Leo Baeck Institute Year Book Vol. 60, 61–78 doi:10.1093/leobaeck/ybv002
Advance Access publication 3 May 2015

On Nathan Birnbaum's Messianism and Translating the Jewish Other

By Nick Block
Emory University

Messianic longing ignited European Jewish thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this time of historical rupture, European Jews from the more traditional East to the acculturated and affluent West were recycling older notions of the Messiah and his advent in a bid to shape the discourse on possible Jewish futures. Zionism's call for a return to the Land of Israel made the political arena the most readily apparent cultural sphere steeped in messianic discourse, though messianic themes were woven throughout the era's politics, literature, and the arts. Yiddish literature offered a wellspring of Jewish tales about the Messiah and his messenger Elijah the Prophet. This article demonstrates that at the nexus of literature and politics in the early 1900s, the political activist and author Nathan Birnbaum came to embody the recurring literary figure of a messianic saviour from the West. The famous religious awakening of the Viennese-born Birnbaum included an assumption of an eastern European Jewish identity, one which, I argue, is rooted in his reading of Yiddish literature's desire for a German-Jewish redeemer. As a translator of Yiddish works including Y. L. Peretz's short stories, Birnbaum knew about the fantastic, messianic, and simultaneously damning reception of German Jews in eastern Europe. He came to see himself as a potential messiah and used his intercultural position to convey this image among European Jewry.

A recurring visitor to the eastern *shtetl* in nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction was the supernatural German Jew (*daytsh*). These stories speak to cultural encounters between two disparate, but neighbouring, communities since the early 1800s. The ambivalent eastern European reception of assimilated, irreligious German Jews yielded both satanic portrayals of the German Jew who led the youth astray and other Yiddish folk tales that revealed the foreign Jew from the West as the prophet Elijah in disguise. At the end of the century, authors popularized this uncanny portrayal of the western Jewish Other, with some ironic distance, in pieces such as Sholem Aleichem's 'The Pen-Knife' and Y. L. Peretz's 'Seven Good Years'. Yet as will be discussed in this article, Birnbaum read these works about the Jewish saviour from western Europe and saw himself in them.

Birnbaum's life story offers a prism through which one can see the factors that fed into the German-Jewish cultural boom in the first third of the twentieth century—Jewish renaissance, Zionism, and immigration of eastern European Jews. Birnbaum (1864–1937) was born in Vienna to immigrant Galician parents. He grew up speaking German, attended the University of Vienna, and had a significant political life. His role in the German-Jewish renaissance has often been overlooked, even though he has been credited as the first to use all three of the terms around which the cultural movement pivoted—'Jewish renaissance', 'Zionism', and '*Ostjuden*' (eastern European Jews). Birnbaum's strikingly active and manic political life led to many accomplishments and defeats across Europe. After having taken a second seat to Theodor Herzl at the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, he turned away from Zionism towards alternative forms of Jewish nationalism, namely Diasporism and Yiddishism. In 1907 he made a failed bid as candidate for the Austrian parliament. In 1908 Birnbaum convened the Yiddish Language Conference of Czernowitz (present-day Ukraine) within just a few years of having started to learn Yiddish, and was subsequently elected its president.[1] Around 1912 he set out on a path to becoming religiously observant, and in 1919 he became the Secretary General of Agudath Israel, the political arm of eastern European Jewish Orthodoxy. A testament to his political significance is his wide reception within eastern and western European Jewish circles, despite vocal reservations about his mercurial politics. In tow with his political ambitions, his parallel cultural activities relayed information between the German-Jewish and Yiddish spheres. His knowledge of Yiddish set him apart from other Viennese-born intellectuals. He started at least six newspapers in his life, one of which was *Dr. Birnboym's vokhnblat* (Dr. Birnbaum's Weekly), a Czernowitz Yiddish newspaper he founded in 1908.[2] Before and during the First World War when he was authoring pamphlets such as *What are Ostjuden?* and *Rights for the Ostjuden!* in German, Birnbaum was simultaneously publishing Yiddish articles with titles such as 'Viennese Jews', 'On the West', and 'Is German Jewry Dying?' in a variety of eastern European newspapers.[3] As is clear from these titles, he directed his gaze both

[1] Birnbaum began publishing in Yiddish in 1904. Joshua A. Fishman, *Ideology, Society & Language: The Odyssey of Nathan Birnbaum*, Ann Arbor 1987, p. 43.

