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**Letters Without Addresses: Abraham Sutzkever's Late Style**

by Saul Noam Zaritt

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## LETTERS WITHOUT ADDRESSES: ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER'S LATE STYLE

by Saul Noam Zaritt

**Abstract:** *Abraham Sutzkever's poetry is often read within the confines of "Holocaust literature," an expansive category of writing embedded and emerging from a singular event to become a globally circulated discourse. This essay reads a selection of Sutzkever's poetry against the Holocaust, against the apocalypse, and against the horizons of meaning that the label of "Holocaust literature" might impose. Focusing on the retrospective strategy of his later poetry, I analyze Sutzkever's attempt to come to terms with the expectation to speak of and for the dead. In confronting how loss and devastation weighed on his literary project, Sutzkever devised a poetics of escape, in which the poem announces the possibility of the dead confirming one's present without pulling the writer into a traumatic abyss. For Sutzkever, the ghosts of the past challenge the poet to reinvigorate his own language rather than be subsumed by theirs, producing a poetry that sees precarity as constitutive of the radical creativity of everyday life.*

### Against the Apocalypse

When encountering the work of the Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever, many readers are first drawn to those poems connected to the writer's experiences during the Holocaust. This is not to suggest that the rest of his poetry that does not deal directly with the Holocaust is simply ignored or forgotten. Many collections and anthologies, not to mention critical evaluations, do indeed present the range of his creative output: Sutzkever wrote powerful neo-classical lyrical poetry in the 1930s as part of prewar Yiddish modernism in Vilna; as a devoted nature poet in the neo-symbolist mode, he can be compared to other Eastern European writers in various Slavic languages who sought to capture the Siberian, Russian, Polish, and Lithuanian wildernesses;<sup>1</sup> after the

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<sup>1</sup> For Sutzkever's relationship with Polish literature see Justin Cammy and Marta Figlerowicz, "Translating History into Art: The Influences of Cyprian Kamil Norwid in Abraham Sutzkever's Poetry," *Prooftexts* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 427–73; Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, "I know who you are, but who I

war, he became *the* gatekeeper and literary authority of Yiddish literature, in particular as founder and editor of the journal *Di goldene keyt*; and he was a poet of Tel Aviv, the Sinai desert, and the land and state of Israel.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his work, Sutzkever expanded the borders of Yiddish literary creativity—from frozen tundra and desert sands to distant South African landscapes, and from sublime metaphors of *this* world to surprising concretizations of the *next* world. Far from being a poet of destruction and lamentation, Sutzkever's writing is both a celebration of the Yiddish language and a vibrant articulation of its metaphysical power.

Yet, at the same time, it can seem impossible for Sutzkever's poetry to escape the place, event, and language of the Holocaust. Before any of the above accomplishments are mentioned, Sutzkever is known first and foremost as the prophetic voice to emerge miraculously from the microcosm of the Vilna ghetto. He was the purveyor of the ghetto's intense cultural creativity under the most harrowing of circumstances;<sup>3</sup> he documented—in stunning prosody—horrors both personal and collective in the very midst of the terror; and then in the aftermath he served as star witness in both postwar trials and postwar anthologies.<sup>4</sup> Much of Sutzkever's work can be thought of as constantly drawn toward this past even as he may try to escape it.

Some might argue that this apparent inevitability means that Sutzkever's work should be inextricably linked to something called "Holocaust Literature." Sutzkever's poetry written after the Holocaust, and in particular his late work of the 1970s until his death, is indeed often grouped together, no matter its subject, with collective artistic efforts to think through and even beyond the Holocaust. But what does it mean to join such a collective or canon called "Holocaust Literature"? What is literature *after* the Holocaust, *in* the Holocaust, or *of* Holocaust?

