed to the crystallization of Jewish *Lite* was the establishment of *va'ad medinat Lita*, the Council of the Land of Lithuania, in 1623, as a separate unit that withdrew from the Polish-Jewish Council of the Four Lands (*va'ad Arb'a aratsot*).[34] From the onset of Jewish communal autonomy in the Grand Duchy, Lithuanian Jews had faced challenges that were quite different from those faced by their co-religionists in the Crown lands of Poland. In Lithuania, Jews were not confronted by the Christian urban middle classes like they were in Poland. Hence, they felt free to develop a strong middle class and a strong oligarchy as manifested in the formation of the Council of the Land of Lithuania. The grounds for a strong and self-

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Duchy of Lithuania played in the formation, not only of the *Litvak ethnie*, but also of the Belarusian one, whose members were sometimes called *Litviny*. See Ibid., 19.

[31] Ibid., 25 For the difference between the southern dialect and the northern see also D. Katz, 145-54.

[32] Zajka, "The self perception," 23.

[33] Ibid., 30; D. Katz, 154.

[34] Vital Zajka, "The self-Perception," 21. Israel Cohen mentions two reasons for the formation of a separate Council of the Land of Lithuania: The first reason was the separate assessment of 60,000 zloty per annum that was imposed upon the Jews of Lithuania by the Polish *Sejm*, and the second reason was the economic differences between the two parts of the Commonwealth. See Cohen, *Vilna*, 147-149.

absorbed Jewish community of the type presented in *Di agune* were established with the emergence of the Council of the Land of Lithuania as an autonomous unit. This sense of cultural independence, though it did not originate solely from Jewish interests,[35] largely contributed to the local Lithuanian-Jewish culture, which borrowed extensively from western culture but maintained its local traditions, religious ethos and dialect. The Council of the Land of Lithuania, much like the Council of the Four Lands, was more than simply a powerful means of communal authority. Its most noteworthy characteristic was the fact that its deputies were neither self-appointed nor appointed by the Polish authorities, but elected by members of the Jewish community. Their activities were coordinated with those of the lay authorities, thus turning the Council into an indispensable political unit of the Commonwealth.[36]

On a more local level, the Vilna *kahal* (the Jewish community government of an individual town) had almost unprecedented political power in the history of the Jewish Diaspora. The historian Israel Cohen points out the main functions of the *kahal* during the time of the Commonwealth.[37] It was responsible for religious observance and education, social welfare, healing of the sick and cleaning the streets. It granted the right of residence in its territory and, for the gentile authorities, was the only body to represent

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[35] Whereas the Jews considered the Councils as a remarkable political phenomenon of Jewish autonomy in exile, the gentile authorities utilized them only as a means to collect taxes designated for the Crown from the Jewish population. Officially, the Council functioned as a tax collector and was hence destined for dissolution when the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania reorganized its fiscal policy toward the Jews in 1764/65. See Haim H. Ben-Sasson, "Ve'ade haaratsot shebemizrah Eiropa," in *Kiyum veshever: yehude polin ledorotehem*, vol. 1, *Pirke historiya* ed. Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman, (Jerusalem, 1997), 152; Cohen, *Vilna* 148.

[36] John D. Klier, "Traditions of the Commonwealth: Lithuanian Jewry and the Exercise of Political Power in Tsarist Russia," in *The Vanished World of Lithuanian Jews*, ed. A. Nikžentiatis, S. Schreiner & D. Staliunas, (Amsterdam, 2004), 5.

[37] Cohen, *Vilna*, 115-116.

the Jews in relations with the government. The *kahal* even had its own jail and a pillory, to which transgressors and dissidents were tied with cords and put to shame.

Despite the dissolution of the Lithuanian Council in 1764 that brought a decline to Jewish political centralization, the Lithuanian Jews succeeded in maintaining an effective centralized political system in comparison with their co-religionists in other parts of the former Commonwealth.[38] Although the official framework of the Council of the Land of Lithuania no longer existed, the rabbinic leadership managed to gather voluntarily when necessary. A prominent example was the convention of a number of elders and Rabbis of various k*ehalim* (plural of *kahal*), in 1781, who decided on a ban of excommunication against the emerging sect of Hasidim that were proliferating in the region.[39] At that time authority shifted from the realm of the national council to the regional.[40]

As the territories of Lithuania were annexed to the Russian empire, Lithuanian Jews had to face new challenges, both internal and external. In his article regarding Lithuanian-Jewish political activism in tsarist Russia, John Klier argues that political activism from the onset of Russian rule over Lithuania may be described as "the legacy of Lithuanian Jewry to their new rulers."[41] Klier also demonstrates the gap between the stereotype of Jewish politics as a form of *shtadlanut* (a temporary and responsive interceding of influential Jews for their co-religionists) and the sophisticated political methods used by the Jewish authorities from the time of the Commonwealth up until the twentieth century.

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[38] Zajka, "The Self-Perception," 24.
[39] Cohen, *Vilna*, 155.
[40] Klier, "Traditions of the Commonwealth," 6.
[41] Ibid.

According to Klier, the Jews of Lithuania had always had impressive skills in utilization of complex politics that sometimes even entailed work on an international scale. The emergence of *Haskalah*, the Jewish enlightenment movement in Lithuania, had a remarkable impact on the formation of Jewish politics and the shift of Russian Jewry from traditional values to the secular world. The tsarist-sponsored Vilna Rabbinic Seminary (later Jewish Teachers Institute) produced many of the personnel for the Jewish "civil service" which was created by the Russian autocrat Nicholas I.[42] This new phase of Lithuanian-Jewish politics culminated in the so-called "new politics" of East European Jewry, that is, the emergence of Zionism and the Bund, the Jewish revolutionary socialist movement. Vilna functioned as an important center, the actual cradle, for these two currents.[43]

In Vilna, as in other places in East Europe, the power of the local *kahal* was declining in response to the development of modern Jewish politics. During the last fifty years of the tsarist regime, the Russian authorities neither recognized the k*ahal* as a public body with legal rights, nor did they deny that such rights existed.[44] The corrupted oligarchic methods of electing *kahal* members were major factors in the rejection of this organization by the Jewish masses as their representative apparatus. In an article pertaining to this context, Eli Lederhendler analyzes an appeal to the Jewish public, issued by "the Rabbis of Vilna," aimed at attacking the nascent Jewish socialist

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[42] Ibid., 9.

[43] On the emergence of the Bund in Lithuania and Poland, see Daniel Blatman, "HaBund: Mitos hamahapekha ve'avodat hayomyom," in *Kiyum veshever: yehude polin ledorotehem*, vol. 2, *Hevra, tarbut. leumiyut*, ed. Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman (Jerusalem, 1997),493-533. Moshe Mishkinski, "Regional Factors in the Formation of the Jewish Labor Movement in Czarist Russia," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, vol. XIV (1969), 27-52. On the role played by Vilna in the formation of the nascent Zionist movement see Israel Klausner, *Vilna, Yerushalayim deLita*, vol.2 (Tel Aviv: 1983), 309-30, 336-57.

[44] Cohen, *Vilna*, 337.

movement.[45] By demonstrating the negative approach of the rabbinic elite towards political subversion, whose ideological basis can be traced back to the Mishnah, Lederhendler argues that the traditionalist community of the Jewish population in East Europe was not represented by a modern political apparatus. The traditionalist leadership did not struggle for a new type of Jewish politics, and certainly had no desire to foster western secular values that only blurred the segregation of Jews from their co-territorialists. Nevertheless, by the end of World War I, a new type of political organization, based on ideological trends, had taken the place of the old style omnipotence of the traditional k*ahal.*

The Image of Jewish Leadership in *Di agune*

In the previous section we encountered two different models of Jewish political organization. The first was the old-style form of *shtadlanut*, the feudal group of powerful oligarchs whose duty was to counter external threats to the Jewish people, both as a community and as individuals. The second was a democratic organization based on rigid ideology (Zionism, socialism, territorialism, etc.), the goal of which was to lead to a worldwide change in the conditions of the Jews.[46]

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[45] Eli Lederhendler, "The Vilna Rabbis' Anti-Socialist Appeal, June 1903," *Shvut* 15 (1992): XXXIII-XL. The appeal comes as a response to a handbill that was distributed by the underground Jewish social democratic party calling the workers to strike in commemoration of the young Jewish martyr, Hirsh Lekert, who was executed for his attempt to assassinate the Vilna governor-general, Viktor Von Wahl.

[46] By and large, this dichotomy between "old" and "new" politics is not accepted by Klier, who argues, in contrast to Lederhendler, that the Jewish struggle for emancipation in the Tsarist Empire was only a modification of the work of the well-organized national Councils of the pre-partition Commonwealth.

It is against this backdrop of competing political models that the political framework that lies at the basis of *Di agune* should be read and, likewise, that questions concerning historical reality and literary image should be addressed. Grade sets his plot in Poland during the end of the 1920s and renders a detailed description of this particular historical reality. It seems, however, as if the enormous amount of power ascribed to the Rabbis in the novel stems not from this historical reality but from Grade's own understanding of the concept of "Lithuanian Jewry." Hence, it is crucial to understand that the invincible power of the Vilna Rabbinic Council, as it is depicted in the plot, comes at a time of declining ultra-orthodox rabbinic power and an increasing polarization of secular and rabbinic societies.

The character of Reb Shmuel-Munye, for instance, the rabbi from Glazers Street, demonstrates the merging of the old and the new political models. Ostensibly, Reb Shmuel is a powerful politician in a modern sense. He conducts the Rabbinic Council, the peace loving Akhdut movement, The Yeshiva Council and the Agudat Israel party. Grade relates that while Reb Shmuel was "the big wheel in all the great conventions of Lithuanian rabbis, he himself remained inconspicuous – he was never the chairman – and the young men did not even rise in respect when he passed by."[47] The writer then offers a more penetrative insight into the oligarchic character traits of Reb Shmuel-Munye's post, traits that are reminiscent of the old-style politics of the Lithuanian Jewish authorities in the time of the Commonwealth:

> In Vilna itself, nothing – whether wedding or funeral – took place without him. During a rabbinic wedding, he whispered to the father of the bride to whom to give the honors. When a great man died, Reb Shmuel-Munye determined which rabbi would eulogize at the Main Synagogue, which at the cemetery, and which rabbi would return home without having delivered his prepared tribute. Not a few

[47] Chaim Grade, The *Agunah*, 118.

> scholars who traveled great distances to attend a wedding or a funeral remained his lifelong enemies. But he did not mind; he always rushed to conventions smiling.[48]

The power deposited in the hands of Reb Shmuel-Munye is only one example of the tendency of the Vilna Rabbinic Council toward political centralization. Similarly, the family ties between the two brothers-in-law, Reb Levi Hurvitz and Reb Asher-Anshel, also contribute to the corruption of the council as external familial motives interfere with the work of Rabbinic Council members. At the end of the Council meeting that is meant to respond to Reb David's releasing Merl from the bonds of her agunahood, Reb Asher-Anshel confesses that he wished to miss the judgment out of fear of confrontation with his brother-in-law.[49]

At the climax of the meeting (and, perhaps, of the entire novel), as Reb Levi demands to issue a ban of excommunication against the rebellious Reb David, another participant in the meeting, Reb Kasriel Kahana, attempts to persuade Reb Levi to give up the idea. One can comprehend from his words an understanding of the changing circumstances in Lithuanian Jewish society throughout its long political history:

> "Rabbis no longer have the power they used to have. We're now living in Exile," Reb Kasriel Kahana roared, ... "Reb David might find an ally in the non-religious elements and then the matter will reach the Warsaw papers," ... "Our enemies will describe us as narrow-minded reactionaries who want to reinstate excommunication, whipping and the stocks."[50]

The opinion expressed by Reb Kasriel raises a question that has already been asked. Is it plausible that the Rabbinic Council of Vilna would have considered its power omnipotent as in the old days of the Talmud or the great days of the Council of the Land of

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 137.
[50] Ibid., 136.

Lithuania? In addition, what would bring the Council to presume that a great amount of power lay in its hands?

It seems as if Grade, in criticizing the corruptive and oligarchic patterns of the Rabbinic Council, offers a portrait, not of the interwar Vilna orthodox leadership, but, rather, of something closer to the image of the medieval Council of the Land of Lithuania. However, it is not the portrayal of their corruption that makes the story seem anachronistic as political corruption is endemic to any culture in any historical context. As well, as the Agudah was an amalgamation of the "old" and "new" forms of Jewish politics, its reputation for being outdated and conservative was commonplace in the interwar Polish-Jewish political discourse. [51] Given the secular response to the growing Agudat Israel party as the major voice of East European Jewish orthodox society, Grade's critical account of the Agudah advocates and the Vilna rabbis is not novel. Rather, it is the immense power that Grade ascribes to the rabbis that is out of place. It is their omnipotence, or at least their self-perception of omnipotence, that seems anachronistic in this context. In an era of the disintegration of traditional Jewish society, the tremendous impact of the Rabbinic Council on the lives of the Vilna Jews portrayed in *Di agune* is historically doubtful.

A brief examination of the existing political powers of the Vilna Jewish community of this era shows a very different image of Jewish leadership during the time period in which *Di agune* is set. By the end of 1918, the Jewish community of Vilna had

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[51] Gershon Bacon, "Agudat Yisrael and the Zionist Movement in Interwar Poland," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, 87, 93. Despite this common critical view of the politics of *shtadlanut* that characterized (at least in the eyes of the secular groups) the activities of the Agudah, it is noteworthy that the leaders of the latter did not perceive themselves as activists in the name of partisan interests. On the contrary, the participation of integrative leaders, that is, apolitical and venerable rabbis in the activities of the Agudah, was perceived by the Agudah advocates as proof of a commitment to the most universal Jewish interests, i.e. the Torah and its observance. See Gershon Bacon, Rabbis and Politics, Rabbis in Politics: Different Models within interwar Polish Jewry," *Yivo Annual* 20 (1991): 43, 52.

already managed to elect its first secular and democratic communal organization (*kehile*). This came after the traditional Jewish authorities of the tsarist period, like the powerful *Tsedoke Gedoyle,* fled to Russia.[52] The first democratic Vilna *kehile*, formed ten years before the plot of *Di agune* takes place, was formed in attempt to replace the self-appointed and oligarchic prewar communal organizations.[53] The two main political powers that comprised the *Kehile* were the Zionist and the Bundist Democratic blocs. As opposed to the internal Halakhic issues that preoccupy the Jews in *Di agune*, the 1918 Vilna k*ehile* was meant not only to coordinate internal issues but also to represent the Jewish community before the Germans and to democratize and secularize Jewish life, to place the community on a modern Jewish national foundation.

It is noteworthy that from a cultural perspective, the transition from "traditional" to "democratic" politics also included the formation of a secular Jewish community that did not share religious values but, rather, cultural and linguistics ones.[54] The almost complete absence of both assimilationists and Hasidim (who usually tended to be radical in their opposition to modernization) from the scene of Jewish life in the city, assisted the Jewish leaders in Vilna in substituting a secular and cultural Jewish identity for the old religious patterns. This new identity was mainly based on either Zionism and Hebraism, or socialism and Yiddishism. Influential figures like the Jewish leader and celebrated physician Dr. Cemach Szabad as well as Zalman Reisen, the editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Letste nayes* and the Yiddish daily *Der vilner tog,* fought to and were

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[52] Samuel D. Kassow, "Jewish Communal Politics in Transition: The Vilne *Kehile*, 1919-1920," *Yivo Annual* 20 (1991): 65.

[53] Ibid., 62.

[54] On the roots and unique characteristics of Lithuania as a center for the emerging secular Haskalah see Mordechai Zalkin, *Ba'alot hashahar:haHaskalah haYehudit baimperiah haRusit bameah hateshah eśreh* (Jerusalem, 2000), 62-64, 142, 263. On the important place Yiddish intellectual life occupied in interwar Vilna see Abraham A. Roback, *The Story of Yiddish Literature* (New York, 1940), 360-364; Israel Cohen, *Vilna*, 406-415

successful in making Yiddish the official language of the Jewish community. Zalman Reisen was also credited with being the discoverer and mentor of *Yung Vilne*. Given Grade's strong affiliation with *Yung Vilne* and with the secular leftist Jewish sector in general, it is surprising that the secular Yiddish component of Jewish Vilna is absent from *Di agune*.[55]

In general, the rabbinic elite of Vilna, who pretended, like in many other places, to represent the silent orthodox majority, was not willing to turn over the property that was under the control of the old *Tsedoke Gedoyle* to the newly appointed *kehile*.[56] Therefore, both the Bundist and the Zionsit blocs were united in their rejection of the old political system and its values.[57] This polarization of Jewish society was reinforced several years later in the elections of the Vilna *kehile* on July 29, 1928. Quite similarly to the previous elections, the Zionist and Bundist blocs overwhelmed the ultra-orthodox deputies of Agudah, who put up candidates for only two seats.[58] Bearing in mind that these elections took place at nearly the same time as the plot of *Di agune*, it is surprising to discover that the decline of the influence of Jewish orthodox society is not expressed in the story.

In contrast to the political reality of Jewish Vilna where the Agudah won only partial support from the traditional masses,[59] it is this ultra-orthodox group that, in Grade's story, becomes the most significant and conspicuous element of local Jewish society. Even while taking into account that the traditional Jews constituted a silent

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[55] Sol Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Middle Village NY, 1972), 411; Justin D. Cammy, "*Tsevorfene bleter*: The Emergence of Yung Vilne," *Polin* 14 (2001): 174.

[56] Cohen, *Vilna*, 394-401.

[57] Kassow, "Jewish Communal Politics," 83.

[58] Cohen, *Vilna,* 396.

[59] Gershon Bacon, "Hahevra hamasortit bitemurut ha'itim: Hebetim betoldot hayahadut haortodoksit bePolin uveRusia, 1850-1939," in *Kiyum veshever: yehude polin ledorotehem*, vol. 2, *Hevra, tarbut. leumiyut*, ed. Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman (Jerusalem, 1997), 472.

majority in interwar Vilna (though without the electoral power to attest to this fact),[60] the depiction of the overwhelming Agudah control over Jewish life in the city vis à vis the absence of the two other political powers, Bundists and Zionists, ought to be approached with reservation.