[2] *Selbst-Emancipation!* (Vienna 1885), *Neue Zeitung* (Vienna 1906), *Dr. Birnboym's vokhnblat* [Dr. Birnbaum's Weekly] (Czernowitz 1908), *Das Volk* (Czernowitz 1910), *Der Aufstieg* (Berlin 1930), and *Der Ruf* (Rotterdam, Netherlands 1934). In its seventh volume, in 1894, *Selbst-Emancipation* became *Jüdische Volkszeitung*. In its fourth volume, in 1937, *Der Ruf* became *Der jüdische Volksdienst*. See Jess Olson, 'The Late Zionism of Nathan Birnbaum: The Herzl Controversy Reconsidered', in *AJS Review*, 31, no. 2 (2007), pp. 241–276 (p. 241 n. 2); David Birnbaum, 'Solomon A. Birnbaum', in John M. Spalek and Sandra H. Hawrylchak (eds), *Guide to the Archival Materials of the German-Speaking Emigration to the United States after 1933*, Bern 1997, pp. 57–67 (p. 65).

[3] All translations are the author's own unless otherwise stated. Nathan Birnbaum, *Was sind Ostjuden? Zur ersten Information*, Vienna 1916; *Den Ostjuden ihr Recht!*, Vienna 1915; 'Viner yidn' [Viennese Jews], in *Der moment*, 11 August 1911, p. 3; 'Fun mayrev: Goles-mayrev, 'Yidnshmerts' un di yidishe yerushe' [On the West: Diaspora-West, 'Jewish Pain' and the Jewish Legacy], in *Di yidishe velt. Literarishe-gezelshaftlikhe monatsshrift* [The Jewish World: Literary-Societal Monthly], 1, nos. 1 and 8 (January and August 1913), pp. 110–116 and 67–75; 'Tsi shtarbt dos daytshe yidntum?' [Is German Jewry Dying?], in *Haynt*, 4 November 1911, p. 3.

eastward and westward to serve as a mediator between German-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jews.

Birnbaum was on the front lines of the Jewish renaissance, where he sought out the holistic *Ostjude* as the aesthetic quarry for German Jews. He subscribed to a paradigm of eastern European authenticity almost a generation before this became widely accepted among Zionist-leaning German-Jewish artists and thinkers. What distinguishes Birnbaum further is that he began to internalize his own message, transforming himself into an eastern European Jew. An investigation into Birnbaum's famous move towards '*Ostjudenheit*' (eastern European Jewishness) reveals a complicated layering of inter-Jewish stereotypes. A photograph from 1931 shows this uneasy relationship between East and West, the *Ostjude* and the *daytsh*. Embodying the idyllic *Ostjude*, Birnbaum (Figure 1, at right) took on all the trappings of a religious eastern European Jew—yarmulke, beard, and sidelocks tucked behind his ears. Yet the religiously clad Nathan sits alongside his grandson, wearing a yarmulke and lederhosen![4] Birnbaum's assumption of the *Ostjude* in dress, language, and religious observance is complicated by the fact that he also assumed the persona of the messianic/prophetic *daytsh* by professing to be on a mission from God. He performed a stereotype held by western Jews while also enacting a stereotype held by eastern Jews. This simultaneity played a role in his wide reception across central and eastern Europe.

Birnbaum's messianism showcases the importance of the intercontinental gaze on the Jewish Other at the intersection of politics and literature. References to Birnbaum as a prophet and messiah abounded, and Birnbaum was keenly aware of this phenomenon. An exchange of letters between Birnbaum and the Galician Rabbi Tuvia Horowitz provides an initial insight into the broader aspects of messianic hope and aspirations as rooted in Birnbaum's frenetic crossing over political and ideological borders. In a series of Yiddish letters written after 1916, Horowitz explained to Birnbaum the Orthodox Jewish perspective on the advent of the Messiah. The rabbi wrote that his daughter had drawn parallels between Birnbaum and the prophet Jeremiah, and Horowitz advised Birnbaum, "For you the way is clear—you want only [to exert] prophetic influence—that [all should be] blown around in the wind of your spirit—which should itself then materialize in life—through your flaming words."[5] My analysis places this supernatural reception of German Jews in the context of translation and cultural exchange that allowed Birnbaum to subsequently capitalize on eastern Jewish hopes for a western Jewish messiah.

