

"plaisir du texte"—these main ideas of Sarkonak's book are tenets that Simon, Ricardou, and others have promoted or adhered to over the past twenty years. As a result, much Simonian criticism has remained firmly entrenched in a prison house of language that Sarkonak never contests. As he revealingly proclaims at one point, "la seule réalité qui compte [est] celle du langage" (p. 83).

Without, then, presenting a truly new view of his subject, Sarkonak does succeed admirably in fleshing out and refining central ideas about Simon's writing. The book is divided into two main parts. Both parts draw their examples primarily from the small, well-selected corpus of *Histoire* and *La Bataille de Pharsale*, while reaching out when appropriate to examples from other texts. The writing and organization are commendably clear, as is the use of contemporary literary theory and criticism on Simon. Sarkonak's extensive references to Derrida, Ricardou, Barthes, Genette, and Kristeva are invariably intelligent and original. Rather than slavishly following Ricardou, for example, as some New Novel critics have done, he develops a method that is more consistently immanent than Ricardou's and that is applied to a Simonian intratext rather than a New Novel intertext. Similarly noteworthy is his application to Simon of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic.

The first part of *Les Carrefours du texte*, which highlights the problematic status of mimesis for Simon, succeeds in demonstrating the important extent to which Simon thematizes the issue of mimesis, in ways that have often escaped attention, notably, in relation to such diverse themes as money, sex, chemistry, memory, and war. To argue his point in this first part that Simon's central theme is the failure of mimesis, the impossible quest to capture reality, Sarkonak treats four different imitative forms or types of "mimétisme" in Simon's work: "le mimétisme référentiel," the characters' problematic relation to language; "le mimétisme cratylien," the impossible search for a necessary link between signifiers and signifieds; "le mimétisme graphique," the text's attempts at representing pictures or other texts; and "le mimétisme auto-référentiel," the various sorts of "mise en abyme."

The second part of the book, "Le Langage producteur," focuses on the self-generative processes of language or "jeux de l'écriture." Among the questions considered in this part are how key words trigger new directions within or among narrative sequences, how sequences combine in coherent patterns, and how sequences function from one place in the Simonian intratext to another. An extended, enlightening analysis of *Histoire*, tracing the generative properties of such key words as "lac," "larmes," "lait," and "elle," provides answers to these questions and shows how the novel's meaning derives from the kernel semantic elements of femininity and fluidity.

A number of inconsistencies should perhaps be noted. One involves Sarkonak's concept of a global Simonian Text, which calls into question the generally accepted division into beginning, central, and later periods: ". . . nous sommes loin d'être sûr qu'il soit possible de couper si facilement une telle oeuvre en compartiments étanches . . ." (p. 12). The inconsistency arises because Sarkonak uses the notion of the Text to deemphasize the more mimetic stages of the earlier fiction, while he later reverts to using just those divisions that he earlier called into question. Another inconsistency concerns the difficulty of reading Simon's novels, which Sarkonak recognizes (Simon himself has often denied it): indeed at one point (p. 15), Sarkonak even suggests that without a modern theoretical background, readers would be unable to read Simon. And elsewhere, he states: "Il n'est donc pas étonnant que certains lecteurs soient agacés, voire même irrités par des textes si 'illisibles'" (p. 158). But since Sarkonak speaks repeatedly of the "plaisir du texte," one wonders whether "pleasure" is not then being used polemically, less to describe how readers *do* read than to prescribe how they *should*. These objections aside, Sarkonak's book is clearly a significant work from which readers interested in Simon and the New Novel will derive unquestionable benefit.

Ruth R. Wisse, ed.

A SHTETL AND OTHER YIDDISH NOVELLAS

Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986. Pp. 359, \$17.50

Reviewed by Miriam Roshwald

The present volume is a labor of love dedicated to Yiddish literature and its spread among the English speaking public. The editor and translator of three out of the five novellas, Ruth Wisse, wrote an informative introduction in which she traces the history of Yiddish literature. In addition, she provides a valuable preface for each of the five writers chosen. The five

authors deal with life in the small Jewish towns in Imperial Russia, known as shtetls, which experienced violent changes, due to external repressions and the influx of new ideas. Caught in the cross-fire of traditionalism, assimilation, nationalism, and free thinking, the shtetl was in the process of rapid disintegration. The old ways were not entirely eradicated and the new ones did not quite take root either, the result being confusion and a sense of profound disorientation. The five authors selected each present the shtetl's "facing of modernity" from a somewhat different angle and vantage point.