In order to account for this deviation from the historical context of the plot, i.e. the tendency to ascribe omnipotent power to the old-style rabbinic leadership, we return to the two distinctive features that render *Di agune* an entirely "Lithuanian-Jewish" novel. Up until this point we have only examined the first element, that is, the role of Jewish politics in the emergence of Lithuanian Jewry as a distinctive unit. In order to reach a deeper understanding of the novel as a representative segment of Grade's work, it is necessary to depart from the realm of social and political history and to penetrate the unique spiritual and intellectual heritage of Lithuanian Jewry. Only such an investigation can clarify why Grade decided to pose a complex Halakhic issue in the infrastructure of the novel and, hence, endow the religious authorities of Vilna with such great political power.

The Supremacy of Torah in Lithuanian Jewish Culture

The period from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the first half of the seventeenth century was marked by a remarkable growth of the Jewish population in Lithuania. This growth was marked by economic prosperity. Concurrently, Lithuanian Jewry began

[60] Lederhendler, "The Vilna Rabbis," XXXIII.

acquiring its prestige as a stronghold of Torah Study and renowned rabbinic authorities.[61] This image of Lithuania, the land of the former Grand Duchy, as the cradle of Jewish spirituality and traditional scholarship lasted until the destruction of Lithuanian Jewry in World War II. This growth in spirituality and Torah Study, however, can not be understood in socio-economic terms alone. The crystallization of the World of the Mithnagdim (the Hebrew word for "opponents"), like the nascent movement it meant to counter,[62] was not merely an outcome of specific social and economic factors. It stemmed, first and foremost, from a distinctive Jewish dogma that would characterize the Jews in Lithuania from the last three decades of the eighteenth century up to the destruction of the community. Although various factors contributed to the emergence of the new Jewish theology, one can argue that it was the Gaon of Vilna, Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon Zalman (1720-1797, hereafter: the GRA, his Hebrew acronym) who, through his remarkable personality, was the first to shape Lithuanian Mithnagdism as a religio-cultural pattern that did not embrace Jewish communities in the rest of the Commonwealth.

Due to his remarkable activities and character traits: intellectual talent, enormous literary output, asceticism and zeal for the Torah, the GRA became a legendary figure even in his own days and attained the title *yakhid bedoro* (distinguished among his own generation) even from his harshest rivals. [63] Although the many fantastic powers that

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[61] Zajka, "The Self-Perception," 22.

[62] Two major studies on Hasidism offer contrasting accounts on the motives for the rise of the movement. Whereas B. Dinur argues that the decline and corruption of Jewish leadership prompted the emergence of the movement as a social revolution, J. Katz contends that the dissemination of Kabbalistic ideas by the Hassidim was the cause, and not the effect, of the rabbinic elite's decline. See Benzion Dinur, "The Origins of Hasidism and Its Social and Messianic Foundations," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism: Origins to Present*, ed. Gershon D. Hundert (New York: 1991), 134-143; Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the end of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1993), 183-201.

[63] Immanuel Etkes, *Yahid be'doro: ha'Gaon me'vilnah demut ve'dimui* (Jerusalem, 1998), 9.

were ascribed to his figure in later generations may be approached with reservation, there is no doubt that the GRA was an extraordinary phenomenon as a master of rabbinic and secular scholarship. His contribution to the breadth and depth of rabbinic scholarship embraced the entire spectrum of rabbinic texts.[64] He contributed to the fields of biblical commentary, Kabbalah, Hebrew grammar and Halakhic literature. Furthermore, he possessed an encyclopedic grasp of sacred and secular subjects, making him a role-model for the subsequent emergence of a new type of Jewish Haskalah in the tsarist empire.[65]

Most significantly, the GRA waged a war against the emerging sect of Hasidism which was burgeoning in Podolia and spreading throughout the Commonwealth during the second half of the eighteenth century.[66] The GRA, although not an official deputy of the Vilna *Kahal* at that time,[67] took it upon himself to confront the new sect as it approached the northern parts of the country, that is, Vilna and its periphery. While several different factors prompted the GRA to launch his first attack against the new sect on the intermediate days of Passover in 1772, it was the mockery of Torah Study and scholars that infuriated the GRA the most. The basis of this anger lay in the fact that the GRA himself belonged to an eighteenth century group of pious ascetics also named

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[64] Elijah Judah Schochet, *The Hasidic Movement and the Gaon of Vilna* (Northvale, NJ, 1994), 148.

[65] Lithuanian Maskilim conceived of the GRA and his students as their spiritual ancestors. Maskilim throughout the nineteenth century drew on his figure as it corresponded with their call for gradual reform in Jewish society. See Mordechai Zalkin, *Ba'alot hashahar: Hahaskalha haYehudit baimperiah haRusit bameah hateshah eśreh*, (Jerusalem, 2000), 30, 62, 142. This, however, is not meant to suggest that the GRA was a harbinger of east European Haskalah. See Allan Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (Baltimore, MD, 1997), 127-150; Etkes: *Yahid bedoro*, 76-79.

[66] The role of the GRA in the Lithuanian opposition to Hasidism has been addressed by several scholars. According to Etkes, who summarizes the various attacks, it was the GRA who launched the war against the Hasidim and not the Vilna Kahal that depended on his authority. See Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 84-108.

[67] Due to his tendency towards asceticism the GRA almost entirely neglected political affairs so as to be fully devoted to Torah Study. See Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 17, 227.

Hasidim, not to be confused with the new group with the same name.[68] The GRA's group of old-style pious scholars advocated asceticism as well as the study of sacred Kabbalistic texts only in the confines of their own distinguished circles. Conversely, it was the new Beshtian Hasidim who perilously disseminated these esoteric ideas to the Jewish masses while, at the same time, they introduced new Kabbalistic techniques as well as the practice of *dvekuth* (ecstatic ascent toward God through prayer). The popularization of these practices, followed by a mockery of the old style Hasidim prompted the fortification of scholarship and the veneration of scholars in Lithuania by those who opposed the new Hasidic movement.

Although the GRA did not develop a sophisticated theology, some of his teachings had an immense impact on the emergence of Mithnagdic Judaism in later generations. One fundamental concept among them was the idea of the supremacy of Torah study as the pinnacle of religious values in Judaism. In addition, the GRA's tendency towards asceticism, as opposed to that of his rivals, was not an attempt to mystically contemplate divinity. Rather, it stemmed, merely, from a desire to be entirely devoted to Torah learning.[69]

According to Allan Nadler, whose work *The Faith of the Mithnagdim* is a remarkably extensive presentation of Lithuanian-Jewish dogma, it is the GRA's outlook on the limits of man's epistemological capacities that determined his conviction that immersion in Torah Study is the only means to contemplate divinity.[70] While sharing an ontological outlook with the first Beshtian Hasidim (especially with the Lithuanian

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[68] For the chief characteristics of the old traditional form of Hasidism see Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 31.

[69] Etkes, *Rabi Yišrael Salanter v'reshitah shel tenu'at hamusar* (Jerusalem, 1982), 28. See also Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 36.

[70] Cited in Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 17.

Hasidic rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyadi) regarding the immanence of God, the GRA argued that mortal and imperfect humans are incapable of reaching a full perception of e*yn sof*, God's most supreme aspect. In the GRA's own words, in his commentary to the *Zohar (Parashath Bo)*, "we are not allowed to investigate beyond the heavens, and we are forbidden to investigate anything that we are unable to see and grasp."[71] In light of these words, it is possible to comprehend the GRA's elevation of Torah Study, not as an intellectual endeavor, but, as the only means by which man is capable of attaining a limited comprehension of the Divine.

These fragmentary claims made by the GRA throughout his literary works only took shape as a fixed anti-Hasidic theology in the work of his disciple Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin (1749-1821) whose book *Nefesh hahayyim* was first published in 1824 and unfolded a coherent anti-Hasidic theology. Although Rabbi Hayyim was not, himself, a representative figure of Lithuanian Mithnagdism, his theological piece *Nefesh hahayyim* was unequivocally the credo of Mithnagdism.[72] This text attempts to encounter Hasidism on an intellectual and theological level. Since Rabbi Hayyim was born into a religious background where Hasidism had already proliferated as a popular movement, he approached Hasidism, not as a heretic sect, but rather as a rival theological movement.[73] Although he understood the true intention of its adherents to reach a higher comprehension of God by means of *Dvekuth*, he criticizes its nihilistic repercussions. His

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 164-165; Shaul Stampfer, *HaYeshiva haLitayit behithavutah bameah hatesh'a-eśre* (Jerusalem, 1995), 27. Despite Rabbi Hayyim's historic prominent role in the formation of Mithnagdic dogma, A. Nadler approaches Rabbi Hayyim's role in the formation of popular Mithnagdism with reservation and, therefore, presents Rabbi Pinehas of Polotsk's theological dogma as a more genuine manifestation of Mithnagdic culture. Nadler strengthens these claims by emphasizing Rabbi Hayyim's indifference to Hasidism as an individual standpoint and the chronological precedence of Rabbi Pinehas' thought over the ideas presented in *Nefesh hahayyim*. See Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim*, 6, 153-54.

[73] See Etkes, *Rabi Yiśrael Salanter*, 41-45.

work evokes the original link between the mitzvoth and the time designated for each mitzvah as proof of the futility of the Hasidic relentless contemplation of the Divine. Rabbi Hayyim demonstrated the absurdity underlying Hasidic doctrines by arguing in *Nefesh hahayyim* that one who lingers in mystical contemplation before blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, may end up performing this commandment only by the first night of Passover.[74] Though, like his adversaries, he was steeped in the world of Kabbalah, Rabbi Hayyim's work presents a concrete and simple philosophy of Jewish religion that stands in clear contrast to the contemplative Hasidic pantheism.

In addition to this positive approach towards the concrete performance of a commandment, Rabbi Hayyim, like his mentor the GRA, advocated a plain level of commentary on Halakha (*peshat*). Though conceiving of Torah Study as the loftiest engagement of human beings, Rabbi Hayyim rejected the Hasidic radical understanding and advocacy of the term *torah lishmah*, the ideal of Torah study for its own sake (which indicates the rejection of Torah study for any other purpose). Paradoxically, the Hasidim, who relegated the study of Torah to a position of secondary importance, utilized the concept of *lishmah* in their promotion of the purification of one's mind as a precondition for attaining a superb level of engagement in Torah Study. In contrast to the Hasidim, both Rabbi Hayyim and the GRA, while maintaining their support of Torah Study *lishmah* accepted the study of Torah *shelo lishmah*, (not for its own sake) as it may lead to the desired level of Torah study for its own sake in the future.

Whereas the Hasidim held that *torah lishmah* signified the desired mental state of the student and, thus, rejected any attempt to use it to gain intellectual "profit" outside of

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[74] Immanuel Etkes, H*asidim umitnagdim*: *Mekorot letargil* (Jerusalem, 1985), 178.

the mystical realm,[75] Rabbi Hayyim conceived the primary goal of Torah Study to be the development of intellectual skills. By evoking the term *torah lishmah*, Rabbi Hayyim, like his predecessor, meant to suggest that a concrete study of the extensive rabbinic literature (Mishna, Talmud, Posekim), based on content as opposed to mystical experience, should be the goal of those seeking the path of piety. In spite of this concrete approach, Rabbi Hayyim developed a full understanding of Torah Study in Kabbalistic theosophical terms.[76] As a result, he stresses the prominence and precedence given to the Torah over the physical world as put forth by Kabbalistic sources. This approach leads I. Etkes to define Rabbi Hayyim's purpose as a "mystification of Torah Study."[77] The Torah, as Rabbi Hayyim argues, not only preceded the creation of the world but also nourishes the entire cosmic system. Without a consistent engagement in it,

> the worlds were weak and shaky and were not on their true foundation; ... And in truth without any doubt at all, if the entire world from one end to another of it were, perish the thought, truly vacant for a moment of our dealing with and contemplation of the Torah, at that moment all the upper and lower worlds would be destroyed and become nothing and chaos, perish the thought.[78]

It is clear that the Hasidic approach to Torah and the Mithnagdic approach held by Rabbi Hayyim are both immersed in the world of Jewish Mysticism. Regardless of his ambiguous attitude toward Hasidism, Rabbi Hayyim was one of the major architects of Mithnagdism. A concrete approach towards Judaism, stemming from a pessimistic

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[75] Rabbi Meshulam Feibush Heler is an authentic representative of this Hasidic advocacy of Torah Study for its own sake. He argues that the intellectual satisfaction that is followed by the study attests to the student's arrogance and hence should be rejected. See Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 169-172.

[76] Ibid., 187-192. Rabbi Hayyim follows the Kabbalisitc idea that man draws divine abundance as he performs the commandments. However, he qualifies this concept by considering Torah Study as the only way that man is capable of influencing the Divine. See Ibid., 190.

[77] Etkes, *Rabi Yiśrael Salanter*, 46.

[78] Cited in Immanuel Etkes, *The Gaon of Vilna: The Man and His Image*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Berkeley: 2002), 176-77.

appraisal of man's epistemological ability to attain the Divine, became the hallmark of Lithuanian-Jewish culture.

Grade's Artistic Representation of Mithnagdism

Up to this point we have presented Lithuanian Mithnagdism as a movement that was crystallized in the works of the GRA and his student Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin. Although the theological principles of Mithnagdism were modified up until the 1930s and positioned in diverse schools and theological approaches, the foundations of Mithnagdsim as a distinctive Jewish current were founded in the works of these two figures. Consequently, the reality presented in *Di agune*, though referring to a different historical context, has much in common with the spiritual milieu of early Mithnagdism. Whereas the GRA and (mostly) Rabbi Hayyim inaugurated the framework of Mithnagdism in their theological works, Chaim Grade uses this concept in the form of literature.

We have already considered the central role ascribed by Grade to rabbinic authorities in *Di agune* despite the historical fact that the interwar period was characterized by a decline of the traditional religious political powers. The decision made by Grade to focus on rabbinic authorities and the spiritual world that they created, did not stem from the historical reality of interwar Vilna. As noted above, the two major characteristics of Lithuanian Jewry, a long history of autonomous political involvement and a preoccupation with Halakha, are the main factors that prompted Grade to depict

Lithuanian Jewry the way he did in *Di agune*, i.e. as an amalgamation of Jewish authority and Jewish legislation.

The first characteristic of Lithuanian Jewry presented in the novel, the rabbinic authorities as they are incarnated in the Vilna Rabbinic Council, functions as the springboard for a deeper stratum of the plot. The heart of the plot embraces the question of *agunot* as a Halakhic problem and magnifies the issue as Jewish Vilna attempts to find the true Torah commentary. The two central rabbinic figures who are involved in the dispute, Reb David and Reb Levi, approach the problem in a typically Lithuanian manner; they both conceive of Halakha as the incarnation of God's existence on earth.

Despite the ambiguity and contextual contingence of the law regarding *agunot* as it appears in the history of Halakha, each rabbi insists that his own commentary on the issue is an implementation of the word of God. As such, each refers to rivaling opinions as a source of heresy. This accounts for Reb Levi's attempt to launch a ban of excommunication against Reb David, a measure that would illustrate the extent of Reb David's blasphemy. Conversely, Reb David argues that Reb Levi is the true transgressor due to his strictness in this case as well as in previous ones, an approach that, he claims, only leads people to believe that the Torah is heartless.[79] Towards the end of the plot, the clash between the two figures is aggravated to the point of absurdity. As Reb Levi warns Reb David that he will not be admitted to Paradise, the latter responds to that threat declaring: "I'll accept the responsibility. I won't retreat in the face of the early and latter rabbinic authorities, just as I didn't retreat in the face of the Vilna Rabbinic Council. And if they don't admit me to Paradise, as you claim, then I'll calmly go to Hell."[80] With these

[79] Grade, *The Agunah*, 133.
[80] Ibid., 219.

words, in keeping with the Lithuanian dogma, Reb David expresses the Lithuanian preference for Halakha over any divine entity. It is the Halakhic commentary that concerns Rabbi David and he is willing to wage a war in its name, until his death, regardless of any divine punishment or reward.

Having observed the relevance of the dispute in *Di agune* to the distinctive religious heritage of Lithuanian Jewry, let us turn to an examination of Grade's motivation in selecting the particular question of agunahood as the foundation of his plot. On a theoretical level, the very nature of the ordeal of agunahood provides a possible source for enormous controversy such as that which is portrayed in the novel. The legal basis for this law clearly demonstrates the difficulty in reconciling Halakha with modern legislation. Its original goal was to protect a married woman from committing adultery. This was based on the fear that her husband was possibly still alive and had, in fact, decided to abandon her. However, while examining the nature of this law from a modern perspective, it is the woman who is disadvantaged by the law more than her transgressing husband as she loses control of her fate. Her future life is dependent on the decision of the rabbinic authorities, who can either be compassionate or high-handed. Thus, we can see that Grade does not content himself with the random selection of a Halakhic issue but, rather, chooses a problem that is able to arouse and magnify the tension in the plot up until its bitter end.

While on a theoretical level the dispute between the rabbis revolves around two opposing methods of commentary, the historical grounds on which Grade poses the question of agunahood has clear allusions to a single Lithuanian-Jewish rabbi. This historic figure is also mentioned in the body of the plot, by Reb David, as his role

model.[81] Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor (1817-1896) was one of the prominent rabbinic figures of Lithuanian Jewry. He wrote one hundred and fifty-eight responsa on particular cases of agunahood and became famous as a result of his tendency towards leniency in this matter. Rabbi Spektor's activities represent the two aforementioned characteristics of Lithuanian Jewry: the centrality of rabbinic politics and Halakhic commentary. His figure amalgamated both these fields and, thus, he was recognized by various communities as the leading authority of his generation.[82] Rabbi Spektor acquired this recognition by virtue of an abundance of activities. He established a yeshiva in Kovno for married students (*kolel avrechim*),[83] struggled against oppressive Russian legislation and organized aid for communities stricken by it.

Together with his political role, Rabbi Spektor was deemed a supreme Halakhic authority during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the biography of Rabbi Spektor, *Sefer toldot Yitzchak*, the authorYa'akov Lifshits, confirms Rabbi Spektor's status and discusses his approach to the issue of agunahood at length.[84] Surprisingly, a close reading of Lifshits' account shows that, in fact, it is Reb Levi, and not Reb David, who is the true adherent of Rabbi Spektor and who follows his approach to agunahood.[85] The following passage clarifies Rabbi Spektor's view on this matter which may be summarized as a compassionate approach to *agunot* only insofar as Halakhic authority is not undermined:

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[81] Ibid., 57.