[4] Many thanks to David Birnbaum at the Nathan and Solomon Birnbaum Archives in Toronto for making his family archive available to scholars. On Birnbaum's switch in dress from western to eastern clothes, see Fishman, pp. 72–73.

[5] Translation by Jess Olson. In Olson's biography of Birnbaum, Horowitz is the only mention on the topic of messianism; whereas I seek to show the broader aspects of messianic hope and aspirations in Birnbaum's life as rooted in his frenetic life crossing over borders between eastern and western Europe. Jess Olson, *Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity: Architect of Zionism Yiddishism, and Orthodoxy*, Stanford 2013, p. 234.

Figure 1. Nathan Birnbaum with his son Salomon and grandson Jakob. Hamburg, 1931, by courtesy of Nathan and Solomon Birnbaum Archives, Toronto.

Awaiting the Saviour from the West

The two biggest names in Yiddish literature of the fin-de-siècle, Y. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, used their western brethren as recurring characters in their oeuvres. The western, assimilated, wealthy *daytsh* figure is at the centre of Peretz's works 'Monish' (1888), 'Travel-Pictures' (1891), 'The Magician' (1904), and 'Seven Good Years' (1908).[6] The *daytsh* also appears in Sholem Aleichem's 'The Pen-Knife' (1886), 'The *daytsh*' (1902), and 'A Premature Passover' (1908).[7] Sholem Aleichem and

[6] Y. L. Peretz, *Rayze bilder* [Travel Pictures], New York 1909; David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling*, Cambridge 1995.

[7] Sholom Aleichem (Sholem Aleichem), 'The Pocket-Knife', in Hannah Berman (ed.), *Jewish Children*, transl. by Hannah Berman, New York 1926, pp. 187–209; Sholem Aleichem, 'A frier peysekh: A mayse vos ken zikh farloyfn af der groyser velt' [A Premature Passover: A Story That Could Happen Anywhere in the World], in *Der fraynd*, 28, 30, and 31 March 1908, pp. 2, 2, and 2–3, respectively.

Peretz mirrored each other, writing fantastic stories about the German Jew throughout their literary careers, from 1886 to 1908.[8] These modern Yiddish writers reworked the awesome representation of the German Jew as Elijah the Prophet in earlier literature as fodder for their own literary purposes. Jewish tradition maintains that Elijah is the messenger of God who will announce the coming of the Messiah,[9] and he is a ritually inscribed visitor in lifecycle events, for whom a place is set at both Passover meals and circumcisions. Elijah as the acculturated German Jew can be found in collections of Yiddish folktales, as seen in one tale about Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter (1798–1866), the founder of the Ger Chassidic group. As the story goes, a three-year-old once became ill with sunstroke. His mother sat down exhausted on a stone and wept bitterly as she saw the state of her young boy. "Suddenly she caught sight of a passer-by who was dressed like a German Jew [*daytsh*], with something like a traveller's bag around his neck. [. . .] Taking a bottle out of his pocket, he poured a few drops of its contents on to a lump of sugar which he had, and gave it to the child." Then the stranger vanished. The story concludes by stating that years later when Rabbi Yitzchak Meir would recount this episode from his childhood, he would add: "That 'German Jew' was Elijah".[10] Elijah masked in the garb of a German Jew plays a central role in this folktale, ostensibly dating to an event in 1801. Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Sholem Asch, and others continued this tradition into the twentieth century.