As readers, we often read a work of literature knowing that there is a particular adjective next to it. We don't just read a text on its own: we read a work of German, French, or Jewish literature; we read "contemporary" literature, "classical" literature, and many other categories and subsets of the written word. Where does "Holocaust literature" fit in this hierarchy? This term is not necessarily a marker of linguistic or institutional belonging. When writing toward an imagined German or French or Jewish national unity, an author joins a proposed literary tradition (however fractured or incomplete) with a specific history and (sometimes mythic) geography. "Holocaust" is not a language or a population but an event, making Holocaust literature akin to something like war literature. But even this last comparison doesn't entirely help, as the

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am—you do not know...': Reading Yiddish Writers in a Polish Literary Context," *Shofar* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 99–103.

<sup>2</sup> See Justin Cammy, "Vision and Redemption: Abraham Sutzkever's Poems of Zion(ism)," in *Yiddish After the Holocaust*, ed. Joseph Sherman (Oxford: Boulevard, 2004), 240–65 and Gali Druker Bar-Am, "Gaystike erd by Avrom Sutzkever: Between Personal Mythology and National Ideology," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 67, no. 1 (2016): 157–81.

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Wisse, "The Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever," *Jewish Book Annual* 54 (1996–1997): 95–106; David Roskies, "Bialik in the Ghettos," *Prooftexts* 25, no. 1–2 (2005): 103–120.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Schwarz, "Vilna: Avrom Sutzkever," in *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 15–43.

Holocaust has an afterlife that globalizes; the Holocaust is an empire of memory or even sometimes an “industry.” Even when the Holocaust is said to be unimaginable—or especially because of its unspeakability—its literature has been consumed by millions if not billions of readers. What does it mean for a poet like Sutzkever to join this global literary network, this ever-expanding collection of Holocaust genres?

It is not surprising that when faced with the task of defining Holocaust literature, David Roskies chooses the most expansive definition possible, pushing the very limits of its legibility: “Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it.”<sup>5</sup> Pressing further in trying to devise a methodology for reading this ever-expanding corpus, Roskies asks: “How to read Holocaust literature? In all languages. From the beginning: before time, in time, and against time.”<sup>6</sup>

Roskies, along with many other scholars of Holocaust literature and Holocaust studies, are reacting to the challenge of what one might call a “world event.” On the one hand, the Holocaust generates an anthological impulse to document and classify, to prove a unique and incomparable event perpetrated upon specific populations in specific locations. On the other hand, the Holocaust is proliferated ceaselessly and globally, becoming a radically altered cultural force each time it is reinterpreted. The Holocaust is both a singular and localized occurrence and an icon that circulates throughout the global market.

It is a challenge then to track what happens to a particular writer when the modifier “Holocaust” is appended to their work. When a writer is drawn into the boundaries of “Holocaust literature,” as both an institution and an ever-expanding canon, what happens to the other literary communities and institutions that are also attached to the work? Must “Holocaust” overwhelm Sutzkever and become the determining adjective of his work? Must he only write *of*, *in*, and *after* the Holocaust? How can his writing escape this designation?

With these questions in mind, I aim to read a selection of Sutzkever’s poetry *against* the Holocaust, against the apocalypse, focusing on the retrospective strategy of his later poetry. In the poems he wrote from the 1970s onward, he attempted to come to terms with the expectation to speak of and for the dead. In confronting how loss and devastation weighed on his literary project, he tried to devise a metaphysical escape hatch with a poetics of the everyday that made space for the ghosts of the past.

## Poetic Escapes

To be sure, the theme of escape was a central component of Sutzkever’s poetics from his earliest literary efforts. Some of his earliest poems center on his childhood in Siberia, where his family had fled to escape World War I. Sutzkever often turns the exilic

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<sup>5</sup> David Roskies, *Holocaust Literature: A History and a Guide* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

home into a crystalline world of frozen beauty, seeing a site of trauma as an opportunity for aesthetic joy and poetic virtuosity.