[82] Geulah Bat-Yehudah Raphael, "Isaac Elkhanan Spektor," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

[83] Stamper, *Hayeshiva* haLitayit, 293-313.

[84] Ya'akov Haevi Lifshits, *Sefer toldot Yitschak* (Warsaw, 1896), 42-45.

[85] As a reliable historical source, t*oldot Yitzchak* must be approached with reservation as its author, Ya'akov Lifshitz, functioned as Rabbi Spektor's secretary. See Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitait*, 295. See, for instance, how Rabbi Spektor is endowed with prophetic powers in his decision to free an agunah and how its result is deemed a miracle: Lifshits, *toldot Yitschak*, 43.

> And what is more, people came to him [Rabbi Spektor] with [Halakhic] questions, as they were sure that he would interpret them favorably. Previously they had already asked local town rabbis [*more horaah*] for this permission. The local town rabbis were willing to interpret the questions favorably but did not want to rely on their own judgment after the appearance of our great rabbi [Rabbi Spektor] in their midst. And our rabbi decided strictly on this question [and did not grant them permission]. All questions that preoccupied him but for which he could not find a favorable interpretation to he would not yield ... And in questions where he could find a spark of hope to be lenient ... then he would perform miracles ...[86]

Lifshits continues by mentioning three separate cases where the issue of an *agunah* was brought before Rabbi Spektor and where he permitted freeing her from her bonds. One of these cases concerned a woman whose husband served in the army and allegedly drowned with no eye-witnesses to confirm this. Needless to say, this case resembles the one in Grade's novel. The story of the agunah presented by Lifshits, however, stands in clear contrast to that of Merl. Rabbi Spektor, as recounted in *Sefer toledot Yitschak*, rejected the *agunah*'s pleas for permission for half a year in a very similar way to the strictness of Reb Levi. Only later, when new evidence that had Halakhic significance was brought before him, did Rabbi Spektor hurry to free the agunah from her bonds. As Lifshits states, in regard to the second case where Rabbi Spektor showed mercy in his permission to free an *agunah*, "and all that he permitted, he did so with his power to interpret Halakha, only according to the Torah, and not because he was motivated by compassion."[87] And indeed, in the third case, when there was no viable evidence for the death of her husband, Rabbi Spektor was not willing to assist the *agunah* until her licentious husband was miraculously discovered.[88] Perhaps, in Grade's novel, it is this pretension to assist the agunah in the name of Rabbi Spektor by any

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[86] Ibid., 42.

[87] Ibid, 43.

[88] Ibid., 45. According to the author, this case also demonstrates Rabbi Spektor's compassion for the agunah as he conceived this law as a means of protection for the wife from the severe sin of adultery.

Halakhic means available, that infuriates the Vilna Rabbinic Council. Conversely, it is Reb Levi who truly adheres to Rabbi Spektor's insistence not to help *agunot* when there is no Halakhic evidence to facilitate permission.

In addition to deviating from Halakhic convention, Reb David's action also contradicts the concept of rabbinic hierarchy. Lifshits emphasizes that Rabbi Spektor interfered only with cases where lower rabbinic authorities had doubts concerning permission and hence appealed to him for advice.[89] However, when lower authorities decided not to permit, there was no reason for him to interfere with their decision. The Halakhic hierarchic system permits the interference of a higher authority concerning a problem tackled by a lower one. On the contrary, lower authorities are not permitted, by any means, to undermine the decision of higher ones. The rabbinic judicial system would, therefore, not tolerate Reb David's behavior. As a *dayan*, an authority subjected to Reb Levi, he should not have interfered with the latter's decision.

In light of Rabbi Spektor's practice of lenience towards *agunot* only insofar as it is permitted by Halakha, it is clear that Reb David's adherence to his mentor is not based on accurate historical sources. This example demonstrates, once again, what has already been noted: Chaim Grade's literary representation of Jewish life in interwar Vilna can not be conceived as an accurate source of historical reality. Grade focuses on the Jewish rabbinic elite and suffuses the plot, from beginning to end, with intense Halakhic, moral and philosophical controversy. These elements do not constitute a reconstruction of the full history of interwar Vilna but, rather, attempt to present an artistic image of this reality. Therefore, rather than applying historical criteria to an examination of this issue, we shall attempt to comprehend the artistic rendition of reality portrayed in *Di agune*.

[89] Ibid., 44.

Only through an understanding of the artistic nature of this work can its true value come to light and can the aforementioned gaps between historical and literary realities be clarified.

As *Di agune* is, first and foremost, an artistic representation and not a historical documentation, a discussion of the novel in the broad context of literary history is essential to our study. This type of examination may lead us to disclose several potential literary influences on Grade's work. To this point, we have classified the novel, from a theoretical perspective, as a historical novel. We shall now examine the pertinence of *Di agune*, not only to realistic representation on a theoretical level, but also to realism as a historical genre that emerged in mid-nineteenth century France.[90] Realism, heralded by romanticism and continued by naturalism, has been, as Harry Levin explains "the animating current of the nineteenth-century."[91] The historical genre of realism, though it attempts to render an accurate image of reality, has a great deal in common with the Romantic Movement, whose propagators called for a rejection of rationality. In accordance with the continuous relationship between realism and romanticism, the literary critic Donald Fanger presents an analysis of three harbingers of realism: Balzac, Dickens and Gogol, and classifies their works as romantic realism. Following this presentation, Fanger shifts to an analysis of the literary canon of their successor: the Russian author Fiodor Dostoevsky.

Fanger's discussion of romantic realism and its principles may be applied to our study of Grade's fiction. While *Di agune* is pertinent to the former group and is influenced by Balzac, it is the novel *Tsemakh atlas* (to be discussed in the following

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[90] For the difference between historical and theoretical genres see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY, 1975), 13-14.

[91] Harry Levin, *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1957), 74.

chapter) that is shaped in accordance with Dostoevsky's unique poetics. At this point we shall discuss the major characteristics of Balzac's realism utilized by Grade in his presentation of reality in *Di agune*.

According to Fanger, the first principle characterizing romantic realism is that of heightening, that is, "an intensification of the original datum ... a tendency to extremes."[92] In contrast to realism, whose main tendency is scientific accuracy, Balzac always creates his protagonists as giants. As a successor of eighteenth century melodrama, the art of Balzac seeks to dramatize and aggrandize its heroes, albeit, in a more rational manner. Unlike melodramatic and romantic novels, Balzac chooses to set his plot in an urban environment while maintaining its intensity and Manichean contrast between white and black, heroes and villains. [93] This creation of a mythological world in the midst of urban life stems from Balzac's pessimistic view of bourgeois society as a "wild beast, full of frenzy."[94]

Grade depicts his heroes in accordance with this Balzacian schema. Reb Levi and Reb David are both depicted as giants of Talmudic lore. Their war is based on two thousands years of rabbinic commentary: the clash between the strict approach retained by Shamai and the flexible attitude of Hillel. Like Balzac, Grade chooses to intensify the tension in the plot by focusing on the heated conflict between these two rabbinic figures whose characters are also grandiose. Balzac's critical view of the emerging monstrous bourgeois culture finds expression in *Di agune* through Grade's critical outlook on the

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[92] Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: a Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens, and Gogol* (Evanston, Ill: 1998), 16.

[93] Balzac discovers that the city itself was a *terra incognita* to "the properly armed investigator". See Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, 19-22.

[94] Baruch Kurzweil, *Masekhet haroman: Shne mahzore masot al shmuel yosef agnon ve'al toldot haroman haEiropi* (Jerusalem, 1953), 290. For Balzac's social philosophy as a Christian reactionary and its influence on the crystallization of his novels, see Ibid., 292-295.

hypocrisy of the Rabbinic Council and their attempt to hide ulterior motives, that is, their unwillingness to assist the *agunah* in their masquerade of piety.

Another characteristic of the Balzacian novel is its presentation of heroes, not only as individuals, but, also, as representatives of social forces. [95] He has a tendency to provide detailed descriptions of every character (for instance: the place where they live, their daily routines, their salary rates) in order to create a sense of realism. At the same time, Balzac portrays his characters, not only as real individuals, but also as transcendent entities. Similarly, the mere title *Di agune* conspicuously conveys this tendency towards symbolism found in romantic realism. The story of Merl is symbolic of Jewish women's tragedy over the course of two thousand years of Halakhic abidance.[96] As a post-Holocaust writer, Grade is not interested only in the specific *agunah*, but, rather, seeks to convey the symbolic, the persistent tensions and conflicts that characterized Lithuanian-Jewish life over generations.

This brings us to the third character trait common to the French master and Grade. Like Balzac, whose chief concern is not one protagonist or another,[97] Grade is also preoccupied with the entire Jewish space of Vilna. The central characters and those in the background do not belong to one social domain but to a panorama of classes and political currents. The criminal Tsirulnik versus the pious Kalman, the socialist workers versus the adherents of the Agudah, and the rabbinic elite versus the Jewish masses, all play a role

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[95] Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, 17, 29. For Balzac's role as an anthropologist, philosopher, politician and economist see Kurzweil, *Masekhet haroman*, 297-299.

[96] The cause of the Jewish woman and the attack against the tyranny of strict halakhic interpretation regarding the woman's question was dramatically presented by the leading Hebrew writer of the Haskalah, the Lithuanian Judah Leib Gordon (1831-1892), in his famous poem "Kotso shel Yud."

[97] Kurzweil, *Masekhet haroman*, 297,

in the novel as it aims to reconstruct an entire society that ceased to exist during World War II.

Though far from Balzac's reactionary Weltanschauung and even more distant from the historical background of French nineteenth century restoration, one can clearly discern how, from an artistic standpoint, both authors share much in common. A comparison between the art of Balzac and that of Grade may profoundly elucidate the latter's attempt to create a detailed and realistic portrayal of Jewish Vilna, while, nonetheless, imbuing this depiction with a mythical aura. As a novelist (as opposed to a historian) Grade endeavors to convey a vivid image of a reconstructed Jewish society. Grade's self-awareness of his artistic task enables him to deviate from absolute adherence to historical data. Hence, the gap between the reality in his novel and history does not undermine his artistic achievement.

In sum, this chapter offers an analysis of two major attributes of Chaim Grade's prose: the historical and the literary-artistic. A survey of the gap between these two forms of description emphasizes that *Di agune*, like Grade's other novels and short stories, can not function as an ultimate historical source as put forth by several scholars and critics. Two artistic motivations prompted Grade to set his plot in the midst of Rabbinic Vilna. The first motivation was the strong sense of political organization that characterized Lithuanian Jewry since the days of the autonomic Council of the Land of Lithuania, and the second, was the supremacy of Torah and its ultimate commentary. Both components led Grade to select the subject of rabbinic centralism despite its incongruity with the historical background of Jewish society in Vilna in the interwar period, an era that was marked, as mentioned above, by an accelerating decline of the rabbinic leadership.

Grade intensifies his plot and heightens the quarrel between Reb David and Reb Levi as a symbol of the ultimate and eternal clash between the demands of God and the necessities of his believers. Reb David, deviating from his mentor, Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor, aggravates the conflict, thus leading it to its tragic end: the death of his son and Merl's suicide. This tendency towards intensification should not undermine the value of Grade's work. On the contrary, it attests to Grade's awareness of his work as an artist rather than a historian.

By comparing *Di agune* with the poetic rules of Balzac and the romantic realists, it becomes clear that Grade's creation of a mythological urban city has firm poetic links to his French literary ancestor. A metonymic analysis of *Di agune*, a study of the literary reality in its plot, discloses Grade's amalgamation of historical data and romantic tension in the novel's foundations. This analysis, however, does not decipher the implicit ideology that underlies this literary representation of Vilna. An answer to this question would provide insight not only into the nature of *Di agune* itself, but also into Grade's motivations to present Lithuanian Jewry in the way that he did in the novel. This question is better answered through the discussion of two of Grade's other works where the world of Lithuanian Jewry is also evoked and extensively discussed. An analysis of this type, of a poem and of a novel, of both an early and a later work respectively, will examine the crystallization of Grade's views on Lithuanian Jewry in general, and the Yeshiva World in particular, throughout the course of his career.

Chapter II

Two Accounts of the Novaredok Musar Yeshiva

The Lithuanian Yeshiva and the Musar Movement

In the previous section we explored the world of Lithuanian Jewry as it appears in *Di agune* from two critical perspectives, historical and literary. The major goal of this exploration was to underline the interplay between historical data and artistic devices in Grade's fictional world. It was argued that this amalgamation of real facts and imaginary details did not mean to present interwar Vilna in a specific historical context but, rather, proved Grade's desire to turn this novel into a vivid monument of the life and values of Lithuanian Jewry.

As previously illustrated, the Holocaust and its aftermath were Grade's chief motives for engaging in this kind of literary presentation. He meant to capture the timeless character traits and principles of Lithuanian Jewry and the general aspects of its history. While this discussion points to Grade's preoccupation with the spiritual world of Lithuanian Jewry, it does not provide us with a sufficient understanding of his ideological point of view. An analysis of the long poem *Musernikes* and the two volume monumental novel *Tsemakh atlas* may clarify this issue. Given that the poem first appeared in 1938 and the novel was published almost three decades later, in 1967, a comparative discussion of the two will illustrate the writer's view of Lithuanian Jewry and his shift, over time, from one stance to another. Thus, this comparison will clarify the ideological gap between Chaim Grade as a young poet and as an older novelist.

An examination of this gap requires an explanation of the various factors that led Grade, in the course of almost thirty years, to treat and approach the same topic in two different manners. Whereas the novel *Di agune* is a presentation of the world of Jewish Vilna, *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas* constitute another fundamental Lithuanian Jewish phenomenon: the world of the Lithuanian yeshivas in general, and those that adhered to the Novaredok branch of the Musar Movement in particular. Before turning to a discussion of Grade's literary representation of this world, we will give a brief account of the history of the Lithuanian yeshivas and discuss the emergence of the Musar Movement and its central role in the life of these yeshivas.

In the previous chapter, Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and his major teachings were discussed. In addition to his role as the creator of an elaborate theological response to Hasidism, Rabbi Hayyim's most significant contribution to Jewish life was the foundation of a yeshiva in 1803 in the town of Volozhin, one hundred kilometers south-east of Vilna. In this town, quite remote from the center of Vilna, Rabbi Hayyim established a new type of religious educational institution which was to lay the foundation for the rise of a new social and intellectual elite of Lithuanian Jewry. Later, this Yeshiva became the archetype for many subsequent yeshivas that sprouted in historic Lithuania throughout the nineteenth century.[98]

The scholar Shaul Stampfer, in his work on the emergence of the Lithuanian yeshiva, offers insight into the establishment of this new type of Jewish educational institution. Previous scholars argue that the yeshivas developed as an institutionalized response to the Hasidic neglect of Torah Study, as an implementation of the GRA's

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[98] Shaul Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit behithavutah bameah hatesha-eśre* (Jerusalem, 1995), 20.

wishes, or as an attempt to inhibit the deterioration of Torah Study that was prevalent during this period. Stampfer rejects these three assumptions and asserts that Rabbi Hayyim's chief motive for the establishment of the yeshiva was "a sincere wish to support young men to preserve the ideal of Torah Study, and not a wish to change the face of Jewish society, nor a desire to confront currents within it."[99] The explicit goal of each Lithuanian yeshiva was to endow its students with rabbinic knowledge, and not to ordain them to become future rabbis. In fact, the aforementioned Mithnagdic ideal of *torah lishmah* was implemented, not only in Volozhin, but in other Lithuanian yeshivas that followed in its path and aspired to continue to produce the traditional intellectual elite.[100]

Not long after its establishment, the Volozhin Yeshiva attained a reputation as a center of Torah study throughout the Pale of Settlement in tsarist Russia, a fame it was to maintain until its closure in 1892. It attracted not only students who wished to engage in the study of Torah and its commentary, but also the rabbinic and the financial elites who supported the yeshiva and identified with its values.[101] Only with the rise of industrialization and urbanization of the Russian Empire in the 1860s, did the status of the Lithuanian yeshivas begin to decline. These processes, accompanied by the emergence of the Jewish Enlightenment Movement, loosened the ties between the

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[99] Ibid., 38.

[100] Ibid., 31-38, 98-102, 318. Stampfer notes that in the second half of the nineteenth century the Volozhin yeshiva was mistakenly identified as being a rabbinic seminary, mostly by the non-orthodox population, that is, the Maskilim and Russian officials. However, the traditional Jews did not view it in that manner. The yeshiva students did not attend in order to find jobs as rabbis. Ideological reasons, not economic ones, were involved in the concept of the yeshiva as a school of "pure" engagement with learning. As the average salary of a rabbi was low, economic pursuit could not have been a major factor in attracting students to attend the yeshiva. See Immanuel Etkes, *Yahid bedoro: HaGaon miVilnah demut vedimui* (Jerusalem, 1998), 231-239.

[101] Immanuel Etkes, Shlomo Tikochinski, "Hakdamah," in Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski eds., *Yeshivot Lita: Pirkei zikhronot* (Jerusalem, 2004), 7.

rabbinic elite and the Jewish masses. In addition, this evolution also blurred the segregation between Jews and Gentiles that had been strictly maintained up to that point.[102]

The founding of the Volozhin Yeshiva was, in many respects, a novelty in the field of traditional Jewish education. Up until its emergence, East European Jewry was familiar with two different types of educational institutions. The first were the medieval yeshivas that existed in the Polish Commonwealth until the 1648-1649 pogroms and which were known as high academies of Torah study. [103] They were headed by a rabbi and supported by the local community. The second were the old system of the b*eith midrash* (a house of study), synagogues with rabbinic libraries where students could engage in independent study, assisted at times by an older scholar. The new form of education initiated in Volozhin drew several elements from the old-style *beith midrash*, such as the autodidactic method of its students.[104] At the same time, it adopted elements from the medieval type of yeshiva, such as installing a rabbi to function as its head (*rosh yeshiva*).