'Seven Good Years', published by Peretz in a 1908 neo-romantic collection called *Folksy Tales*, begins with the *shtetl* Jew Tuvye standing at the market, praying to God to provide money for the Sabbath. A German Jew arrives. "Just as he was praying, he feels someone pulling on his coattail. He looks around and sees a little *daytsh* [*a daytshl*], dressed as a hunter in the forest with a feather on his hat and a green trim on his jacket."[11] The arrival of the German Jew—seemingly out of nowhere—signals that the man is a gift from God. In typical fairy tale-fashion, the German Jew then offers Tuvye seven years of prosperity. He and his wife must choose whether to take the seven years now or to wait and take the years later in life. The narrator tells the reader that the German Jew is actually Elijah the Prophet: "It

[8] Peretz's first published Yiddish piece was 'Monish' in 1888, Sholem Aleichem's in 1883.

[9] "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord". (Malachi 3:23).

[10] Shlomo Yosef Zevin, 'A Revelation in Disguise', in *A Treasury of Chassidic Tales on the Torah: A Collection of Inspirational Chassidic Stories Relevant to the Weekly Torah Readings*, transl. by Uri Kaploun, vol. 2, New York 1992, pp. 296–297. For original Hebrew, see Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *Sipure Hasidim* [Tales of Chassidim], Tel Aviv 1967, pp. 239–240. Speaking to the continued significance of the East-West Jewish gaze today, this story still circulates among the English-speaking Jewish community through Artscroll Publishers (Mesorah), a company that prints works predominantly intended for American Orthodox Jews.

[11] "Vi er iz azoy mispalel, derfilt er, az emets git im a tsi far der pole. Kukt er zikh um, zet er far zikh a daytshl, ongetun vi a shiser in vald, mit a feder oyfn kapelyushel un a grinem oyflog oyfn shpentser." Y. L. Peretz, 'Zibn gute yor' [Seven Good Years], in *Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn* [Folksy Tales], *Ale verk fun Y. L. Peretz* [Complete Works of Y. L. Peretz], Warsaw 1908, pp. 41–48 (p. 41).

was, it turned out, Elijah the Prophet who, as is his nature, was dressed up as a *daytshl*."[12]

The German-Jewish character in 'Seven Good Years' is an archetypal figure who shares similarities with characters in other stories. One common characteristic is that the fantastic German is only ambiguously Jewish. The most striking non-Jewish trait of this figure is his hunter's apparel. According to the laws of *kashrut*, most animals must be ritually slaughtered with a knife before their meat can be eaten. The death of larger kosher animals via other means, such as a gunshot, renders the meat of the animal no longer kosher. Jewish legal authorities therefore frown upon hunting and denigrate the act as a purposeless, non-Jewish sport.[13] Contributing to the ambiguity of this character's Jewishness, however, is that this ostensibly non-Jewish German is called a daytshl (little German). The diminutive suffix suggests familiarity rather than small physical stature, and in the Judeocentric Yiddish-speaking society, familiarity is more likely to be evoked by the character's Jewishness than by his hunter persona. The uncertainty as to the figure's Jewishness is endemic to Yiddish representations of German Jews.

In the broader eastern European context, the identification of the German Jew with Elijah the Prophet and the advent of the Messiah is important to understanding the reception of the Zionist leader Theodor Herzl among eastern European Jews. Born into the German-speaking milieu of Budapest, Herzl spent his life as a journalist in Vienna and Paris before writing his Zionist treatise *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*) in 1896. Within a few years, the work was translated into Yiddish so that this originally German-focused Zionist movement could reach a wider international audience. "[M]any Eastern European Jews explicitly compared Herzl to Moses", as Steven Aschheim writes. "Ben-Gurion [the first Prime Minister of Israel], who was ten years old at the time, recalled that when Herzl visited his home of Plonsk a rumour spread 'that the Messiah had arrived—a tall, handsome man, a learned man of Vienna, a doctor no less—Theodor Herzl'."[14] The Galician-born artist E. M. Lilien reinforced this opinion with multiple provocative drawings that conflated Herzl and Moses (See Figures 2, 3, and 4).[15] It is within this context, in which eastern European Jews awaited a saviour from the West and German Jews carried certain messianic cultural cachet, that Nathan Birnbaum made his political career.[16]

[12] "Geven iz es, vi es hot zikh aroysgevizn, Eliyahu Hanovi, vos hot zikh, vi zayn shteyger iz, in a daytshl farshtelt."