זונפֿאַרגאַנג אויף אייַזיק בלאָע וועגן.  
זיסע דרעמלפֿאַרבן אין געמיט.  
ס'לייכט פֿון טאָל אַ שטיבעלע אַנטקעגן  
מיט אַ שניי פֿון זונפֿאַרגאַנג באַשיט.  
וונדערוועלדער הוידען זיך אויף שויבן,  
צויבער-שליטנס קלינגען אין אַ קרייַז.  
אויפֿן פיצל בוידעם וואָרקען טויבן,  
וואָרקען אויס מיין פנים. אונטער אייַז,  
דורכגעשטרײַפֿט מיט בליציקע קרישטאַלן  
צאַפלט דער אירטיש אין האַלבער וואָר.  
אונטער אויסגעשוויגענע קופאַלן  
בליט אַ וועלט – אַ קינד פֿון זיבן יאָר.

Sunset on icy blue paths.  
Sweet dozing colors in my soul.  
A little house shines across from the valley  
covered with the snow of sunset.  
Wonderwoods swaying on windowpanes,  
magic sleighs chiming in a circle.  
Cooing of doves in the little attic,  
cooing at my face. Under ice,  
striped through with dazzling crystals,  
the Irtysh quivers, half real.  
Under speechless domes  
a world blooms—a child of seven years.<sup>7</sup>

The “sweet dozing colors” of “wonderwoods” bloom with crystals of ice—dense imagery is matched by a lushness of sound and playful neologisms that are entirely untranslatable. Typically a place of political suffering and where indeed his own father died, Siberia here becomes an opportunity for poetry of grand aesthetic ambition. This preference to escape into the poetic image, instead of attending to social and political exigencies, distanced Sutzkever from his fellow Eastern European Yiddish writers,

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<sup>7</sup> This is the opening poem of Sutzkever’s cycle of poems *Sibir* (1953) and I present here a translation by Richard J. Fein, recently published as “Siberia,” *In geveb* (September 2015): <http://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/siberia> and then reprinted in *Avrom Sutzkever, The Full Pomegranate: Poems of Avrom Sutzkever*, trans. Richard J. Fein (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019). An earlier version of this poem first appeared in 1937 under the title “Shtern in shney,” which Sutzkever continued to edit, even during the war, before using it as the opening poem of his volume *Sibir* (1953). For an investigation of the way the poem changed over time see Sunny Yudkoff, “Monuments of Poetry: On the Publication History of Avrom Sutzkever’s *Sibir*,” forthcoming in *Shofar* 38, no. 1 (2020).

especially during the turbulent times of the 1930s. But it was a poetic strategy that became a hallmark of his writing.

The impulse toward the redemptive, transcendent beauty of the poetic line would even follow Sutzkever into the Vilna ghetto. One would think that in such a place any aesthetic escape from devastation would be impossible. But following the death of his mother, Sutzkever still tested the limits of a poem's metaphysical powers. In his 1942 cycle entitled "My Mother" he writes:

ז  
כגעפֿין אַנשטאַט דיר אַ צעריסנס דיין העמד,  
נעם איך צום האַרצן און דריק עס פֿאַרשעמט.  
עס ווערן די לעכער פֿון העמד מײַנע טעג  
און דער זױם פֿונעם העמד ווערט אין האַרץ מיר אַ זעג.

צערייס איך פֿון לײַב מײַנע קליידער וואן קריך  
אין דיין אָפֿענעם נאַקעטן העמד ווי אין זיך.  
ס'איז מער ניט קיין העמד, ס'איז דיין ליכטיקע הויט,  
ס'איז דיין קאַלטער, דיין איבערגעבליענער טויט.

ח  
רעדסטו צו מיר  
אַזוי וואָרהאַפֿטיק עכט:  
– ניטע, מײַן קינד,  
ס'איז אַ זינד, ס'איז אַ זינד,  
און אונדזער צעטיילונג  
נעם אָן פֿאַר גערעכט.

אַז דו ביסט פֿאַראַן,  
בין איך דאָ סײַ־ווי־סײַ,  
ווי דער יאָדער אין פֿלויים  
פֿאַרמאָגט שוין דעם בוים  
און די נעסט און דעם פֿויגל  
און אַלץ וואָס דערבײַ.

ווילנער געטאָ, אַקטאָבער 1942

VII.

Instead of you, I find your torn coat  
I press it to my heart, bashful and raw.  
The holes of your shirt become my days  
And the seam of your shirt in my heart like a saw.