Despite the similarities between the new Lithuanian Yeshiva and the former Jewish educational institutions, it is clear that the Volozhin Yeshiva was quite distinct from its old archetype. As opposed to being located in a central city, the Volozhin Yeshiva was founded in a town of no significant importance. Moreover, as opposed to the medieval framework of yeshivas, the new yeshiva was not dependent on the local community but, rather, on individual philanthropists who, through their contributions,

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[102] Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit*, 223.

[103] On Poland as a thriving center for Torah study in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see David Assaf, "Olam hatorah bepolin bameot hatetzayin-hayodzayin," in *Kiyum veshever: yehude polin ledorotehem*, vol. 2, *Hevra, tarbut. leumiyut*, ed. Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman (Jerusalem, 1997), 69-111.

[104] Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit*, 17.

wished to create an educational institution that would serve the Lithuanian Jewish population.[105] If Volozhin, the "mother" of the Lithuanian yeshivas, was a novelty in its structure, the Slobodka Yeshiva, founded in 1881 in the suburb of Kovno named Slobodka, by Rabbi Nathan Zevi Finkel, drew upon this model for its establishment. In the first years of its existence, studies in this yeshiva were conducted sporadically until the yeshiva was relocated in its own building in 1901. Four years earlier, as a result of a dispute over the introduction of Musar into the yeshiva's curriculum, the Slobodka Yeshiva split into two different yeshivas; the one headed by Rabbi Finkel was then called "Kneset Yisrael."[106] Whereas the establishment of the Volozhin Yeshiva was not a response to the recent waves of Enlightenment and Modernism that became prevalent in Western Europe, the introduction of the study of Musar in the Slobodka Yeshiva was a clear reaction to these nascent currents. Rabbi Israel Salanter, who founded the Musar Movement during the years 1845-1846, set forth a new method of learning that sought to pose moral (in Hebrew: m*usar)* perfection as a high priority among orthodox Jews.[107]

According to Immanuel Etkes, whose work on the Musar Movement and on Rabbi Israel Salanter is one of the major contributions to the area, the founding of a learning method named Musar in the 1840s was meant to counter the growing Haskalah Movement. The Maskilim, who sought to introduce the Jewish masses to modern values and secular education, became successful in enlisting a growing number of Jews to their ranks during that time.[108] As a reaction to this current, Rabbi Israel Salanter developed a

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[105] Etkes, *Yahid bedoro*, 216.

[106] Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit*, 232, 246.

[107] Immanuel Etkes, *Rabi Yiśrael Salanter vereshitah shel tenu'at hamusar* (Jerusalem, 1982), 13.

[108] Ibid., 161-164. The major reason for the growth of Haskalah in Russia at the beginning of the 1840s was the resolution of the Russian government to cooperate with the Maskilim in accelerating the process of acculturation and enlightenment among the Jewish population. By establishing a system for Jewish secular education, the Russian Minister of National Enlightenment, Uvarov, wished to put an end to

new educational method that aimed to strengthen one's adherence to the word of the rabbis. In this sense, Musarism may be conceived of as a novelty within the realm of orthodox Jewish society, as a counter-Enlightenment movement. This new current also greatly contributed to the shift of traditional society from a religious group to a modern, self-conscious, political and ideological movement, as awareness grew of the threats imposed on it from the outside world. [109]

Rabbi Israel Salanter and his disciples discerned that ultra-orthodox society was collapsing as a result of internal problems, i.e. its inability to implement the values and demands of Halakha.[110] Because the Lithuanian-Jewish elite, rabbinic scholars and yeshiva students alike, were perceived as hypocritical (as it seemed that stringent observance of commandments was not accompanied by observance of basic moral values), young men tended to abandon religious conduct in favor of secular life. In the "Musar Epistle," the first publication of Rabbi Israel Salanter which came out in 1858, the leader of the new movement contended that while the average religious Jew makes great effort to refrain from eating non-kosher meat, he easily fails to obey the strict commandment against slander and gossip.[111]

The major concern of the Musar Movement was not to impose more stringent commandments on the individual but, rather, to lessen the gap between the existing commandments and their fulfillment.[112] In this respect, Rabbi Israel Salanter's initiative

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Jewish segregation through cultural assimilation. See Ibid., 148-149. For a reappraisal of Uvarov's reactionary policy toward the Jewish minority in the Russian Pale of Settlement see Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia 1825-1855* (Philadelphia, 1983), 59-69.

[109] Etkes, *Rabi Yiśrael Salanter*, 18.

[110] Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit*, 19.

[111] Etkes, *Rabi Yiśrael Salanter*, 221.

[112] Ibid., 106; Lawrence J. Kaplan, "The Hazon Ish: Haredi Critic of Traditional Orthodoxy," *The Uses of Tradition* (1992): 157.

was part of the ongoing effort begun by the GRA to maintain the distinctive tradition of Lithuanian Jewry. The credo of this heritage, as noted before, was the elevation of *torah lishma* to the pinnacle of Jewish life. Rabbi Israel Salanter's basic intention was to fortify the ideal of *torah lishma* by making the Torah, not an intellectual challenge, but, rather, a demand that must encompass every aspect of one's life. True implementation of Torah principles and not simply superficial engagement in its study or attempts to gain some benefit from it, were of supreme importance in the eyes of the movement's founder.[113]

The major educational method, by which Rabbi Israel Salanter meant to overcome the gap between cognitive knowledge of a commandment and the emotional will to abide by it, was the study of Musar texts with enthusiasm (*hitpa'alut*), with "lips aflame." The Musarist was prescribed to chant these texts accompanied by a gloomy melody that was meant to influence his own awe and fear of punishment. What was of supreme importance was, not the content of the text, but the psychological impact it would have on the student.[114] It is noteworthy that by introducing a new type of learning, one which substituted moral perfection for intellectual development, Rabbi Israel Salanter, though unintentionally, prepared the ground for a future clash between the Lithuanian-Jewish scholarly elite and the adherents of the Musar Movement.[115]

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[113] Lawrence Kaplan notesin this context that the Hazon Ish was one of the major opponents of the Musar Movement. The Hazon Ish rejected the demand of Rabbi Israel Salanter and his adherents to include a separate study of moral issues, apart from the "plain" study of Halakha. In his view, a traditional knowledge of Halakha and a strict performance of the commandments are sufficient means for a true religious conduct. The additional study of Musar, followed by additional moral challenges, only overburdens the Musar student and therefore disrupts his observance of Halakha. See Ibid., 158-162.

[114] Ibid., 158.

[115] On the opposition to the study of Musar in Slobodka see Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit*, 244-251.

Although the new movement failed to attract the middle classes of Jewish society (*ba'alei batim*), by the beginning of the twentieth century Musarism had, nonetheless, become the major trend in the Lithuanian yeshivas and held a strong appeal for young men. The Slobodka yeshiva, the first Musar Yeshiva, where Rabbi Nathan Zevi Finkel, the Slobodka *alter* ("the old man", the respectful title given to him by his students and followers), introduced the study of Musar, functioned as a center for its forthcoming branches that were established by Slobodka's graduates. The success in introducing the study of Musar into existing and new yeshivas fostered the emergence of Musarism, not only as an educational concept, but also as a mass ideological movement. The Musar yeshivas proliferated throughout historic Lithuania at the end of the nineteenth century and reached the peak of their growth during the interwar period.

The Radical Path of Novaredok

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were already two contrasting sub-currents of the Musar movement, that of the minimalist approach retained by the schools of Slobodka, Telz and Kelm, and the maximalist current of Novaredok.[116] These two trends were based on contrasting interpretations of Rabbi Israel Salanter's teachings. The first group, whose major representative was the Slobodka a*lter*, Rabbi Nathan Zevi Finkel, intended to raise the prestige and pride of engagement in Musar by drawing closer to modern European currents.[117] According to David Fishman, the Slobodka Yeshiva incorporated ideas of Haskalah and bourgeois values through the internalization of

[116] Haim H. Ben Sasson, "Musar Movement," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.
[117] Stampfer, *Hayeshiva haLitayit*, 238.

orderliness, personal hygiene, dignity, and restraint.[118] As a result, the majority of students of the three minimalist-type yeshivas were clean-shaven and dressed in European style.

The compliance with Haskalah ideas and gestures which characterized the minimalist school of Slobodka, Telz and Kelm stemmed from an optimistic comprehension of Rabbi Israel Salanter's teachings. Engagement in Musar was feasible, argued Rabbi Nathan Zevi Finkel, only because humans are capable of perfecting their character traits. By emphasizing the concept of *gadlut haadam* (man's greatness), Rabbi Nathan Zevi Finkel intended to raise the students' self esteem. He presumed that by doing so, they would be less likely to drown in sin. By interpreting Rabbi Israel Salanter's teachings in a moderate way, Rabbi Nathan Zevi Finkel helped to create a more modern, bourgeois type of Musar student.

In clear contrast to this attitude, Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz was the leader of the extremist and radical interpretation of Musarism. Rabbi Hurwitz founded the yeshiva in Novaredok (the Yiddish name of the Belorussian town known as Nowogródek in Polish) which existed between 1896 and 1915. In the years following 1905, new branches of this yeshiva emerged. Thus, the Novaredok branch of Musarism eventually embraced 70 yeshivas in various cities throughout interwar Poland. It is to this branch of yeshiva education that Chaim Grade belonged as a young student (before he broke with religious practice at the age of twenty two). David Fishman's article on the Novaredok Yeshiva provides an answer concerning the origins of the enthusiastic and extremist approach that characterized it at the beginning of the twentieth century. Fishman argues that

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[118] Fishman, "Musar and Modernity: The Case of Novaredok." *Modern Judaism* 8, no. 2 (1988): 42; Avraham Kariv, "Lita mekhorati," in *Yahadut lita: Temunut vetsiyurim*, ed. Y.D Kamzon (Jerusalem, 1959), 11.

Novaredok's worldview and practices stemmed from the age of radicalism in Russian Jewish society.[119]

Ostensibly, there was no link between progressive socialist ideas and the radical attack of Rabbi Hurwitz on Haskalah and Jewish modernity.[120] In contrast to the students of the yeshivas of Telz and Slobodka, those in Novaredok wore beards, traditional long black coats and long *tsitsis*. Moreover, unlike other Lithuanian yeshivas, the reading of secular books and newspapers was strictly prohibited in the Novaredok Yeshiva. Thus, Rabbi Israel Salanter's appealing bourgeois movement was transformed in the Novaredok extremist branch into an exclusive current admitting only a fanatic spiritual elite. These young people were expected to stay within the confines of the yeshiva for the rest of their lives, shunning any encounter with the many temptations of the outside world.[121]

Despite the ideological dichotomy between the new wave of Jewish modernity and Novaredok's ultra-orthodox approach, Rabbi Hurwitz managed to draw upon secular revolutionary ideas and to introduce them into the world of Novaredok. He realized the attractiveness of these ideas to young people of that time. This is why he decided to establish a radical anti-bourgeois trend within the quite moderate world of the Musar Movement. Instead of a social reform, Rabbi Hurwitz called for a spiritual reckoning. The world, according to the view presented in his major work *Sefer madregat haadam* ("The Book of the Level of Man"), could be healed from its evil and ordeals, not through

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[119] Fishman, "Musar and Modernity," 42.

[120] Ibid., 44.

[121] The students in the Novaredok Yeshiva were expected to declare: *shivti bevet hashem kol yeme chayai* (that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life). By doing so they made a vow never to leave the yeshiva. This practice reflects the extremist view of Novaredok. Only by the path of this Yeshiva can man attain a worthwhile life. A negative account of a scene where a young student declares *shivti* exists in *Musernikes* as Yosef Kovler declares never to leave the yeshiva. See Grade, *Musernikes*, 22. An account describing a similar scene also exists in a story that carries the title "Shivti." See Ben Artsi, "Shivti," in Etkes, Immanuel, ed., *Mosad hayeshiva: Be-shilhe yeme habenayim uva'et hahadashah: Kovets mekorot* (Jerusalem: 1989), 245-264.

a superficial restoration of the social world order, but rather through a spiritual metamorphosis of the individual. This can be achieved not by improving one's material situation, but conversely, by a complete neglect of any mundane concern. Hence, in order to express this idea of negation of the world outside, Novaredok students wore soiled and worn garments and derided personal hygiene.[122]

The Novaredok student was thus expected not to triumph over poverty in reality, but to annul it in his own consciousness. While the minimalist path of Slobodka rejected ascetic behavior on the grounds that it may crush one's own spirit,[123] Novaredok claimed that only by an emotional storm can the restructuring of the self be achieved.[124] Since the self is the major obstacle in desiring only that which God commanded, one must rise above physical concerns and sacrifice all that may be held dear and precious in one's eyes.

Several philosophical concepts in Rabbi Hurwitz's work consolidate the affirmation of such an internal spiritual war. The first concept was known in Novaredok as *shvirat hamidot,* that is, the crushing of one's character traits. According to this system, there are no good human character traits. Therefore, man must crush them all to make himself submissive to the truth of Torah. According to Fishman, this central tenet in the world of Novaredok is nowhere to be found in classic rabbinic literature.[125] The new concept introduced by Rabbi Hurwitz was a radical modification of the former Musar concept of *tikun hamidot*, which means the perfection of one's character traits,

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[122] Fishman, "Musar and Modernity", 44.

[123] Ury, Zalman F. *Studies in Torah Judaism.* Vol. 12: *The Musar Movement: A Quest for Excellence in Character Education* (New York, 1969), 58.

[124] Levin, Meir. *Novarodok: A Movement that Lived in Struggle and Its Unique Approach to the Problem of Man* (Northvale, NJ, 1996), 13.

[125] Fishman, "Musar and Modernity," 52.

prominent in the works of the GRA and of Rabbi Israel Salanter.[126] Whereas the older concept is based on an optimistic view, through the presupposition that bad character traits may be corrected by human endeavor, this new concept suggests that man, in order to improve his character, may only rid himself of his own personality and submit himself entirely to the word of Torah. Rabbi Hurwitz demonstrates by a parable on the necessity of that engagement:

> And the nature of a deer is that while the hunter chases after it, it escapes from him to the forest ... and because [the deer] knows that the trees' branches block its way and that it would get trapped in them with its branched antlers, then immediately before it enters the forest it breaks off its own antlers against the tree, and begins running freely without anything to hinder it. In this way man too, has a world that impedes him on his way and he becomes entangled in it. So how much more must a man foresee the future and break his own evil character traits so that he does not get trapped by his lurking inner [evil inclinations].[127]

The deer's horns in this parable represent the evil inclination embedded in every soul against whom man must wage total war. If the deer's horns represent man's bad character traits, it is the dark and sinister forest that represents reality. Rabbi Hurwitz discusses the nature of the forest leading to the second psychological principle of Novaredok, that of complete negation of the external world (*hishtavut*). According to Rabbi Hurwitz, one must completely ignore physical obstacles such as poverty and hunger, as well as mental ones such as pride or social prestige. These obstacles may be removed merely with the understanding that suffering stems not from objective reasons but from one's misleading perception of the world. The follower of Novaredok needs only to realize that the forest appearing in the parable does not really exist, it is only in

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[126] Etkes, *Rabi Yiśrael Salanter*, 130.

[127] Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz, S*efer madregat haadam: Mimaamare... Yosef Yiozl Hurvits* (Jerusalem, 2002), 48.

one's mind, so he can overcome his own plight. Hence the real obstacle lies in the soul itself and not in the outside world, as, drawing on the previous parable, "man creates his owns horns that then themselves create a forest - and without these horns, no forest in fact exists ..."[128]

The idea that a real interpretation of the Torah is feasible solely by shattering one's own character traits brings us to the third concept of Novaredok Musarism, that of *negi'ah*, the suspicion that an ulterior motive lies in every human action. This concept is extensively discussed throughout *Sefer madregat haadam* and is fundamental for our understanding of Chaim Grade's account of Novaredok.[129] Indeed, the previously discussed concepts of *shvirat hamidot* and *hishtavut* are based on the fear of *negi'ah*, of a hidden selfish motivation that lurks under any outwardly pious act. Rabbi Hurwitz's view of human character is entirely pessimistic in this sense: a decision to follow religious practice, no matter how sincere, will only lead a person astray if he relies on his own judgment. Rabbi Hurwitz contends that what seems to take shape in one's mind as a true intention to perform a commandment *lishmah* (for its own sake) will quickly turn out to be a formidable sin because there is a hidden motivation of self-interest involved in this intention.[130]

The concept of overcoming *negi'ah* becomes even more complicated with the two contradictory solutions given by Rabbi Hurwitz. The first is a total self-abnegation followed by a complete submission to the authority of the Torah. In clear contrast to that, the second solution requires total self-assertion and human autonomy in one's

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[128] Ibid., 50.

[129] Throughout *Madregat haadam*, Rabbi Hurwitz offers a new perspective on the role of an ulterior motive in the sins of Biblical figures such as Cain, Joseph's brothers, Korah, Samson, Jeroboam and others. See Ibid., 57, 60, 61, 75.

[130] Ibid., 38-41, 164.

interpretation of the Torah.[131] Rabbi Hurwitz explains his first solution with the following:

> Man must choose all that the Torah chooses for him, [as the Torah] is pure of any interference of his own character traits. And he ought not to rely on his own judgment at all, and especially in matters of doubt ... And the Torah is an iron bridge that prevents man from failure, so he will not fall down into the tempestuous sea of life. [132]

Rabbi Hurwitz offers here a radical understanding of one's role as he interprets the Torah and other Halakhic texts. Tamar Ross, in an article about the various hermeneutic approaches that characterize the Musar Movement, emphasizes this reading of Rabbi Hurwitz's dogma. She presents Hurwitz as an advocate of an anti-rationalist hermeneutic stance that rejects any extent of involvement of one's own judgmental skills in the process of Torah interpretation.[133] The Torah, according to this viewpoint, cannot gain the allegiance of its students by means of logical arguments. Since a rational comprehension of the Torah cannot be attained, Rabbi Hurwitz maintains that the yeshiva student must passively absorb the Torah's teachings, thus entirely surrendering to its ultimate authority.

Rabbi Hurwitz's words seem to convey rather clearly this sense of complete submission to the Torah so desired by the founder of the Novaredok stream. Yet further in the same passage, Rabbi Hurwitz's arguments seem to contradict themselves: "And so, we find that man is required to [apply] all his reasoning only within the Torah- how to deepen and broaden it from all sides- so that all his deeds and matters are on the side of

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[131] Kaplan, "The Hazon Ish," 162.