[13] Ezekiel ben Judah Landau, *Nodà Biyehudah Mahadura tinyana*, vol. 1, New York 1960, pp. 5–6.

[14] Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German-Jewish Consciousness, 1800–1923*, Madison 1982, p. 84.

[15] See Michael Stanislawski, Zionism and the fin de sie'cle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky, Berkeley 2001, pp. 111–13.

[16] For a comparison with the messianic atmosphere in western, German-Jewish thought around the time of World War One, see Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity*, Stanford 1992.

Figure 2. *Mose* I. Moses is drawn to look like Theodor Herzl on the stained glass window for a B'nai B'rith lodge in Hamburg. In Edgar Alfred Regener, *E. M. Lilien. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der zeichenden Künste*, Berlin 1905, p. 87.

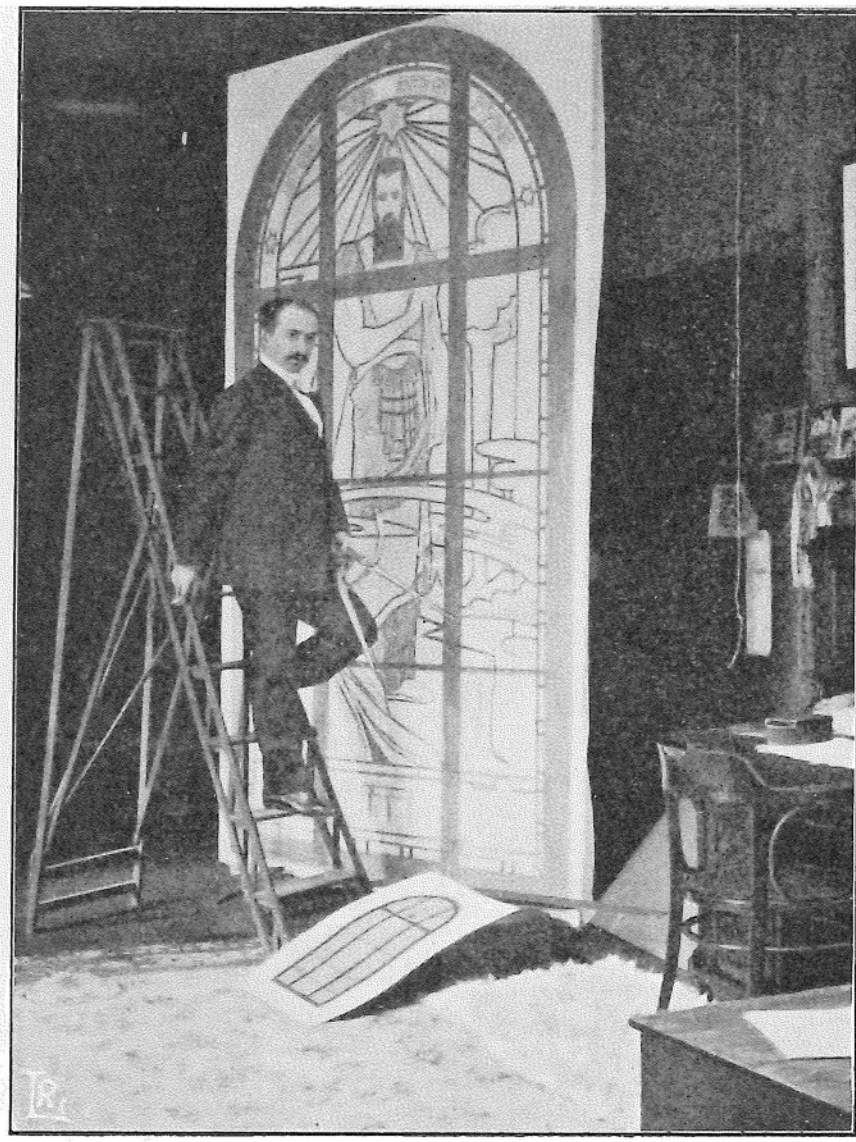

Figure 3. E. M. Lilien stands alongside a larger than life image of Moses/Herzl in his studio as he designs the stained glass window *Mose* I in Figure 2, 1904. In Edgar Alfred Regener, *E. M. Lilien. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der zeichenden Künste*, Berlin 1905, p. 146.