I rip the clothes off my body and creep  
Into your naked shirt as into myself.

No longer a shirt—your shining skin,  
Your cold, your everlasting death.

VIII.

You are talking to me  
So palpably bright:  
—Don't, my child,  
It's a sin, it's a sin!  
This is our parting—  
Accept it as right.

If you are still here,  
Then I exist too,  
As the pit in a plum  
Bears in it the tree  
And the nest and the bird  
And everything else too.

Vilna Ghetto, October 1942<sup>8</sup>

In impeccably constructed quatrains, Sutzkever attempts to transform moments of extreme pain and sorrow into sonorous prosody. In the first two stanzas, the speaker seeks to reunite with the dead, incestuously reanimating the mother's body on and inside his own. The language of the poem reinforces this desire, rhyming skin and death (*hoyt-toyt*), as if death were something that a living person could wear on their body. Survivor's guilt drives the speaker to share the dead's suffering *and* to repeat it endlessly. The mother and the son in this transgressive act are neither dead nor alive, but instead are united in a single body constantly being torn and defiled. The death is "everlasting" and never final or fully accepted. In order to somehow protect or save the world of Vilna and his family, the speaker embodies its destruction in an act of total visceral identification, a cannibalistic devouring of death.

However, in the next two stanzas, the mother figure of the poem immediately rejects this rhapsodic longing for reunification: the lines of the poem become shorter and sharper, including the weighty rhyme of son and sin (*kind-zind*). She insists on a divide between the dead and the living: she implores her son to remain in the world of the living and deny the suicidal impulses of the previous stanzas. The dead instead take up existence in a separate space. One is tempted to call this space memory, but this would be inaccurate. The mother is not simply remembered—she and her entire world exist, speak, and even offer the possibility of radical creativity. The discarded plum pit holds within it the potential of a tumescent fruit growing on a living tree within an

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<sup>8</sup> Abraham Sutzkever, "Mayn mame," in *Poetische verk*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Ahdut, 1963), 269; translation from "My Mother," in *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. and trans. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 149.

orchard teeming with life. The pit, the remnant after decay and yet the very seed of life, becomes a symbol of the creative capacity of art in the face of loss.

The mother's words are astounding, yet the speaker never actually agrees to her conditions. Indeed, how could this radical devotion to art be possible in the face of such trauma? How is the guilt effaced and deferred by the creative act? The date and place at the bottom of the poem—placing the poem amid the trauma—is a significant reminder: in the midst of the horror, Sutzkever preserves the destroyed world in a poem. The painful event has been deferred but also internalized, made part of a personal and unstable metaphysics. The ineffable, the impossible moment of the mother's death, is protected in its singularity while also given a potential communicative form in the act of poetry. What Jacques Derrida calls the "there is" of literature is confirmed but as a conditional: "If you are still here, then I exist too."<sup>9</sup> The condition for the mother's existence is the absolute devotion to writing, and more specifically a constant return to the Yiddish language. In much the same way he previously avoided his father's death in Siberia, Sutzkever again sidesteps loss by announcing a departure from the dead only to reconstitute them within a living literary monument. Sutzkever attempts to suspend a traditional metaphysics—the opposition of here and not-here, alive and dead—to imbue poetry with a sense of agency in the face of destruction.<sup>10</sup> The poem is able to contain the dead as a supplement; the structures of literature can encompass that which, in the cruel material world, is impossible, threatening, and self-effacing.

Such a stance, in which the written word constitutes its own alternative metaphysics, requires absolute belief in the power of language. It also enables a constantly repeated gesture of escape: the perfect poetic line signals a departure from the precarity of Eastern European Jewish life toward a new, fantastic refuge in its language, Yiddish. That Sutzkever's poetry is filled with neologisms only underscores the virtuosity of this strategy—a Yiddishland that is not simply a sentimental recreation of the past, but rather an invitation toward its radical renewal.