[132] Hurwitz, *Madregat haadam*, 42. The Hazon Ish, though opposing the Musar movement, and especially the radical trend of Novharedok, shares with Rabbi Hurwitz the same rejection of self-assertion and human autonomy. See Kaplan, "The Hazon Ish," 162.

[133] Tamar Ross, "Tenu'at hamusar vehabe'ayah hahermenuitit betalmud torah," *Tarbits* 59, no. 1-2 (1990): 200.

true fulfillment, without misplacing even a tiny part of it [the Torah]."[134] One may infer from these words that in order to avoid the interference of ulterior motives in one's actions, one must firstly become aware of the role these motives are playing in one's judgment, and secondly, perfect one's own character so as to combat these ulterior motives and immunize oneself from their intrusion into one's actions. Thus, rather than simply "surrender" to the Torah, i.e. submit oneself to its commandments, one must constantly and actively uproot any sense of self-interest or ulterior motive from one's soul. In this way, one makes oneself worthy of the purity of the Torah path in life.

In addition to this statement about the important role played by the individual, Rabbi Hurwitz also introduces a method of how to carry out this task known as *pe'ulah* ("action"). This method is an exercise or an operation undertaken by the Novaredoker (follower of Novaredok) designed to uproot an evil character trait. A performance of *pe'ulah* means to first recognize the type of moral defect (such as pride or the quest for social esteem) and, second, to perform an action that embodies the complete opposite of that defect. Asking a druggist for nails in order to combat pride and concern for public opinion is perhaps the most famous example of a Novaredok student trying to achieve this level of supreme indifference to the world, the aforementioned *hishtavut*.

Since Rabbi Hurwitz advocates at one point the complete submission to the authority of Torah and endorses an ultimate degree of self-assertion in its interpretation, an internal contradiction in the Novaredok philosophical system is inevitable. Viewing this problem from a Kantian perspective, one may ask what kind of ethical system is

[134] Hurwitz, *Madregat haadam*, 42.

offered by Rabbi Hurwitz, an autonomous or a heteronomous one.[135] According to the ethics of Immanuel Kant, every religious dogma, by its very definition, is marked by the concept of heteronomy, a compulsory set of values imposed on the individual by an external authority, that of the Divine. As opposed to this type of ethical system, Kant raises the idea of autonomy as an imperative for human beings to form their own values without the subordination to an external authority.[136] In light of Kant's arguments, one may argue that Rabbi Hurwitz amalgamated these two concepts of autonomy and heteronomy in a perilous way. He expected his disciples to submit themselves to the heteronomous authority of Torah on the one hand, and to develop strong autonomous judgment skills on the other hand. As we shall see, this intrinsic contradiction in the philosophy of Rabbi Hurwitz lies at the core of Chaim Grade's criticism of the teachings of his mentors in Novaredok.

From *Musernikes* to *Tsemakh atlas*

The existence of the aforementioned hermeneutic and ethical contrast in the teachings of Novaredok finds expression in the two major accounts of the Novaredok Yeshiva given by Chaim Grade. The writer first tackled this issue in the early period of his career when he published the long narrative poem *Musernikes* in 1938.[137] Grade treated this issue

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[135] For a summery of Immanuel Kant's distinction between ethical autonomy and heteronomy see Shmuel H. Bergman, *Hafilosofya shel 'Imanuel Kant* (Jerusalem, 1997) 91, 94.

[136] Ibid., 94.

[137] Chaim Grade, *Musernikes: poeme; Mayn krig mit hersh raseyner: esey* (Jerusalem, 1969). All Yiddish translations from *Musernikes* are my own. *Musernikes* first appeared in 1938 in the literary miscellany *Zamlbikher*, published in New York by Yosef Opotoshu and H. Leyvik. The work was published as a book in Vilna, in 1939, with slight variations from the original publication. The Hebrew University edition of *Musernikes* is a photo reproduction of the 1939 Vilna edition.

again almost three decades later, in his novel *Tsemakh atlas*.[138] Grade's view of *negi'ah* represents his criticism of Novaredok in his poem *Musernikes* as well as in the development of his major protagonist Tsemakh Atlas in the eponymous novel. As already noted, almost thirty years separate the publication of the first and second accounts of life in the Novaredok yeshiva. Grade, though criticizing the radical path of Novaredok in both works, offers a different type of criticism of the yeshiva in each work. While in *Musernikes*, the writer unequivocally castigates the fanatic worldview of the Novaredok rabbis, in *Tsemakh atlas* his criticism of the Novaredok branch of Musarism is softened, as he portrays a more positive image of the yeshiva. Both works embody the figure of the future writer himself, Chaim Vilner in *Musernikes* (Chaim from Vilna) and Chaikl Vilner[139] in *Tsemakh atlas*. Through both of these figures the writer conveys his own experiences in Novaredok as literary autobiography.

In *Musernikes*, Grade, then a young poet and member of the Yiddishist and secular literary group *Yung Vilne*, unfolds the plight of young students in one branch of the Novaredok Yeshiva in 1930, as they strive for self-perfection through practices of self-denial and self-affliction. In both dramatic and grotesque style the poet illustrates how these young men struggle with themselves in order to triumph over secular temptations, pride, envy and sensual desires.[140] Throughout the poem, Grade introduces the reader to some of Novaredok's unique methods designed for human perfection: the study of Musar texts "with lips aflame" (*musar behitpa'alut*), the pledge made by

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[138] Chaim Grade, *Tsemakh atlas: Di yeshive*, 2 vols (Los Angeles, 1967-1968). All English citations of *Tsemakh atlas* have been taken from: Chaim Grade, *The Yeshiva*, 2 vols., trans. Curt Leviant (New York, 1979). This novel first appeared serially in the New York Yiddish daily *Der Tog – Morgn Zhurnal*. It appeared in book form in the Yiddish original in 1967-1968. Curt Leviant's translation first appeared in 1979.

[139] Chaikl is a Yiddish diminutive of the name Chaim.

[140] Khayim Bez, *Af di vegn fun der yidisher literatur*, (Tel Aviv, 1980), 438.

students never to leave the yeshiva (*shivti*), the war against ulterior motives characterizing the method of *pe'ulah*, and the *birzhe*, the assembly of a group of students to discuss spiritual matters and to examine their advancement on the path of righteousness.[141] The poem reaches its climax as Chaim Vilner, the figure in which the poet mirrors himself, as a result of all his strenuous attempts at self-perfection loses his faith in God.

In the context of Grade's life, *Musernikes* is a description of the rebellion that took place in Grade's consciousness. In the course of the poem the young Grade turns from a pious yeshiva student into a secular Jew. From the poem's outset, Grade depicts the life of his alter-ego and his fellows in dark gloomy colors. Metaphors of death, torture and suffering are the main vehicles through which he conveys what he believes to be the true repercussion of Musar study in Novaredok. The Yiddish critic Khayim Bez summarizes this mood, asserting that *Musernikes* is a protest against a lifestyle resembling an atmosphere of a funeral, death and catastrophe.[142]

This mood of death and sorrow stands in clear contrast to the fact that the yeshiva students presented in the poem are all young people. Despite their young age, the major protagonists, some known only by their names, some also by the name of their hometowns, appear to be people long past their youth: they are tired, pale, poor, sick and hungry, physically and emotionally drained, as a result of their engagement in

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[141] Grade, *Musernikes*, 13, 20, 22, 32-39. Fishman argues that the assembly of Musarists to discuss spiritual matters was borrowed from the practices of Jewish revolutionaries. Members of various trades would gather at a particular street location to discuss their trade, find jobs, etc. This location was known in Yiddish as *Di birzhe*. It was at the *birzhe* that the revolutionaries would organize the workers. The Musar teachers at Novaredok adopted the *birzhe* assembly for their own spiritual purposes. See Fishman, "Musar and Modernity," 45-50. See also Moshe Zilberg, "Novhardok," in *Yeshivot Lita: Pirkei zikhronot*, ed. Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski, (Jerusalem, 2004), 362-363.

[142] Bez, *Af di vegn*, 429.

Novaredok's practice of self-abnegation and self-perfection.[143] Moreover, this ominous mood is not shared by the yeshiva students alone. This feeling of death is endemic to nature as well:

> Der eluldiker regn roysht, di volkns tsien,
> Vi an eyde tsu a heyliker levaye.
> S'iz fintster, un mayn harts hot zikh tseshrien
> Mitn nign fun bal-muser r' bakhye...[144]

[The rains of the month of Elul make noise, the clouds pass by,
Like a group of Jews following a holy funeral
It's dark, and my heart cried out
With the chant of the Musarist Rabbi Baḥya...]

The poet evokes in these words the dark and sinister echoes of his days in the yeshiva that, in his account, had taken place seven years earlier. Grade the poet, as opposed to the naïve adolescent Chaim Vilner, comes well-equipped with the analytical skills to compile a harsh bill of indictment against Novaredok.[145]

In the poet's eyes, the major cause of the masochistic engagement that characterizes the Musar students' conduct is the fear, illustrated above, of interference of ulterior motives with their own judgments and deeds. The method of *pe'ulah* that aims to neutralize the influence of ulterior motives is only one way which leaves the students with a constant feeling of dissatisfaction and guilt. Grade exposes the vulnerable point of this method in recounting the story of Der Ostrovoler (the student from the town of Ostrovol), one of the older students in the yeshiva, and his fellow student Khlavne. Both wish to marry the same young woman, the *rosh-yeshiva*'s only daughter. Der Ostrolover forces himself to give his only pair of shoes to Khlavne so that the latter can meet his prospective match.

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[143] Sol A. Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Middle Village, NY, 1972), 418.
[144] Grade, *Musernikes*, 9.
[145] Bez, *Af di vegn*, 438.

Der Ostrovoler, who remains barefoot, is frustrated not by his act of altruism, but rather by his inability to uproot his own pride. Even after this type of *pe'ulah* to annul the temptation of possession is implemented, Der Ostrovoler realizes that his wish to help his friend was not free of feelings of self-pity and envy. As he says: "I am not tormented [knowing] that this girl does not want me – but that what she wants is that man."[146] The reader who first encounters Der Ostrovoler's generosity realizes that ultimately this act of self-abnegation only enhances his pride, envy and perhaps even hatred of his friend.

Khlavne, who takes the shoes, rationalize his own desire to win the young woman:

> Der Ostrovoler hot a peule in hatove
> Gevolt durkh dem bavayzn
> Shver iz mir geven di shikh zu nemen, shver
> Nem ikh nit – volt ikh im shtark gekrenkt,
> Ikh hob geton durkh dem far im fil mer,
> Vi er far mir - ...[147]

[The Ostrovoler scored an achievement in doing good
Through this he wanted to demonstrate [his goodness]
It was hard for me to take the shoes, hard,
But if I would not take them – I would hurt him severely,
[By taking them] I did much more for him
than he for me - ...]

These words show a conspicuous futility of the Musarist's relentless attempt at purification of the soul. Methods such as self-abnegation or the above-mentioned *pe'ulah* manage only to overburden one's conscience and to blur the distinction between good and evil. Thus, a gesture of altruism, such as the gesture of Der Ostrovoler, may leave one impressed in the world outside the yeshiva. Yet only in Novaredok would such a gesture of altruism make both the giver and the receiver disdainful of this action.

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[146] Grade, *Musernikes*, 57.
[147] Ibid., 49.

Towards the end of the poem, Grade reiterates this distinction between the "healthy" and "natural" values of people outside the yeshiva and those held by the Musarists. The comparison between the yeshiva and the secular world outside comes to full expression in the dialogue between Chaim Vilner and the student Liber who joined the yeshiva at an early age, and later on became an *Apikoyres* (heretic). Liber, who decides to stay in the yeshiva only because he is incapable of functioning in the outside world, is shunned by the other students though, officially, he is allowed to remain a student. He explains to the younger Chaim Vilner why secular people fare better exactly where the Musarists try, but inevitably fail:

Zey hobn azoy lang geshmisn zikh mit eygenem geshrey
Biz zey hobn ufgehert tsu shemen zikh arumgeyn naket;
Fun reynikn zikh – zaynen zey gevorn ful mit umreynem fardakht
Zey hobn azoy lang af zikh aleyn getrotn un gekhraket,
Biz zey hobn shoyn fun gor nit, khuts fun zikh getrakht.[148]

[They flogged themselves so long with their own cry
Until they stopped being ashamed to walk around naked.
From purifying themselves – they became full of impure suspicion
For so long they stomped and spat on themselves
Until they thought of nothing else but of themselves].

Here too, the Musarist's self-flagellation leads, ultimately, to pride, the same character trait the teachings of Rabbi Hurwitz were designed to combat.

Grade's negative view of the Novaredok Yeshiva in the poem *Musarnikes* is clear in almost every single scene in the poem. Already at the poem's outset, Chaim Vilner is seduced by secular books. But it is only at the very last moment that he reaches the epiphany that leads him to lose his faith. Although earlier he attempted to rebuke Liber for his heretic views, Chaim Vilner eventually becomes convinced that the path of masochistic engagement in self-perfection does not yield the desired results nor does it

[148] Ibid., 67.

make the Novaredok students better. The poem ends with Chaim Vilner experiencing an epiphany: the Holy Ark in the *beith midrash* is collapsing. The fall of the Holy Ark represents the inevitable process that Chaim Vilner undergoes as he understands that Liber's blasphemous criticism turned out to be true. Grade dramatizes the last scene as he depicts the strenuous effort made by the yeshiva students to rescue the Holy Ark. The poem ends with a description of Chaim Vilner's failure to rescue his own belief in God, as he is left "wounded in a trench, a blind man in a dark forest, in front of a burnt out bonfire."[149] At that point, the gap between the poet and his alter-ego is bridged, as Chaim Vilner arrives at Grade's critical outlook on Novaredok.

In this respect, the closing scene of *Musernikes* gives us a psychological insight into Grade's world up to the moment when he broke with religion and became one of the major voices of secular Yiddishism in Vilna. Turning from the plot itself to the historical context in which *Musernikes* was written, it is noteworthy that Grade was not the first poet to deal with the hardships of young yeshiva students. Yiddish and Hebrew literature of the early twentieth century had already had a tradition of pessimistic descriptions of the yeshiva student, of his plight and loneliness. Yet in earlier works such as the poem "*Hamatmid*" written in Hebrew by Hayyim Nahman Bialik, there is still an affirmative and nostalgic view of the yeshiva despite the portrait of the student's suffering. *Musernikes* marks a shift in this process as the Lithuanian yeshiva is portrayed in much darker colors and negative tones.[150]

The literary scholar Abraham Novershtern notes that Grade, as a major representative of *Yung Vilne*, sought in *Musernikes* to present a topic with which the

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[149] Ibid., 78.
[150] Bez, *Af di Vegn*, 441.

majority of the Yiddishist secular circles could easily identify. The members of this group, though largely politically leftist, were divided among themselves in their attitude towards Zionism, socialism and communism.[151] According to Novershtern this is why Grade treated the topic in the negative manner that he did. The poet chose to deal with the break with religious practice since that issue was already a closed chapter in the lives of many people of that period. While Novershtern's account of the role of *Musernikes* as an outstanding product of *Yung Vilne* is true, the individual aspects of this work, i.e. the description of Grade's loss of faith, should not be overlooked. In *Musernikes*, Grade does not express antagonism toward the Jewish tradition in general. His attack against Novaredok is based on his own distressing experience and it is directed, as illustrated above, against its extremist approach and peculiar practices.

Although Grade decided to abandon religious practice completely, his vehement attack on Novaredok in *Musernikes* is not a part of an encompassing attack on Judaism. The Yiddish critic A. Tabachnik notes in his discussion of the poem that in contrast to other poets of his time, Grade's early poetry, of which *Musernikes* is an indispensable part, manifests a strong affinity with the life and spiritual legacy of the older generations.[152] This is why, despite the attack on the Novaredok Yeshiva in *Musernikes*, Grade's work was considered quite conservative in the eyes of his own generation: his prophetic language and treatment of Jewish subjects made him be perceived by his

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[151] Abraham Novershtern, "Sifrut vepolitika bitsirata shel kevutsat 'Yung-Vilne'," In *Ben shete milhamot 'olam: Perakim mehaye hatarbut shel yehude Polin lileshonotehem*, ed. Chone Shmeruk and Shmuel Werses (Jerusalem, 1997), 177-79; Justin D. Cammy, "*Tsevorfene bleter*: The Emergence of Yung Vilne," *Polin* 14 (2001): 172.

[152] Abrahm B. Tabachnik, *Dikhter un dikhtung* (New York, 1965), 396; Dov Sadan, "In un arum yidishvarg, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv, 1984), 78.

audience from the very beginning of his career, in his first book *Yo* ("Yes," 1936), as part of the Jewish tradition.[153]

Interestingly, in a generation that strove to draw a clear distinction between the 'dark' old days of adherence to the words of the rabbis and the bright future of socialism, Grade's positive attitude to the Jewish tradition is striking. As we turn to a discussion of yeshiva life in the post-Holocaust *Tsemakh atlas*, Grade's positive stance towards the Jewish tradition tends also to include the previously renounced Musar Movement. The writer affirms that the Musarist yeshiva life was a milieu of intensive spirituality, where young people struggled to overcome pride and sexual temptation and where a true war in the name of Torah was waged. Yet the literary representation in *Tsemakh atlas*, though missing the harsh Maskilic tone of previous accounts, does not attempt to idealize the Lithuanian yeshiva life.[154] In *Tsemakh atla*s Grade introduces the character of the Novaredok Musarist to develop a full-fledged outlook on the pros and cons of this life and presents a panorama of characters within Lithuanian-Jewish orthodoxy.

Tsemakh Atlas, also known as Tsemakh Lomzher, the eternal seeker and skeptic, is a Musarist who had managed to return to Poland after several years of exile in Russia during the First World War and the Russian Revolution. He came back to Poland in order to maintain his religious lifestyle and his study of Musar. Grade portrays his character as an extraordinary figure even among his yeshiva peers. On the one hand, he is a typical Novaredoker, searching for the ulterior motives for any of his deeds. He aspires to observe the Torah *lishmah,* to uproot the interference of evil inclinations that might lurk deep in his soul. On the other hand, by portraying the figure of Atlas, Grade introduces a

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[153] Shloyme Belis, "Bay di onheybn fun yung vilne," *Di Goldene Keyt* 101 (1980): 54.
[154] Shloyme Bickel, *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1970), 356.

new type of yeshiva student, one whose inner storm makes him vacillate between orthodoxy and secularism.