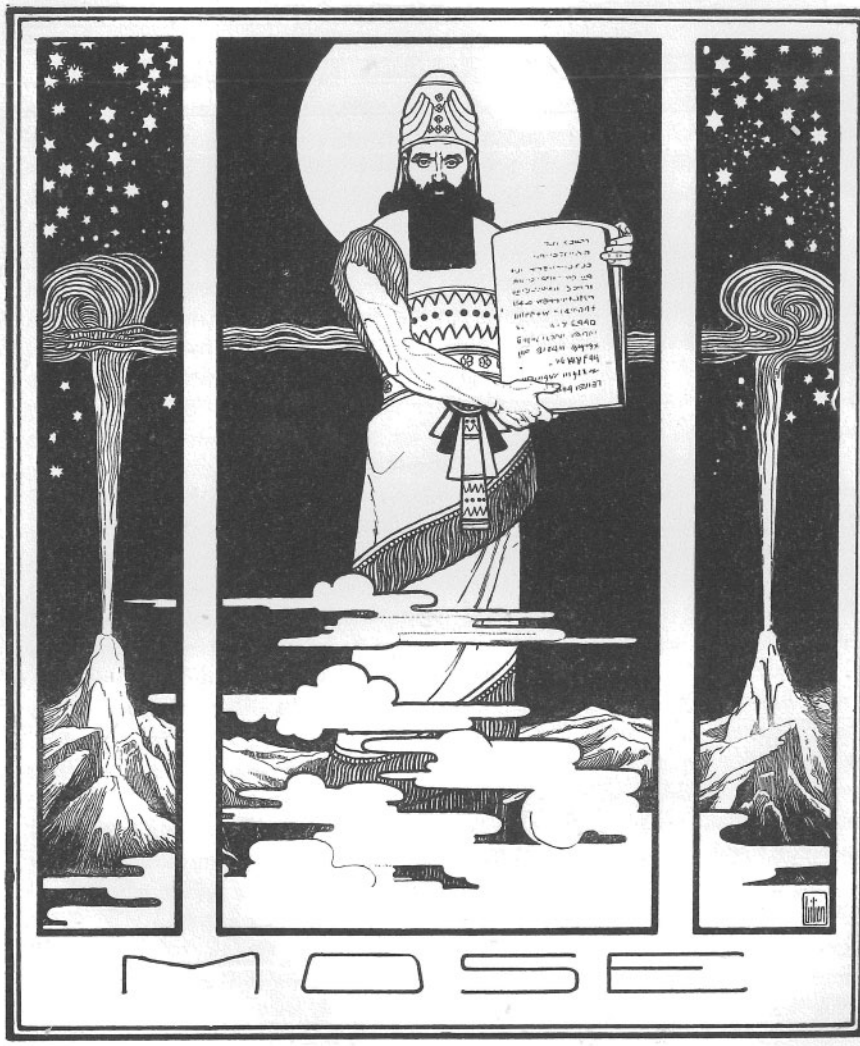

Figure 4. *Mose* II. Lilien again depicted Moses with Theodor Herzl's distinctive square beard in 1908. The religious overtones were even more explicit in this image, which was included in an illustrated Bible. In F. Rahlwes (ed.), *Überlieferung und Gesetz. Das Fünfbuch Mose und das Buch Josua*, transl. by Reuss, vol. 1, *Die Bücher der Bibel*, Braunschweig 1908, p. 233.