Yet, even as we marvel at this poetic faith, one cannot help but wonder at its instability. How is it possible for the poet to straddle both this world and the next? How does Sutzkever perpetuate this delicate metaphysics, dependent as it is on the sublimation of the dead within poetry?

## **Ghosts and Afterlives**

These questions certainly haunted Sutzkever as he continued to explore the future of Yiddish in the postwar period. Perhaps due to an unbearable proximity to the dead, Sutzkever frequently imagined his own literary persona to be doubled, as if he were writing *with* an absent twin brother. For Sutzkever, after the Holocaust the dead cannot replace the living—but the dead do appear as an extra presence. Rather than the danger of a total, almost suicidal identification with the dead, Sutzkever saw the poem

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature," in *Acts of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 42–43.

<sup>10</sup> David Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984) 241–42.

as a space to communicate with the ghosts always hovering near the living poet in the midst of his work.

Sutzkever came to realize that in the poem he could speak a language that evokes the dead but still avoids the secret, threatening language of the dead. In moving past writing poetry that directly confronts the events of the Holocaust, including his own experiences, he felt compelled to find a way to escape his mother's skin, as it were. His discovery was to see Yiddish as a ghost-language that calls to memory (even calls into being, ever so briefly) a lost community but also remains, contingently and precariously, a language of the everyday. For Sutzkever, the dead exist—are “there” in the Derridean sense—only when the past is intimately involved in the most mundane experiences. Yet at the same time, one's speech must remain in some way distinct from the language of the dead. To speak *with* the dead would be to join them in radical retreat from the everyday into a cycle of trauma. Instead, the poet of the living Yiddish present must let the dead inform his speech without overwhelming it, becoming a mundane yet powerful specter in his poetic universe. His later poetry takes this everydayness as the organizing structure of the writerly act, each poem becoming part of Sutzkever's final project, *Lider fun togbukh*, *Poems from a Diary*.<sup>11</sup> In this way the Yiddish poem, with its everyday intimacy with the dead, offers a metaphysical alternative to traumatic absence. This Yiddish metaphysics is powerfully on display in the following poem from late in Sutzkever's career:

איך שרייב מייןע בריוו אן אדרעסן. צו די  
וואָס ווײַנען אַצינד אונטער וועלק, אונטער בלי  
און די וואָס באַהאַלטן זיך אונטער ציפרעסן.  
איך שרייב מייןע איצטיקע בריוו אן אדרעסן.

און וואָרהאַפֿטיק, אלינקע בריוו קומען אן,  
ס'צעטראָגט זיי אַ קאַסמישער מין פּאַטשטאַליאַן.  
ער ווייסט די אַדרעסן, די פינקטלעכע נומערן,  
ווי זיי, די געוועזענע, ווינטערן, זומערן.

זיי ענטפֿערן אויך. מיר איז קענטלעך די שריפט,  
ווי ס'וואָלטן זיך שורהלעך בליצן פֿאַרטיפֿט  
אַנטקעגן הייסקלאַפיקע שלייפֿן. איך לייען –  
געוועזענע ווילן אויך אַצינד מיר דערפֿרייען.

די נעכט ווערן דינער און דינער. דין־דין  
אַזוי ווי בריוו. און סע ציט מיר אַהין  
צו וועמען איך שרייב מייןע בריוו אן אדרעסן:

<sup>11</sup> The diary poems were first published in a volume of the same name in 1977, but he continued to add poems to the cycle throughout the rest of his life. For extended analysis of the various strategies of this later poetry see Dan Miron, *Sheleg 'al kenaf ha-yona: pegishot im shirato shel Avraham Sutzkever* (Tel Aviv: Keshev, 1999), 18–58; Heather Valencia, “*Farvandlen vel ikh toyt in lebn*”: Transformations of the Holocaust in the Post-war Poetry of Abraham Sutzkever,” in *Yiddish after the Holocaust*, 217–39.

צו דאנקען זיי – פֿאַר אַזוי לאַנג ניט פֿאַרגעסן.

28 נאָוועמבער 1994

I write my letters without addresses. To those  
who now live under wither, under flower  
and to those who hide under cypresses.  
I write my letters now without addresses.