The remarkable character traits of Atlas stand out already through an etymological analysis of his name. Tsemakh Atlas suggests two associations: Atlas, the mythological figure who carried the whole world on his shoulders, or perhaps *atles*, the Yiddish word for satin, which is associated in the Jewish tradition with spiritual nobility. While the first image implies the way Tsemach conceives of himself as the moral voice of his society, the latter alludes to his gentleness and high morality. The Hebrew meaning of his first name, Tsemakh, is "plant" and illustrates how young and vulnerable he is despite his age and life experience. The ambivalent approach towards Novaredok held by Atlas is clear already in the beginning, when he and the literary figure representing Rabbi Hurwitz are discussing his major spiritual problem – his disbelief in God:

> At first the Rabbi did not comprehend the question. None of his students had ever asked him if the Creator existed. But he soon grasped what the Lomzher meant and sent his fiery, penetrating glance into him: "You ought to get married as soon as possible." Tsemakh felt a hot flush on his face as though he'd been slapped. The Old Man had considered him the sort of youth who had to be yoked with wife and children to prevent him from thinking about forbidden things.[155]

The dialogue between the mentor and the student exemplifies the previously discussed contradiction inherent in the philosophy of Rabbi Hurwitz. The original goal of his teachings was to enable enough space for self-autonomy, to encourage one to achieve a supreme level of knowledge of his own character while still totally relying on the authority of Torah and abiding by the word of the rabbis. Tsemakh Atlas, however, stretches the quest for self-perfection to an extreme level of individual autonomy, thus being compelled to abandon religious practice and break off his engagement with the

[155] Grade, *The Yeshiva*, 1:5.

pious Dvorele Namiot. Only after he turns to the secular world with his marriage to the rich Slava Stupel does Atlas face the hypocrisy and superficiality of the secular world, and he decides to go back to the confines of the *beith midrash* with an intensified fanaticism.

Throughout the vicissitudes in the various stages of Tsemakh Atlas' life, Grade presents an ambivalent approach toward his protagonist. On the one hand, Tsemakh Atlas has extreme expectations from others because he demands the same extent of piety from himself.[156] His sacrifice and skepticism is what makes him, indeed, a true believer. On the other hand, his intransigent quest for purity through self-criticism is what makes Tsemakh Atlas an ultimate anti-hero.[157] In a very similar way to Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin in the Russian author's masterpiece *The Idiot*, Tsemakh Atlas is a character whose actions, though stemming from pure motives, ultimately lead to a disaster in his life and the life of those surrounding him. As in the case of the overwhelmingly good-hearted Mishkin, who brings only tragedies and despair upon his new acquaintances, the character of Tsemakh Atlas amalgamates two contrasting aspects: that of the saint and that of the destroyer. Unlike Grade's account of Musarism in his prewar poem, the figure of Tsemakh Atlas as a representative of Novaredok is more complex. Though later in his novel Grade rejects the fanatical worldview of Atlas, he depicts him as a true believer who "seeks with all his might to live religion in its purest form."[158]

In addition to a more positive account of the Musarists, Grade also embeds in *Tsemakh atlas* a different account of his alter-ego's loss of faith and break with Halakhic abidance. Although, as already noted, the prewar Grade was not a zealous critic of the

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[156] Bickel, *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, 359.
[157] Joseph Sungolowsky, "Chaim Grade's *The Yeshiva*," review,*Yiddish* 4, no. 3 (1981): 87.
[158] Ibid.

totality of the Jewish tradition, the fact that *Musernikes* is marked by the devastating loss of Chaim Vilner's belief in God cannot be overlooked, played out as a trauma that reaches its peak at the very end of the poem. In *Tsemakh atlas*, on the contrary, the idea of loss of faith is more moderate. Although the novel has an autobiographical framework similar to *Musernikes* with the description of the writer's alter-ego, Chaikl Vilner, and his quest for liberation from the entrapment of religion, this quest does not occupy a central place in *Tsemakh atlas*. Indeed, Chaikl Vilner plays only a secondary role in the plot, whereas the major figures in the novel are the two ideological opponents: Tsemakh Atlas and Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, the author of "The Vision of Avraham" (*Mahaze Avraham*), the two mentors between whom the young Chaikl is torn.[159]

In *Tsemakh atlas*, Grade chooses to elevate the figure of Reb Avraham-Shaye, the alter-ego of Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, better known as the Hazon Ish, to a supreme extent. Grade's description of Reb Avraham-Shaye is based on his own experience, as he was tutored by the revered rabbi before turning to the secular world.[160] It is important to note that Rabbi Karelitz was a fierce opponent of the Musar movement and especially the extremist methods of Novaredok in the first half of the twentieth century. While Grade approaches the saintliness of Atlas with reservation, it is Reb

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[159] Susan A. Slotnick, "Chaim Grade's Central Concern: On the Occasion of His 70th Birthday," *Jewish Book Annual* 37 (1979-1980): 112. Critics argue over the question of who is the central character in *Tsemakh atlas*. Bickel argues that although Reb Avraham Shaye is absent from most of the first part of the novel, his ideological dominance makes him the central hero of the novel. See Bickel, *Shrayber fun mayn dor*, 369. According to M. Moskowitz, however, Tsemakh Atlas, whose name the novel's title carries, is also its central figure. See Moshe Moshkowitz, Review of *The Yeshiva*, by Chaim Grade, *Judaism* 27, no. 1 (1978): 116. M. Halamish offers in regards to this issue an intermediate approach, contending that *Tsemakh atlas* is a drama revolving around two poles, that of Tsemakh Atlas and that of Reb Avraham Shaye. See Mordechai Halamish, *Yidish batefutsot: 'Al sofrim umeshorerim* (Tel Aviv, 1993), 86.

[160] The scholar Isadore Twersky once commented that Chaim Grade's portrait of the Hazon Ish in *Tsemakh atlas* is remarkably accurate in all respects except one: according to Twersky, Grade exaggerated the prominence of the Hazon Ish as a scholar and authority while still in Europe, before he departed to the Land of Israel in 1933. See Lawrence Kaplan, "The Hazon Ish," 170.

Avraham-Shaye who incarnates in the novel the purity, lenience and love of human beings that Grade sees in the Jewish tradition.

The major claim made by Rabbi Karelitz against the Musar Movement, and especially against the extremist approach held by Novaredok, may be summarized as an attack against the aforementioned internal contradiction in the philosophy of Rabbi Hurwitz. According to Lawrence Kaplan, Rabbi Karelitz was an anti-modern Halakhic thinker, an opponent of modern trends within the Mithnagdic society among which the Musar Movement played a central role.[161] The previously mentioned intrinsic contradiction in Rabbi Hurwitz's teachings regarding interpretation of the Torah and Halakhic abidance lay at the core of Rabbi Karelitz's criticism of Novaredok.[162] Rabbi Karelitz's rejection of Rabbi Hurwitz's teachings did not stem from the latter's blind abidance by the Torah. On the contrary, he rejected Novaredok's philosophy (especially through the method of *pe'ulah*) of assigning too much room for individual judgment.

If a religious Jewis expected to submit himself entirely to the authority of Halakha, Rabbi Karelitz argued, than no methods other than the judgment of the Torah can be utilized to avoid sin. Hence, in case of a controversy regarding a desired judgment call or conduct, the ultimate answer should be sought only in exhaustive Torah study. Since the basic demand of Halakha already encloses the true judgment, all the Musarist methods of self-affliction are redundant, and designed only to bring unnecessary

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[161] Ibid., 154. In addition to his attack on the Musar Movement, Rabbi Karelitz also rejected the introduction of more modern analytic methods of study in the yeshiva of Brisk (Brest-Litovsk). See Ibid. 149-157, 162.

[162] Ibid., 162. On Rabbi Karelitz's major conflict with Musarism, see the third chapter of his work *Sefer Hazon Ish: 'Al 'inyane emunah uvitahon*, in *Mosad hayeshiva: Be-shilhe yeme habenayim uva'et hahadashah: Kovets mekorot*, ed. Immanuel Etkes (Jerusalem, 1989), 277-289.

suffering upon a person. The simple and traditional abidance by Halakha is, therefore, sufficient for strict and proper observance of the Jewish Law.[163]

As we turn to a comparison between the prototype of Rabbi Karelitz in the form of his literary alter-ego Reb Avraham-Shaye, it becomes clear that Grade succeeded to capture and convey the essence of Rabbi Karelitz's biography as well as his philosophy. If Rabbi Karelitz, before his departure to Palestine, is reflected through his own writings and other historical sources as a talented Halakhic thinker and a growing rabbinic authority, Grade adds another significant aspect to Reb Avraham Shaye's portrait: that of the mentor who is responsible for the development of the characters of both Tsemakh Atlas and Chaikl Vilner. The novel ends with the realization by these two figures that "all their struggles would be illuminated by the radiance of the man of God – Reb Avraham-Shaye Kosover, the author of *The Vision of Avraham.*"[164]

As a mentor, Reb Avraham Shaye leads young Chaikl to realize that the fanatical demands of his teacher Tsemakh Atlas, the principal of the Valkenik Musar Yeshiva, are exaggerated and extremist, based on the latter's skepticism and craving for sin.[165] Although Chaikl draws closer to his new mentor, Reb Avraham-Shaye, he eventually realizes that he is destined to the life of an artist, and, thus decides to abandon religious practice altogether. Tsemakh Atlas, fascinated by the piety of the revered rabbi as well, is advised by the latter to abandon the Novaredok yeshiva and instead live with his secular wife and work as a shopkeeper. This sort of life-style, Reb Avraham-Shaye argues,

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[163] Rabbi Karelitz demonstrates the conflict between morality based on common sense and the judgment prescribed by Halakha. He brings up the case of a controversy between local and foreign children's teachers (*melamdim*) who are competing for the same position in a given town. Halakha enables the more attractive foreign teachers to take over the local teachers' post, and hence, any moral argument in support of the local *melamdim*, one that might be invoked by the Musar proponents, would not be congruent with the demand of Halakha. See Ibid., 277

[164] Chaim Grade, *The Yeshiva*, 2:393.

[165] Ibid., 1:385-387.

embodies the desired extent of piety required. As a shopkeeper, out of the confines of the yeshiva, Tsemakh Atlas would not need to afflict himself with artificial trials, since life itself will bring many cases where the judgment of Torah would need to be applied.[166]

More than anything else, the development of the characters of young Chaikl Vilner and the older Tsemakh Atlas attest to the shift in Grade's unequivocal denunciation of Novaredok. Only in the novel does Grade contrast the secular world with the radical piety of the yeshiva so as to bring together these two worlds into the equilibrium that exists in the character of Reb Avraham-Shaye, the strict but humane Halakhic thinker. From an ideological perspective, the elevation of this figure to supreme heights suggests that in *Tsemakh atlas*, Grade achieves reconciliation with his past, with the humiliation, torments and self-torture that he had experienced until the loss of his faith. In *Musernikes*, the only outlet offered in the wake of the loss of faith is a complete break with religion. It is the older Grade, however, in *Tsemakh atlas* who finds the ultimate balance between ultra-orthodoxy and secularism in the figure of Reb Avraham-Shaye.

Apart from lessening the contrast between the two poles, secularism on the one hand versus radical Musarism on the other, Grade's fervent criticism of the Musar teachers and their adherents is toned down in almost every aspect of the novel *Tsemakh atlas* with the figure of Reb Avraham-Shaye. In fact, there are several scenes in the novel that were recast from the poem, where the Musarists perform the aforementioned gestures of self-abnegation. A comparative reading of these scenes in *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas* clearly shows the modification the image of the Musarists undergoes as they are

[166] Ibid., 1:385-386, and see also Ibid., 2:358-360.

transferred from the one work to the other. In those cases--though the original setting of the scene is maintained--the previous criticism of the Musarists' conduct fades away.[167]

To illustrate this process of moderation, let us use one clear example related to the yeshiva student Der Kupishker (the student from Kupishok) in *Musernikes*, who is reported to be dead from the outset because of excessive asceticism. His adverse story is used by the abusive Musarist, the older teacher Reb Aba, to demonstrate the extent of piety expected from the younger students. Grade depicts, in a sarcastic and disdainful tone, the "heroism" of Der Kupishker, who broke his spectacles to overcome sexual temptation and used to sleep on the board used to ritually wash corpses in the morgue to overcome fear.[168] The reader may infer from the formidable character of Reb Aba (who borders sometimes on sheer sadism) that those who will attain the highest degree of spiritual success in Novaredok will share the same fate with Der Kupishker.

In contrast to this account, however, the ascetic Shimshl Kupishker in *Tsemakh atlas* is portrayed in brighter colors. The major difference between the earlier Kupishker and the new Shimshl Kupishker is that the latter, failing to commit suicide by hanging himself, does not "manage" to die out of practices of self-affliction.[169] Compared to his literary equivalent from *Musernikes*, the new Kupishker is depicted by the author with more sympathy, though not without sarcasm and criticism. In the eyes of the blasphemous Moshe Chayit Lohoysker (who is reminiscent of Liber, the atheist in *Musernikes*), Shimshl Kupishker is seen as the ultimate adherent of the school of Novaredok, declaring that "our Torah of life is indeed a Torah of self-abnegation. So either you follow Kupishker's path and deny yourself everything, or you follow my path

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[167] David Sfard, "Vegn dray bikher fun Chayim Grade," *Bay Zikh* 8 (1977): 107.
[168] Grade, *Musernikes*, 19-20, 26.
[169] See Grade, *The Yeshiva*, 2:294.

and deny yourself nothing."[170] This sympathy for the radical Shimshl Kupishker in *Tsemakh atlas* comes as part of a new presentation of the Musarists - not as foolish fanatics, but rather as brave truth-seekers, those who manage to withstand external temptations in their battle for true Torah observance.

Several factors account for the transformation in Grade's ideological standpoint which becomes progressively more moderate over the course of almost three decades. The first reason for this change lies in a fact already noted, that Grade as a post-Holocaust writer conceived the pre-war criticism as no longer valid. Since the world of the Mithnagdim in Lithuania was transformed by its destruction from a real cultural milieu into a fragmented memory, so was the previous criticism of Novaredok, for instance, also a closed chapter in the eyes of the writer. The attack against Mithnagdic fanatics such as Tsemakh Atlas, or Valkenik's leading citizen Reb Hirshe Gordon, was meant to clarify the major problems and challenges with which this society was faced, rather than to direct the condemnation at a specific current or person.

Even though the Holocaust and its aftermath were the most obvious factors that determined Grade's new viewpoint, this shift can also be understood in light of two other phenomena. Apart from his position as a post-Holocaust writer, Grade's role as a yeshiva alumnus also accounts for his moderate approach towards the schooldays of his childhood. Immanuel Etkes notes that the image of the yeshiva as it is illustrated in memoirs of its alumni is generally rather positive. [171] It is noteworthy that Etkes demonstrates this point with an account of the Novaredok Yeshiva written by Moshe Zilberg. The writer of this memoir was a student at Novaredok in the early years of the

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[170] Ibid., 2:243.
[171] Etkes, *Yeshivot Lita*, 10.

twentieth century. Like Grade, Zilberg's view of this world in his later years, when he functioned as a judge in the Israeli Supreme Court, is not characterized by a harsh criticism. His sarcastic depiction of Novaredok's practices of self-denial which almost bordered on frenzy, are blended with sympathy toward his mentor Rabbi Yosef Yoizl Hurwitz.[172]

Interestingly, both Grade and Zilberg who in their later years left the life of the Lithuanian yeshiva, tended to view this part of their biography differently from the critical and didactic way that characterized the Maskilic approach to this topic. This fact is of significance since it clearly shows that the shift in Grade's worldview is not entirely linked to his self-perception of his role as a post-Holocaust writer. Regardless of the credo of the various yeshivas, for these writers, and Grade among them, yeshiva life represented the core of their adolescence.[173] Being aware of the immense importance of the Lithuanian yeshiva in modern Jewish history, the yeshiva memoirists tended to view that world in a positive way due to their mature perspective on its values.[174]Although a more profound comparison between the work of Grade and that of other memoirists may yield a better understanding of the nature of Grade's work as a reconstruction of memory, one should not overlook the medium that Grade selected to convey these memories, that is, a novel instead of a memoir. Since the work of Grade should be examined in the context of a literary discourse, a better comprehension of his art can be attained by an

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[172] Ibid., 11. For Zilberg's description of Rabbi Hurwitz see Moshe Zilberg, "Novhardok," in *Yeshivot Lita: Pirkei zikhronot*, ed. Immanuel Etkes and Shlomo Tikochinski (Jerusalem, 2004), 363.

[173] Ibid., 11.

[174] It is true that the memoirs of Volozhin Yeshiva alumni came partly in the aftermath of the yeshiva's dissolution. These memoirs were a manifestation of lament for the decay of that world in quite a similar way to Grade's lament on the destruction of east-European Jewry. Yet it seems as if the sympathy to Volozhin was more a result of its role in east European Jewish life than to the mere fact that this yeshiva ceased to exist. Needless to say, the Holocaust intensified the degree of Grade's mourning compared to other yeshiva alumni who lamented their institutions' recession into the past.

analysis of the distinctive literary mediums of poetry and prose writing. Following a discussion of each medium and its major characteristics, we shall turn to an examination of the manner in which Grade masters these two media in order to convey two different approaches toward Novaredok Musarism.

Grade's Shift from Poetry to Prose

We have already pondered the shift in Grade's view of the Novaredok Yeshiva from a harsh denunciation of it in the poem *Musernikes* to a more mature, ambiguous and philosophical view of this world in *Tsemakh atlas*. At this point, let us turn from a comparison between the content of Grade's criticism to an examination of the literary form in which these views crystallize, that is, a comparison between *Musernikes* the poem and *Tsemakh atlas* the novel. At the core of this comparison lies the fact that Grade went from solely writing poetry to writing both poetry and prose. This transition took place at a later point of Grade's career, after he had settled in New York in 1948. Although the impact of the Holocaust and his immigration to the United States were correlated with this shift, one ought to bear in mind that the shift from poetry to prose writing is not unusual, and that it also has a broader context.