Birnbaum's Theorem: *Daytsh* + *Ostjude* = Messiah

Birnbaum's multilingual writings were central to his intercultural position between western and eastern Jewries, and any consideration of Birnbaum is impossible without examining how both his Yiddish and German writings work with and against one other. This approach exposes greater complexity in his internalization of the Jewish Other, the *Ostjude* persona. Namely, at the same time that Birnbaum became the eastern Jew, he was forming a Jewish identity informed by his knowledge of the German Jew stereotype. He personified the mythical *daytsh* for many who saw him as a prophet or messiah. In similar fashion to the letter-exchange with Rabbi Tuvia Horowitz, others, such as the writer Shemaryahu Gorelik, wrote that Birnbaum embodied the prophet Jeremiah by being "a Jew in Jeremiah's mould" and having "a Jeremiah countenance".[17] Notable Jewish historian Simon Dubnow dubbed Birnbaum the "knight of eastern Jewry".[18] Samuel Bettelheim, an Orthodox journalist from Bratislava, referenced Birnbaum as "the honourable prophet in the wilderness".[19] Chaim Nagler, leader of the first Zionist youth group *Blau-Weiß*, wrote about his impressions of Birnbaum when he saw him at the age of fifteen: "and there stood on the podium a true, a real man from Vienna, [. . .] at that time he appeared to me like a prophet, no, like an army leader who was calling his people to battle and was belting out the inspirational war cry."[20]

Birnbaum had intimate knowledge of how eastern Jews perceived German Jews.[21] Not only did he translate Yiddish into German, but Birnbaum specifically translated the Yiddish literary pieces about German Jews, such as Peretz's 'The Magician' and 'Seven Good Years'.[22] In a German volume of collected Peretz stories, Birnbaum notably includes these two stories that thematize the gaze on the Jewish Other. Intertextual references to these Yiddish works also appear in Birnbaum's own writing. Birnbaum once described an arrogant German Jew he met on the way to a Zionist conference as "a '*daytsh ben daytsh*' [thoroughbred German] as our Sholem Aleichem would say".[23] He directly quotes from Sholem Aleichem's short story 'A Premature Passover', a work published just two years

[17] "a yid in a Yirmiyahu geshtalt", "Yirmiyahu-ponem". Shemaryahu Gorelik, 'Dr. Nosn Birnboym' [Dr. Nathan Birnbaum], in *Eseyen* [Essays], Los Angeles 1947, pp. 265–274 (pp. 266, 270).

[18] Simon Dubnow, 'Ein Gruß aus dem Osten dem Ritter des Ostjudentums', in *Die Freistatt*, 2, no. 2 (28 May 1914), pp. 76–78.

[19] "Nathan Birnbaum, der verehrungswürdige Prophet in der Wüste". Samuel Bettelheim, 'Die Familie des "Šemen Rokeach"', in *Judaica*, 4, nos. 21–22 (February–March 1937), pp. 16–17 (p. 16).

[20] "Und da stand auf dem Podium, ein wirklicher, ein echter Wiener, [. . .] damals erschien er mir wie ein Prophet, nein wie ein Heerführer, der seine Leute zum Kampfe aufruft und ihnen die begeisternde Kriegslosung zuruft." Chaim Nagler, 'Über Birnbaum', in *Die Freistatt*, 2, no. 2 (28 May 1914), p. 85.

[21] As early as 1897, Birnbaum knew about the eastern Jewish perception of the German Jew. See Nathan Birnbaum, 'Deutsche und Polnische Juden', in *Die Welt*, 6 August 1897, pp. 4–5.

[22] J. L. Perez (Y. L. Peretz), 'Die sieben guten Jahre', in *Volkstümliche Geschichten. Heiligen- und Wunderlegenden*, Berlin 1913, pp. 12–17; and 'Der Zauberkünstler', in *Volkstümliche Geschichten. Heiligen- und Wunderlegenden*, Berlin 1913, pp. 29–36.

[23] "Also 'Datsch ben Datsch', würde unser Schulem-alejchem sagen." Nathan Birnbaum, 'Unter Fremden', in *Ausgewählte Schriften zur jüdischen Frage*, vol. 2, Czernowitz 1910, pp. 352–356 (p. 354).

prior, about a tricky *shtetl* Jew who visits Germany.[24] Birnbaum was familiar enough with these stories and contexts that he quoted from them.