And actually, all the letters arrive at their destination,  
a cosmic letter carrier delivers them.  
He knows the addresses, the exact numbers,  
where they, the ones who have passed away, winter and summer.

They answer too. Their handwriting is familiar to me,  
as if lightning penetrated with each line  
my hot-pounding temples. I read—  
those who have gone even now want to make me happy.

The nights become thinner and thinner. So thin,  
just like letters. And I am drawn there,  
to those to whom I write my letters without addresses:  
to thank them—for so long not forgetting.

28 November 1994<sup>12</sup>

As in many of Sutzkever's poems, this poem begins with the opening of two seemingly unbridgeable spaces: the physical place where the poet writes his letters and a second location that has no address. The speaker is safe in his tangible, lived reality while the dead are reunited with nature—buried under wither, under flower, under cypresses. However, this burial place is not the address-less place where the poet sends his letters. The "residence" of the physical bodies, the cemetery or mass grave, is a place that is known to the speaker. This is where they *reside*, but this is not where they *exist*. Instead Sutzkever imagines a third space that has no address, where the dead persist beyond material decay.

In order for the letters to reach their destination the speaker needs the help of a third party, here a *potshtalyon* (почтальон), the Russian word for letter carrier. Sutzkever does not use *brivntreger*, the conventional term in Sutzkever's Lithuanian Yiddish, but rather introduces a Slavic word into the poem, as if communication with

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<sup>12</sup> This poem first appeared as the third part of a cycle entitled "Dray lider fun zayn un umzayn," ["Three Poems of Being and Unbeing"] *Di goldene keyt* 140 (1995): 218. The cycle was reprinted in *Tsevaklte vent* (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt, 1996). Translation mine.

the dead requires an archaic and alien intermediary.<sup>13</sup> The Russian word renders the letter carrier all the more cosmic and at the same time comical, underlining the fantasy of the whole project. The Russian also complicates the geography of the poem. The speaker is in Tel Aviv, Israel (hence the cypresses), the dead in some impossibly distant place, and the space in between filled with the ambiguity of an anachronistic evocation of imperial Russia. Despite this juxtaposition of incongruous spaces, the speaker appears ready to take the farce seriously. The letter carrier is a cosmic jokester, yet he knows the exact addresses of the placeless dead: “*er veys di adresn, di pinktlekhe numern, / vu zey, di gevezene, vintern, zumern*, he knows the addresses, the exact numbers, / where they, the ones who have passed away, winter and summer.”

In the third stanza, the poet must then contend with the consequences of this new division of space. What repercussions does such a strange mode of communication have on the psyche of the living? Initially, the speaker experiences the joy of recognition: “*mir iz kentlekh di shrift*, their handwriting is familiar to me.” The imagined script on the page echoes the absent bodies, as if in recalling the physical act of writing one could extrapolate the outlines of a hand or an arm. Through this reanimation, the dead seem to become active agents—they desire the speaker’s happiness and they literally penetrate his body. The bifurcation of space in the opening stanza has been compromised and the dead, through their letters, invade the speaker: “*vi s’voltn zikh shurelekh blitsn fartift / antkegn heysklapike shleyfn*, as if lightning penetrated with each line / my hot-pounding temples.” Sutzkever here uses a surprising enjambment: *fartift / antkegn* pairs a verb that implies infiltration into the poet (*fartift*) with a preposition that can mean both opposite and toward (*antkegn*). The dead are an opposite, external force that suddenly becomes deeply embedded in the self, exciting the psyche yet also doing potential harm. The communication with the dead is a moment of joy, almost transcendental, but also of violence and shock. The new agency of the dead can overwhelm and incapacitate the speaker.