I.M. Weissenberg, in his "A Shtetl", confronts head on the brutal conflict of classes; the older generation, rooted in tradition and established in the status of employer and community elder, is forced to face up to the new phenomenon of uncouth youth's impatience to gain reforms and wrest concessions from the exploited worker. Their unscrupulous resorting to violence, strikes, and bloodshed, and their gleeful trampling of age-old proprieties are depicted with a broad brush and garish realism. The new-fangled labor union opens a chasm of hatred which splits the community in the middle. In the midst of the ensuing reign of lawlessness and intimidation, the redeeming still small voice of troubled consciences and a sense of guilt may be heard: the shtetl is not entirely bankrupt and its moral backbone is not quite broken.

If Weissenberg's "raw youth" and their bumbling excesses bring to mind Dostoevski's "The Possessed", David Belgelson's world of gloom and doom, shot through by random eruptions of mindless malice, is reminiscent of Chekhov. Again, the shtetl is in decline and the central hero of the story "At the Depot" symbolizes the torpor and lethargy of a community which has lost its sense of direction. The dreamlike atmosphere of impotence and frustrated will heightens the sense of futility and carries a compelling message of hopelessness and doom.

Joseph Opatoshu's "The Romance of a Horse Thief" has all the marks of a folk ballad and yet is firmly rooted in the everyday realities of a vigorous community. That the community happens to be Jewish adds only a measure of piquancy to the fact that, side by side with respectability, a world of lawlessness and brute force dwell under the same roof. Opatoshu does not preach morals. His elderly thief is aware of the marginality to which his occupation relegates him but he proudly rejects anybody's claims to moral superiority over him. He is a doting *pater familias*, of gentle manners and he carries the burdens of his "trade" with the same resigned forbearance as anyone else. It is the young son, wrapped in a naive aura of a folk hero, who shows signs of moral corrosion. Yet even he yearns secretly for respectability and solid, middle class status. Opatoshu's gentle irony is unsparing of the peripheral world, but his irony is tempered by warmth and compassion.

It is Anski's dramatic tale of sons in a deadly struggle with fathers (and mothers) that employs all the tools of suspense and morbidity. Subtle, and plumbing the murky depths of psychological complexities, Anski's analysis of the radical mind is in a class with Dostoevski. Based on autobiographical data, Anski describes the young generation's scornful rejection of the old authorities and their stagnating ways. Subversion and deception turn imperceptibly from means into ends and finally the destructive impulses and a new sense of power bewitch the would-be bearers of light into agents of evil. Anski, famous for his drama *The Dybuk*, explores the deeply-set myths and folk beliefs which, rationalized and sublimated as they may be, lie always in wait to reappear in their true garb as reminders of the uncharted territories of our souls.

The jewel of the collection is the autobiographical story of the master of Yiddish and Hebrew letters—Mendele Mocher Sforim (Mendele the Bookpeddler), the pen name of Sholom Jacob Abramovitch. His "Of Bygone Days" "is perhaps the most detailed study of a shtetl in all of Jewish literature" (p. 251). The author takes us to the semi-rural background of his birthplace and unrolls the spectacle of a typical Jewish family and its changing fortunes. The personal story is meant to be a reflection of the community's story. The gentle love and tenderness lavished on every detail are particularly poignant in this writer who is known for his merciless criticism of what he perceived as decadent and backward in Jewish life. Here, instead of devastating satire, we have a nearly lyrical evocation of a childhood and adolescence steeped in an atmosphere of close family and community ties, traditional upbringing, and proximity to the wonders of nature. Colorful types and idiosyncratic characters fill this world and enrich it sufficiently to inject in the precocious and impressionable child intimations of a world different from his own. The narrow world of his youth is not quite insulated and ideas radically alien percolate through. Crushing misfortunes—natural and unnatural—speed up the dissolution of the old verities and world views. What was once a child's world in all its plenitude turns into ashes and a ghost of memory.