In a dissertation limited to Western writers only, Sagit Blumrosen presents a study of one hundred and forty-four writers who turned from poetry to prose writing, among whom were Alexander Pushkin, James Joyce and Hayyim Nahman Bialik.[175] The fact that the 'reverse' case (i.e. writers who begin their literary career as prose writers and

[175] Sagit Blumrosen, "Hama'avar miktivat shira likhtivat proza: Hebetim sifrutiyim vepsikhologiyim" (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1999), VII.

then turn to poetry writing) is so uncommon consolidates Blumrosen's major argument that this phenomenon reflects a common pattern of development of a writer, from a poetic 'primordial' state to a more mature perspective on the writer's object. Though Blumrosen does not include the work of Chaim Grade as a case study for her research, it would be of immense significance for us to apply the distinction she presents between the 'lyrical' mode of creative writing and the 'prosaic' one to our inquiry.

Blumrosen traces the debate on the gap between the lyrical and the prosaic modes throughout the history of literary criticism from Plato and Aristotle to modern critics. The major differences between these two modes are obvious also through a comparison between *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas*. Although *Musernikes*, written seven years after Grade embarked upon his literary career as a poet, cannot be conceived as a full-fledged representation of the lyrical mode due to its elaborated plot and large scope, its concise structure and rhymed verses continue to attest to its pertinence to the lyrical genre.

Tsemakh atlas, on the other hand, with its large scope and attempt to encompass various scenes, locations, sub-plots and portraits of Lithuanian Jews in a panoramic manner, belongs undoubtedly to the prosaic mode. In a description of the lyrical and the prosaic modes, Blumrosen enumerates several major differences between the two. Let us follow these distinctions so as to glimpse again at the nature of the two works written by Grade.[176]

The first distinction between the lyrical and the prosaic modes is characterized by the way each mode relates to characters and objects. The lyrical mode embodies the

[176] For our concerns, there will be only differences in the structure and ideology that underlie the gap between the lyrical and the prosaic modes. Differences that do not directly impact the work's content (such as the text's scope and linguistic differences) will not be treated here.

writer's inner worldview, his emotions, thoughts and conceptions.[177] Poets are generally more preoccupied in their own emotional world, and even when they do refer to the outside world, this entity is only mirrored in their consciousness. The literary critic Emil Staiger formulates this relationship, arguing that "in the lyric realm there is not yet any distance between subject and object. The 'I' swims along in the transience of things."[178] This subjective standpoint of a poet characterizes *Musernikes* in two different respects. In the very beginning of the poem, the chapter titled "V*iderkol*" ("Echo"), the narrator is thrust into his memories of the days of the month of Elul, the month of repentance preceding the Jewish New Year, seven years earlier. The plot, thus, takes place in two different loci: the physical Novaredok yeshiva and the memory, the vision of the yeshiva that is reconstructed in the narrator's consciousness.

Another characteristic of the poem illustrates even more clearly the subjective perspective embedded in it. Although the poem only features the character of Chaim Vilner as the poet's alter ego, the voice of the narrator is expressed through the words and thoughts of other characters.[179] The poet, so as to magnify his own criticism, reveals his own voice through the doubts and suffering of his alter ego's fellows. As Der Ostrovoler's doubts emerge after he gives the younger Khlavne the only pair of shoes he has in a gesture of altruism, Grade manifests Der Ostrovoler's thoughts in the literary technique of free indirect discourse, i.e. a convergence of both the narrator's speech with

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[177] Ibid., 24.

[178] Emil Staiger, *Basic Concepts of Poetics*, trans. Janette C. Hudson and Luanne T. Frank, ed., Marianne Burkhard and Luanne T. Frank (University Park, PA, 1991), 181.

[179] Bez, *Af di vegn*, 438. Bez argues that the figure of Yosef Kovler, who makes a pledge never to leave the yeshiva and consequently is tortured with a longing for his mother, is only a representation of Grade's own biography. See Ibid., 440-41.

the voice, thoughts and feelings of another character.[180] The thoughts of Der Ostrovoler and those of the narrator intertwine, conveying thereby a unity of pessimism and decay that is manifested from every angle from which the story is told. Ultimately, the reader realizes that the particular story of every character is only a partial representation of a higher voice, that of the narrator.

If a tendency to subsume the whole reality in the consciousness of the poet characterizes the lyrical mode, the prosaic one is marked by the opposite phenomenon, i.e. the writer's contemplation on reality from a more distanced standpoint.[181] This sort of objective perspective is also relevant to the case of *Tsemakh atlas*, where the narrator recounts a quasi-autobiographical story. In this novel, as already mentioned, the figure of Chaikl Vilner does not occupy a major role. The two major characters in the story are the Musarist teacher Tsemakh Atlas and the older moderate Halakhic thinker Reb Avraham-Shaye. Although it is quite clear that the author identifies with the latter, he nonetheless remains emotionally distanced from the scene itself.

Despite his sympathy for his former teacher Rabbi Karelitz, represented by the character of Reb Avraham-Shaye, Grade manages to disclose the dramatic tension between the characters by juxtaposing contrasting views that all seem plausible and argumentative. This is done in a typical Lithuanian way, in a dialogue that attempts to seek out, expose and destroy the intervention of any ulterior motive that might lurk beneath a fake piety, thus deciphering the ultimate truth. Therefore, Tsemakh Atlas, as opposed to Der Ostrovoler, his equivalent in *Musernikes*, is not conceived by the author

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[180] For Der Ostrovoler's monologue see Grade, *Musernikes*, 56-57. On the variety of definitions for free indirect speech, see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, 2nd ed. (London, 2002), 110-17.

[181] Blumrosen, "Hama'avar miktivat shira," 24-25.

as a fool. Although he is wrong about his fanaticism and extreme expectations from humans, Atlas is still entitled, in Grade's eyes, to confront his older opponent, Reb Avraham-Shaye by arguing:

> And that freewill recluse, that hidden, holy, pure man teaches Torah solely for its own sake; he prays with his head toward heaven and thinks high-flown thoughts like an angel. Why should he pursue honor that might flee from him when he can flee from honor and have honor pursue him? ... And so he becomes an even greater saint and an even more humble man. He is severe with himself but lenient with others. He knows how popular one becomes by being strict with oneself and lenient with others.[182]

Despite Grade's strong affection for the character of Reb Avraham-Shaye, he is nonetheless capable of criticizing him. This stems from the fact that Grade, unlike in his poem, is more distant from the plot and is able to present the convictions of both sides.

As noted above, the medium through which Grade chooses to convey the complexity of these internal rabbinic disputes belongs to the mental, psychological and also structural realm of prose. A closer examination of the nature of *Tsemakh atlas* shows that the novel is framed in a very specific 'prosaic' form that serves the writer's desire to turn the novel into a panorama of Lithuanian-Jewish life and thought. In a similar way to *Di agune*, an intensive clash between two opposing rabbinic figures also underlies the framework of *Tsemakh atlas*.[183] Yet if a discussion of *Di agune* evokes the work of Balzac, in *Tsemakh atlas* Grade turns from the realm of society to that of philosophy. This shift draws the art of Grade in *Tsemakh atlas* closer to one of the ultimate giants of world literature, the Russian novelist Fiodor Dostoevsky.

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[182] Grade, *The Yeshiva*, 2:142-43.

[183] Bickel offers a similar reading of both *Tsemakh atlas* and *Di agune* as a clash between the strict and the lenient Halakhic approaches. The major goal of that confrontation is to demonstrate how easily inflexible Halakhic convictions can originate from evil motives. See Bickel, "*Shrayber fun mayn dor*," 356.

Chaim Grade's novel resembles the work of the Russian novelist not only in terms of style but also in terms of content. We have already considered the resemblance between Prince Mishkin and Tsemakh Atlas as two "destructive saints." An extensive comparison between the works of these writers exceeds the bounds of this thesis. What is relevant for our discussion is the similar place that theories and ideas occupy in the world of these two writers. Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most noted readers of Dostoevsky's works, clarifies this indispensable link between characters and ideas in the art of Dostoevsky:

> It is given to all of Dostoevsky's characters to "think and seek higher things;" in each of them there is "a great and unresolved thought;" all of them must, before all else, "get a thought strait." And in this resolution of a thought (an idea) lies their entire real life and their own personal unfinalizability.... the image of the hero is inseparably linked with the image of an idea and cannot be detached from it.[184]

Bakhtin's analysis of the nature of Dostoevsky's literary world may be applied in the same manner to our reading of *Tsemakh atlas*. Both Grade and Dostoevsky manage to create a mosaic of contrasting ideas and ideologies without imposing their higher authority on the characters that take part in the story, a work that Bakhtin defines in his monograph on Dostoevsky's poetics as "the polyphonic novel."[185]

According to Bakhtin, a polyphonic novel--where a non-unitary structure negates the dominance of any voice or ideology (even that of the implied author himself) over others--is achieved by Dostoevsky in a pure form. This structure depends on an extreme

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[184] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. & ed. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: 1984), 87.

[185] Ibid., 5-46. And see also Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 83. Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky's polyphonic structure is a novelty in world literature. He compares the art of Dostoevsky to that of Tolstoy in order to emphasize the innovative talent of the former over the latter; See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 69-73. Dostoevsky, according to Bakhtin, achieved that level of polyphony by creating a new 'fantastic' point of view for the author in relation with his characters that comes to its expression with the author's ability to be both the creator of his characters while still enabling them a generous amount of freedom to have "the final word." See Ibid., 53, 64-65.

exploitation of the prosaic mode. It entails the withdrawal of the writer from the arena where the plot takes place so as to enable an equal value of every voice and idea. In comparison, the polyphony in *Tsemakh atlas* does not attain that "pure" form that exists in *Crime and Punishment* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, for instance. The degree of elevation of Reb Avraham-Shaye at the end of the novel, who becomes the major ideological voice in the text, stands in clear contrast to the scheme that underlies Dostoevsky's poetics.

Nevertheless, a certain extent of similarity between the plot's design in the work of the two writers may be found in *Tsemakh atlas*. Grade's quest for a balance between the zeal of Tsemakh Atlas, the moderation of Reb Avraham-Shaye and the emergence of Chaikl as a secular artist produce polyphony, to a certain extent, in the design of the novel. Paradoxically, in both the cases of Grade and Dostoevsky exists the tendency of the authors to theorize and philosophize, to intensify the gap between contrasting opinions that brings both characters such as Raskolnikov and Tsemakh Atlas to realize the fatal impact and malaise brought by ideas and theories, and to favor simple life to the perils of excessive rational thinking.

If the first distinction between Grade's lyrical and prosaic works is marked by the writer's position in relation to the plot and its characters, the second one focuses on the writer's relationship with himself. In his lyrical phase, the writer is incapable of conveying a full-fledged portrait of his emotional world, but rather focuses on a specific mood. His portrayal, therefore, lacks diversity of time, space and experience.[186] As already noted, the arena where the plot of *Musernikes* takes place is not only the concrete Lithuanian reality, but also the poet's consciousness, as he reflects on the days of his

[186] Blumrosen, "Hama'avar miktivat shira," 27.

youth. Even in regard to the plot itself, Grade does not give his readers a clear indication of the timeframe of every scene. Nature as well as human action interweaves one into another to constitute a representation of the poet's mood. This tendency intensifies toward the end, where nature and human beings change positions. While the trees drop their leaves in the autumn in a gesture of Sanctification of the Name of God (*kidush hashem*),[187] embodying a metaphor of demise and fatalism, the yeshiva students, conversely, turn into a forest, as "every tree laments with its own voice."[188]

In *Tsemakh atlas*, however, the writer relates to his own inner world in a much more complex manner. Here, the world-view of young Chaikl, the alter ego of the older writer Grade, is not overwhelmed by other voices but rather it takes shape as an individualistic way of life, that of an artist and thinker. Apart from that, at the end of *Musernikes* Chaim Vilner witnesses the lose of faith as this process is embodied in the fall of the Holy Ark, a metaphor of a dramatic collapse of Grade's worldview to which he had been so fervently committed. Yet this emotional tension is absent in the novel, as Chaikl Vilner comes gradually to a realization that his is not the role of these Torah scholars, "who control everyone to see if his deeds are in accord with the law and his feelings with the Musar books."[189] Chaikl's final decision to substitute aesthetic judgment for a moral one, to portray life in its diversity and perplexity, and the Jewish street--in its diversity of both plain people and venerable Torah scholars--comes only by virtue of Grade's ability as a novelist to treat the days of his youth in a more balanced, as well as a more distanced way.

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[187] Grade, *Musernikes*, 72.
[188] Ibid., 75.
[189] Grade, *The Yeshiva*, 2:378.

Thus, as it is conveyed through the medium of the prosaic mode, the break with religion is no longer a "break," but rather a process where the former believer cultivates his memories and renders them in the medium of prose. Despite the clear contrast between the two works examined in this chapter, it is noteworthy that the process of reconciliation with the world of the Novaredok Yeshiva, which is also a process of maturing and artistic development, is a gradual one. As noted before, Grade, among the Yiddish writers of his generation, was one of the most "Jewish" writers from the outset of his career.[190] Already in his first book of poetry *Yo* ("Yes," 1936) he describes in a poem that carries the name of the book a reality in which the world is governed by a complete disregard for the commandment of "Thou shalt not kill."[191] The scholar of Yiddish literature Yechiel Szeintuch notes that Grade's yea-saying to his Jewish heritage is in fact a nay-saying to a world that objects to Jewish values. [192] In another poem in that collection, "Geveyn fun Doyres"[193] (Cry of the Generations), Grade deals with his ancestors who were doomed to death and silence only because of their reliance on dreams for a better world and not on physical power.[194] The link that Grade draws between the dreams and heroism of older generations and the political tendency of his generation towards socialism and communism may give us another glimpse into the nature of Grade's work. The critic Milton Konvitz summarizes the entire work of Chaim Grade asserting that Grade "wrote not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a

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[190] See pp. 74-75 of this thesis.

[191] See Chaim Grade, *Doyres: Lider un poemes* (New York, 1945), 60-61.

[192] Yechiel Szeintuch, "Chaim Grade as Poet of the Holocaust," *Jewish Book Annual* 48 (1990-1991): 150.

[193] Grade, "Geveyn fun doyres," in *Doyres: Lider un poemes* (New York, 1945).

[194] Szeintuch, "Chaim Grade," 151.

feeling that the whole of Jewish life and literature had a simultaneous existence and composed a simultaneous order...."[195]

This affectionate attitude towards the previous generations only intensified during the war, between the years 1941-1945, which were, for Grade, years of wandering and exile in the Soviet Union. The critic Shmuel Niger refers to this point in a discussion of Grade's poetry of that period, the major characteristic of which is an intensified inclination on Grade's part towards the world of the *Litvakes*. Before that period, Niger notes, "there has never been in Grade such a strong and insistent [sense] of neo-traditionalism as in the years when he lived in the anti-traditionalist Soviet Union."[196] Although the criticism of the Novaredok Yeshiva in *Musernikes* and in *Tsemakh atlas* is different in terms of both content and perspectives (a young poet, a mature prose writer), the entire canon of Grade's work shares a persistent attitude towards the Jewish tradition as a critical account written from within, and not from an external or perhaps even from an estranged point of view.

If *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas* embody two poles of Grade's view of the Novaredok Yeshiva, the literary watershed of the process of reconciliation with that world is found in his philosophical essay-short story "*Mayn krig mit Hersh Raseyner*"(My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner, hereafter: *Mayn krig*) that was written in the aftermath of the Holocaust. This work combines the conciseness and passion of the earlier poem and the complex, mature and reconciled outlook on the Novaredok Yeshiva of the later novel. In *Mayn krig* the alter-ego of the author, Chaim Vilner, engages in a

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[195]Milton Konvitz, "Chaim Grade's Quarrel," *Midstream* 8 (1985): 19.

[196] Shmuel Niger, "Prese shtimen vegn der bikher-serye dos poylishe yidentum: Sh. niger shraybt vegn chayim grades bukh lider un poemen 'pleytim'," in Chaim Grade, *Shayn fun farloshene shtern: lider un poemen*, (Buenos Aires, 1950), 134.

heated conversation with his former fellow student from the Novaredok Yeshiva Hersh Rasseyner, who argues that he managed to survive the Holocaust only through his belief in God and his maintenance of the Novaredok extremist way of life. The encounter of the two men in Paris, in the aftermath of the war, immediately arouses a post-Holocaust dispute between the secular Yiddish writer and the orthodox Jew who is busy with raising funds with the hope of reviving the annihilated world of the Lithuanian yeshiva.

In *Mayn krig*, Grade makes a reckoning with his interwar experiences at the yeshiva. In a certain sense, his criticism in *Mayn krig* is even harsher than the one in *Musernikes*, directed towards the hypocrisy of rabbis and yeshiva students, the existence of Divine Providence in a post-Holocaust reality and finally, Jewish rejection of other peoples and cultures. Chaim Vilner rebukes his fellow, asserting:

> And who told you that I seek pleasure? I seek a truth you don't have. For that matter, I didn't run away, I simply returned to my own street ... I love the porters with their backs broken from carrying their burdens; the artisans sweating at their workbenches; the market women who would cut off a finger to give a poor man a crust of bread. But you scold the hungry for being sinners ... You laugh at people who work because you say they don't trust in God. But you live on what others have made.[197]

These words testify that in *Mayn krig*, as a transitional phase between *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas*, the former criticism is not only still apparent but rather it reaches a new peak. If in *Musernikes* the Novaredok teachers are accused of neglecting the outside world, in *Mayn krig* Grade expands his criticism to the charge of neglecting the plain and poor Jewish masses.