In the final stanza, this threat intensifies: “*Di nekht vern diner un diner. Din-din / azoy vi di briv. Un se tsit mikh ahin / tsu vemen ikh shrayb mayne briv on adresn*, the nights become thinner and thinner. So thin, / just like letters. And I am drawn there, / to those to whom I write my letters without addresses.” The speaker is tempted to join the dead in their world. As the nights become thinner, as the speaker grows older and closer to death, his life begins to resemble the letters themselves, that cosmic third space where the dead and the living communicate. Indeed, the speaker is drawn to that address-less space. Sutzkever again performs a clever enjambment: “*ahin / tsu vemen*, there to those to whom”. *Ahin* implies a location, toward a specific place, and Sutzkever immediately frustrates this expectation with *tsu vemen*, indicating an identity. By conflating location and identity, Sutzkever opens an empty space at the end of the line and then fills it with the address-less dead. The dead themselves, in their very non-existence, constitute a manifest non-place that pulls at the speaker.

But even this conflation is rejected in the poem’s final, stunning volta. The speaker is attracted to the dead *not* in order to join them but rather “*tsu danken*

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<sup>13</sup> Dan Miron, *Sheleg ‘al kenaf ha-yona*, 87–88.

*zey—far azoy lang nit fargesn*, to thank them—for so long not forgetting.” The speaker defers the romantic act of bringing the dead back to life and even lets go of the cosmic letter carrier. Rather, it is the dead’s ability to remember—in and through the poet—that gives the speaker purpose in the present. It is thanks to the dead that the poet lives. Though Sutzkever is drawn “there” to finally join the dead through inscription on the page, the memory of the other from within returns the poet to the present, to the everyday. The ghosts of the past that hover at some distance can potentially cross a boundary and reenact that terrible trauma; but they can just as likely become fixtures of a creative yet mundane present, constantly challenging the poet to reanimate his own life and reinvigorate his own language rather than be subsumed by theirs.

Sutzkever coerces the reader to change the way the present can be informed by memory. The reader should not identify with the dead; this would mean disaster, translating speech and poetry into the secret language of the dead that wracks one’s temples. Nor is the reader simply being asked to witness and remember after the fact, which would lead to nostalgia and sentimentality. Sutzkever returns to the past and to the dead as part of a confirmation of the present, opening up the possibility of the radical other from within. If there is any being, or rather if there is any being to unbeing, it is through the poem’s capacity (and by extension language itself) to “curve back in a perpetual return upon itself”<sup>14</sup>—to be able to live at some distance from the dead, but also to live in the present thanks to the dead. This commitment to the everyday is one of the hallmarks of Sutzkever’s later poetry. Eschewing the sentimental ode or even the short, biting lyric poem, Sutzkever performs a methodical, sometimes even comical, reconsideration of the Yiddish present, pronouncing its radical newness despite its precarity.

## Conclusion

Such a poetic strategy represents a profound departure from many of the common definitions of Holocaust literature. Rather than document or bear witness, Sutzkever writes *against* the apocalypse. He refuses to reenact the Holocaust by obsessively returning to the moment of loss; rather, that loss is constantly reconsidered, paradoxically, as an opportunity for regeneration, a call to the ways in which the dead constitute the living without overburdening the present. Sutzkever’s belief in poetry is not a kind of romanticism or form of magical thinking but rather a metaphysics of space that invites the ghost as a participant in the artistic act. Rather than writing *of* or *after* the Holocaust, trapped by nostalgia or sentimentality, or overdetermined by the singularity of *the* event, Sutzkever imagines a new way of speaking in which the poetic word announces the radical possibility of the dead confirming the impossible present. The plum pit contains the tree and the entire orchard; letters to the dead allow figures of the past to remember and constitute the poet’s everyday life. David Roskies might call Sutzkever’s poetry a new kind of JewSpeak, coming as it does as a compensation for that

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 300.

which has been lost, “an essential expression of the once-living folk.”<sup>15</sup> But Sutzkever would perhaps object to such a temporal designation, as if Jewspeak were a literary genre that always came too late, after the speakers of Jewspeak had disappeared. Sutzkever does not seem to be interested in conservation. Perhaps we can say that he sees himself as a poet of the living Yiddish word standing among the ghosts *at* Sinai, not *after* Sinai. After all, Sinai too has no address.

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<sup>15</sup> David Roskies, “Call it Jewspeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing,” *Poetics Today* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 301.