Whereas the criticism of Novaredok is magnified as it embraces the social, national and theological realms, Grade, true to the polyphonic style, nonetheless enables

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[197] Chaim Grade, "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyner," in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, trans. Milton Himmelfarb, (New York, 1990), 626.

his fellow Hersh Rasseyner to speak up for himself and manifest the reasons that religious Jews rejected European culture and its values. At a certain point Hersh Rasseyner's view is so convincing that it raises the question of how far removed his opinions are from those expressed by the narrator. After all, already in his first poems, Grade manifested his preference for Jewish values to what he considered the corrupted and sinister European ones. It is therefore not surprising that at the end of *Mayn krig*, the narrator Chaim Vilner appeases his former friend, while still determined to remain secular and not to return to strict religious observance:

> Our paths are different, spiritually and practically. We are the remnant of those who were driven out. The wind that uprooted us is dispersing us to all the corners of the earth. Who knows whether we shall ever meet again? May we both have the merit of meeting again in the future and seeing how it is with us. And may I then be as Jewish as I am now. Reb Hersh, let us embrace each other.[198]

It is against the broader context of Grade's work that these words should be understood. *Mayn krig*, as a stage where the writer manages to overcome his strife with his past is also the turning point where the writer is capable, for the first time, of viewing with affection his memories of Novaredok. Here Grade portrays in a positive way not only the simple Jews, but also the rabbis, the Musar teachers and alumni of his former yeshiva.

It would be relevant to end the discussion of the two modes of writing with a philosophical question about the nature of *Musernikes and Tsemakh atlas* as two contrasting portraits of the Novaredok Yeshiva: what account, that of the younger poet or that of the older prose writer, should be treated as more authentic, as the one where Grade was more honest about his interwar years in Novaredok? Are we entitled to contend that the young Grade, who denounced Novaredok while living, relatively speaking, in the same environment where that yeshiva still existed, is a more reliable source to

[198] Ibid., 650-651.

comprehend the negative impact of Novaredok on those young, naïve boys as described in *Musernikes?* Or rather is it the second account, the one embedded in *Tsemakh atlas*, in which Grade, from a different geographical and historical perspective, could more truthfully formulate and comprehend the unripe indignation of the young poet Grade?

Since the attack on the cathartic elements of poetry versus the more philosophical facet of the prosaic mode can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, it would be reasonable to leave the answer to these questions unresolved. Grade, who felt in the aftermath of the Holocaust that his former harsh criticism was no longer valid, chose not only to change tone, but also to match his new perspective with the appropriate literary medium, to turn to prose writing while still maintaining his former engagement in poetry. In this chapter, in contrast to the previous comparison between historical reality and literary representation, the object of our inquiry was not an ontological truth, but rather the writer's inner reckoning and reconciliation with that historical reality. The comparative analysis of both *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas* presented in this chapter does not attempt to lead the reader to determine the proximity of each standpoint to an ultimate truth. Rather, it charts a creative process, where memory, ideology and literary modes converge so as to embody the dynamic world of Chaim Grade.

The last phase of our inquiry will be to amalgamate the two different readings presented in this work, the metonymic reading of the first chapter with the ideological component that was brought into discussion in the second. The key to do so would be first to understand the reasons that led Grade to turn his post-war works of prose into what he himself defined as a "monument for a world that perished." Given the fact that the reconstruction of Lithuanian-Jewish culture is considered to be one of the major goals

of *Di agune*, *Tsemakh atlas* and other novels and short stories written by the author, one wonders why Grade, who had a variety of genres to manifest his postwar ideological views, chose the genre of the novel and the form of a literary monument.

The answer to this question will be found if we depart from the realm of literature to that of memory, and more accurately, that of the way memory takes shape in modern society. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, a pioneering inquiry into the subject of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym sheds a new light on a term that developed from a seventeenth century curable ailment based on a medical diagnosis into an incurable modern condition, a "hypochondria of the heart."[199] The chief claim made by Boym is that nostalgia should be divided into two different tendencies, or rather two ways of giving shape and meaning to the phenomenon of longing: the restorative versus the reflective nostalgia. Boym argues that,

> The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world.... Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstruction of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time.[200]

In light of this distinction between the restorative way to face and cultivate memory, as opposed to the reflective way, the art of Chaim Grade may be conceived as an art involving the nostalgic mode of the first category, i.e., of the aspiration to erect monuments to a vanished past, and in this specific case, not a physical monument but a literary one. This reading of Grade's post-war work as a nostalgic venture gains support

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[199] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: 2001), 1-7. The word nostalgia is a pseudo-Greek term coined in the seventeenth century: *nostos* - return home, *algia* - longing. See Ibid., XIII.

[200] Ibid., 41.

by the preoccupation of American Jewry with its East European past in general, a phenomenon that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War.[201]

In clear contrast to other yeshiva memoirists who shared with their readers reflections on their fragmented past, attempting to trace the imaginary loci of the "golden days" of their youth, the prose works of the later Grade crystallize into a nostalgic account of a restorative type. The author, facing in the wake of World War II the loss of his home not only metaphorically but literally, aspired, in the words of the critic Curt Leviant "to undo, metaphorically speaking, what history has done,"[202] i.e. to resurrect annihilated Lithuanian Jewry if not as a living organism, then as a literary one. The scholar Ruth Wisse joins Leviant's assertion in her reading of *Mayn krig*, arguing that "this story is not only anti-Hitler, it is resolutely anti-Holocaust, in the sense of reestablishing the continuity that had been shattered by the events of 1939-1945."[203]

The idea of a "literary monument," pertinent to the restorative group of nostalgics, presupposes the desire of its sculptor to revive the splendor of bygone days, to give expression to and find space for a vanished culture in a new form, i.e. of a literary work. Not unlike other monuments, this aspiration of 'resurrecting the dead' can never be fully satisfied. Despite the accuracy of details, the exuberant description achieved by the romantic portrayal, and the remarkable ability to provide a panoramic view of Lithuanian-Jewish society with various strata and voices, the literary monument remains a lifeless organism, stable and fixed, detached from life itself.

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[201] See Steven Zipperstein, *Imagining Russian Jewry* (Seattle: 1999), 16-39. Zipperstein enumerates three different reasons for the transformation of the image of the East European Jewish past from a harsh condemnation to an affectionate preoccupation: The European catastrophe, the search for identity and place in postwar America, the geographical dispersion of a previously urban American Jewry in the 1950s and beyond. See Ibid., 20.

[202] Curt Leviant, "Introduction," in Chaim Grade, *Di agune* (New York, 1974), 5-10.

[203] Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture* (New York, 2000), 235.

Nonetheless, in his post-war works, Grade is not content with fragmented memory reflections, similar to those written by other yeshiva alumni. For Grade, a desire to give general expression to the Jewish world that perished was not the only goal of his literary enterprise. A comparative reading of *Musernikes* vis à vis *Tsemakh atlas* suggests that the major reason for the erection of a literary monument lies in Grade's ambiguous and entangled relationship with Judaism in general, and religious practice in particular, from the point of view of a post-Holocaust writer. Grade himself related to this fact, attempting to explain the pertinence of his former life as a yeshiva student to his later career as a writer:

> I am busy with this question all my life.... But after all, Judaism is also a civilization. Religious people don't have to depend on a church. You know, it is impossible to find a poet who is not religious, who is not a mystic, who does not feel for things that do not exist and that we do not see. Officially, to be a Jew – or a Christian, for that matter – you have to do everything in accordance with official law and tradition. But that is not the same thing as being religious or not.[204]

In these words Grade, like other Jewish writers who stemmed from a religious background, points at the genuine religiosity of artists, as opposed to those who adhere to Halakha only, that is, to the external manifestation of faith. But as Grade explains what part his former religious phase still plays in his life as a writer, the linkage between his art and lost faith is strengthened: "There are some books I can read without a hat ....Even the Bible I can read without a *yarmulke*. I am not afraid. But some commentaries – when I begin to read the Vilna Gaon... for example, it is very deep, and a lot I still don't understand. If I read without a *yarmulke*, I feel like my head is burning."[205]

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[204] Morton A. Reichek, "A Writer in a Search of an Audience: Profile of Chaim Grade," *Present Tense* 5, no.4 (1978): 43.

[205] Ibid. Unlike the domain of the fine arts, in which graven images are reproduced, literary creation does not stand in clear contrast to traditional Judaism and is not inevitably associated with idolatry. However, the more modern concept of "art for art's sake," the romantic view of art as the incarnation of

Interestingly, Grade confesses that as he comes across the commentaries of the Vilna Gaon, a feeling of awe compels him to cover his head, an act that can be comprehended as a sign of affinity to the lifestyle that he had already completely neglected before the outbreak of World War II. In a typically Jewish way, it is the older Grade who finds, as an artist, an intermediary between his two antithetical tendencies, towards the culture of the people he cherished on one hand, and towards the domain of art.[206] Similarly to other Maskilim and secular Yiddishists who saw Vilna as a citadel of Jewish intellectual life, thus evoking the name of the Vilna Gaon, Grade, who decided to abandon his expected career as a *lamdan*, a Talmudic scholar, found at an older age an individualistic path that interwove the two strands. On the one hand he gave expression to traditional scholarship, offering penetrative insights into Talmudic commentary such as those appearing in *Di agune*. On the other hand, he maintained an engagement in creative writing, being thus able to illustrate ultra-orthodox life in a way other scholars from these circles would not pursue.

As in the case of other restorative nostalgics, the desire to resurrect the dead remains only partially fulfilled. The artist, in that sense, is responsible for a semi-resurrection of Lithuanian-Jewish culture: the idea of a literary monument enables the writer to partially reunite, theologically and emotionally, with the society from which he originated. Unlike his fellow Hersh Rasseyner, Grade did not take part in a practical revival of the world of the Lithuanian yeshivas. Being already unable and unwilling to

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divinity, poses a real threat to the authority of the Torah. An attempt to reconcile art and religion was carried out by one of the architects of religious Zionism, the originally Lithuanian rabbi, Avraham Yitschak Hakohen Kook. See Zvi Yaron, *Mishnato shel harav Kook* (Jerusalem, 1974), 167-88.

[206] J. Sungolowsky offers this commentary on *Di agune* in his review of the novel. See Josef Sungolowsky, Review of *The Agunah*, by Chaim Grade, *Yiddish* 2, no. 2-3 (1976): 136. For Grade's reconciliation with his past, achieved through the writer's portrait of Reb Avraham-Shaye in *Tsemakh atlas*, see Moshe Moskowitz, "Chaim Grade and the Jewish Ego," *Judaism* 25, no.3 (1976): 340.

return to the naïve faith of his youth; being doubtful of the attempt to restore Lithuanian-Jewish scholarship to its previous magnificence, Grade offers a new perspective on the world and faith of the Mithnagdim in the form of a historical novel. His post-Holocaust literary works may be comprehended as the quest of a writer to find his way as an artist into the world of Orthodox Jewry, to contribute to that spiritual heritage, if not by a new Halakhic commentary, then by its reconstruction as a literary monument.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this thesis has been to provide a reappraisal of the reflection of Lithuanian-Jewish culture in the work of the Yiddish poet and prose writer Chaim Grade. This was realized through an analysis of both the literary representation and the implicit ideological views embedded in a sample of his major works. The first chapter illustrates how scholars of Grade's work, when considering his depiction of Lithuanian-Jewish life generally tended to view his work as an accurate historical reconstruction of this world. The overestimation of the writer's work as a credible historical source has blurred the gap between two distinct perspectives, the historical-scientific and the literary-artistic. A brief description of Lithuanian-Jewish culture followed by the analysis of *Di agune* suggested that Grade, in an attempt to capture the spirit of Lithuanian Jewry, embedded the medieval conception of Jewish politics within the reality of interwar Vilna. Thereby, the literary rendition of this reality was presented here as historically anachronistic. However, as the chapter progresses, it becomes clear that Grade's work may be criticized only in light of the misconception of readers who conceived of his work as a reliable historical source. Since Grade's canon must be situated in the domain of art, his anachronistic magnification of the role of Vilna rabbis should be understood as an artistic device. Reading *Di agune* in accordance with the principles of romantic realism, it has been demonstrated that Grade aggrandizes the image of the Vilna rabbis and their quarrel in the name of Halakha during the interwar period as a part of a conscious romantic literary conception.

This reading of *Di agune* exposes the indispensable link between Grade's literary portrait of interwar Vilna and his ideological stance as a post-Holocaust writer. To better

understand how ideology modifies the depiction of Lithuanian Jewry in his work, the second chapter introduces a comparative reading of the younger and the older Grade. Following a presentation of the history of the Lithuanian yeshivas and the tenets of Musarism, Grade's treatment of this world was analyzed in relation to two different periods of his career. The first period analyzed was the prewar, harsh condemnation of the Novaredok Yeshiva as it appeared in *Musernikes*. The second period was analyzed through the balanced and polyphonic story of *Tsemakh atlas*. This ideological shift can be accounted for by several different motivations: the Holocaust which annihilated the world of Lithuanian Jewry, thus dissolving its conflicts. The second reason is the age of the writer himself which turned a young and rebellious poet into an older, moderate and nostalgic writer. In addition, this modification of Grade's standpoint underlies the shift that the writer underwent from poetry to prose writing. Thus, the juxtaposition of the image of Novaredok in *Musernikes* and *Tsemakh atlas* offered a better reading "between the lines" of each individual work.

By penetrating the surface of the early poem and the late novel and, thus, obtaining a glimpse into the ideological presuppositions that forged Grade's poetics, the works of the Yiddish writer were illuminated in a different light. The postwar artistic venture of reconstructing Lithuanian-Jewish life seems, in light of investigation, to be a remarkable authentic *Litvak* phenomenon where an artist utilizes the medium of art in order to reconcile with the religious society he forsook several decades before, with a positive, though different, view of its nature and character. Grade, while maintaining a secular lifestyle, found himself, as a prose writer, immersed in heated Talmudic disputes such as those encountered throughout the analysis of *Di agune* and *Tsemakh atlas*. In

these works, however, it is Grade's role as an artist, and not as a Talmudic scholar, that defined his new outlook on the civilization he had left behind on the eve of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The quest of ultra-orthodox Musar teachers for truth, the desire to observe the Torah *lishma* (that is, for its own sake), is reminiscent of Grade's plot which functions as an arena where a gigantic quarrel over the attainment of truth is unleashed.

It would be intriguing to compare Grade's idiosyncratic oeuvre to another Yiddish writer who, while working in the same East European cultural milieu several decades before Grade, had to face similar challenges posed by the dialectics of art and religion. I.L. Peretz (1852-1915), much like Grade, believed that the Jewish religion in its traditional ultra-orthodox form needed to undergo a considerable shift. This change was meant to wed the long-standing unique characteristics of Judaism with the demands of the Modern Age. Since his first Yiddish work "Monish," Peretz aspired to discover the human being in the pious Jew, embracing his spiritual capacities and sexual cravings alike.[207] His portrait of the romance between the prodigy Monish and the seductive Marie was a departure from the realm of Jewish life, from both its religious and Maskilic components, to a description of a universal phenomenon, a "Gentile" theme formulated in a Jewish language.[208] Not unlike Grade's sentiments, this call for change and modernization on the part of East European Jewry was meant to consolidate this society and not to lead to its assimilation.[209]

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[207] Shmuel Niger, *Y.L Perets: Zayn lebn, zayn firndike perzenlekhkayt, zayne hebreishe un yidishe shriftn, zayn virkung* (Buenos Aires, 1952), 176.

[208] Ibid.

[209] Ruth R. Wisse, *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, (Seattle, 1991), 34-35. The idea of modern Jewish culture was evoked by Peretz as he envisaged hopes for an East European Jewish existence in the framework of a future democratic Polish state. Yet given the physical powerlessness of the Jews, this political vision of future co-existence with the Poles and other minorities

Being one of the founders of modern literature expressed in the medium of the Yiddish language, the work of Peretz may be summarized as a transformation of the Jewish past with its abundant spiritual heritage into a new form, where, according to Ruth Wisse, "culture would have to take over from religion, and poets from preachers and rabbis, in ensuring Jewish survival."[210] In a very similar way to Grade's early poetry, and more conspicuously, to his post-Holocaust reconstruction of Lithuanian-Jewish life, the modern Jewish culture venture fostered by Peretz had an affirmative attitude toward the Jewish spirit and strength. Yet it also had a sharp criticism of superstition and hypocrisy on the part of the rabbis and the traditional Jewish authorities. The same adoration of the simple Jews expressed by Grade, is evoked in Peretz.

Peretz sought, through these works, to find an equilibrium between the old religious piety vis à vis a modern, neo-romantic literary inspiration by tradition. This philosophical and artistic standpoint is very similar to the development of Grade as a conscious artist, looking retrospectively and not without affection, to the religious chapter of his life. There is, however, a crucial difference between the imagined Jewish culture fostered by Peretz and the reconstructionalist scheme of Grade. For the latter, living in a reality where Jewish East Europe was a memory of bygone days, the major challenge was not the formation of a new cultural platform that would help in transmitting the divine values of Judaism. Rather, the major impetus for Grade's reconstructive task was the commandment not to forget the vanished world of many, who could not leave even a pale monument to commemorate their past. Being historically remote from Peretz's hopes of

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was marked by a pessimistic prophecy of Jewish annihilation in East Europe. See Ruth R. Wisse, "The Political Vision of I.L Peretz," in *The Emergence of Modern Jewish Politics*, ed. Zvi Gitelman, (Pittsburgh, PA, 1997), 130-131.

[210] Wisse, *I. L. Peretz*, 105; Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York, 1987), 134-35.

co-existence in the realm of a future liberated Poland, Grade did not envisage in his works a venue for a future Jewish culture.

Compared to his literary ancestor Peretz, the work of Chaim Grade is, in this sense, less of an ambitious project. It does not chart the desired future of Jewish life, nor does it utilize the medium of Yiddish to lead the Jewish masses on the track of western civilization and modernity. Notwithstanding the desire to be the voice of the East European past, to endure the burden of several hundred years of Lithuanian-Jewish existence, Grade's work remains a panoramic literary autobiography, where individual memory, the writer's central concern, rises to a monument for the Mithnagdic world. This is why the image that haunted Grade more than any other, throughout fifty years of creative work, was neither the image of Jewish Vilna nor of the Lithuanian yeshiva, but that of a poor fruit peddler, Vella Grade, the writer's beloved mother. The portrait of Lithuanian-Jewish society presented in his work, of its typical rabbinic and educational institutions, has been the major concern of this research. However, Grade's literary enterprise, as opposed to Peretz's, is not marked by a vision of a Jewish future on a national level but, rather, is a personal venture meant to recollect the past. As such, it was Grade's penurious, modest, and strictly Halakhic mother, always self-sacrificing out of love for her son and for the ethics of Judaism, a figure only on the margins of this society, in whom the writer saw the ultimate embodiment and the pinnacle of Mithnagdism.

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