Birnbaum's understanding of the fantastic and sometimes critical westward gaze on German Jews in Yiddish literature led him to neutralize this criticism when curating the eastern Jew before a German-Jewish audience. Birnbaum's translations exhibit his interest in inverting the negative reception of eastern Jews in German into an almost apotheosis of their holistic, traditional lifestyles. Subscribing to the efforts of literary nationalism, he strove to show German Jews what Jewish folktales could look like, as opposed to the familiar German ones. Yet he also sought to protect the image of these Yiddish authors by simultaneously making changes when necessary to avoid any unflattering misunderstandings. One of his intentional mistranslations obscures the fact that the fantastic Yiddish tales originally centred on German Jews. For example, in Peretz's 'Seven Good Years', Tuvye the *shtetl* Jew meets the German Jew in green hunter's gear who later is revealed to be Elijah the Prophet. In Birnbaum's translation, the man in hunter's gear is identified as a "stranger" (der Fremde).[25] This process of translating, editing, and omitting reveals Birnbaum's role as curator of the eastern Jew.

Birnbaum tapped into certain themes of Yiddish literature for his assumed identity. Alongside the supernatural German-Jewish figure, other themes involving German-Jewish characters in Yiddish literature further help to place Birnbaum's transition into perspective. Dan Miron, in *The Image of the Shtetl*, identifies the prodigal son as a recurring character in Yiddish literature. In this construct, the native son leaves his hometown, to return unexpectedly many years later, transformed and warmly received. This plotline sometimes intersects with the plotline of the German Jew who visits the *shtetl* in that the visiting *daytsh* turns out at times to be the prodigal son in western dress.[26] Even though Birnbaum himself was not born in Galicia, he used his parents' story to fashion a narrative of himself in line with that of the prodigal son: his parents left Galicia and had a child abroad, and that son has returned to save the town. A necessary component of this self-fulfilling prophecy was a claim to eastern Jewish roots. To accomplish this, Birnbaum positioned himself as an eastern Jew in Yiddish and wrote about German Jews as if he were not one. A shift can be seen in Birnbaum's writings in 1909, when he began using the first-person pronoun "we" to assume the voice of an

[24] In Sholem Aleichem's story, the visiting Pinches Pinkes calls the waiter a "*daytsh* ben *daytsh*". Sholem Aleichem, 'A frier peysekh', 30 March 1908, p. 2.

[25] Perez, 'Die sieben guten Jahre', p. 16. Jeffrey Grossman suggests that Yiddish to German translators had competing ideological agendas. Though my focus here is on Birnbaum and the reasons that he might have mistranslated, Hermann Blumenthal also failed to translate the word *daytsh* literally. In contrast, Albert Katz did translate *daytsh* directly in his rendition of Sholem Aleichem's 'The Pen-Knife'. See Jeffrey A. Grossman, 'Sholem Aleichem and the Politics of German Jewish Identity: Translations and Transformations', in *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 41 (2009), pp. 81–110; J. L. Perez (Y. L. Peretz), 'Sieben gute Jahre', in *Wiener Jüdische Volksstimme*, 2 May 1912, pp. 1–2; Albert Katz, 'Aus dem Leben eines Knaben', in *Die Jüdische Presse*, 28 November 1907: *Illustrirte Feuilleton-Beilage*, pp. 189–190 (p. 190).

[26] Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*, Syracuse 2000, p. 27.

eastern European Jew and to separate himself from western Jewry.[27] A 1914 biographical article emphasized his eastern European legacy in its opening statement: "Nathan Birnbaum was born on the tenth of Iyar (at that time, 16 May) 5624 (1864) in Vienna as the son of eastern European Jewish parents."[28] His self-representation as western Jew but also eastern Jew became so interchangeable that even Hersh Nomberg, a Polish-born Yiddish essayist who worked with Birnbaum, was confused about whether or not Birnbaum was born in Galicia. In two pieces, written several years apart, Nomberg wrote conflicting descriptions of Birnbaum as both a Viennese-born *Westjude* and as a native-born Galician.[29] Capturing the moment when the prodigal son returns, an impressive 1907 picture for the Austrian parliamentary election, taken from a high angle, shows Birnbaum at the front of a throng of townspeople from the city of Buczacz, his father's hometown (Figure 5). Along the edges of the largely Jewish crowd are Ukrainian women in white headscarves, attesting to Birnbaum's multi-ethnic support. Even though he lost this election (reportedly due to fraud), the scene is striking, with Birnbaum at front and centre of the crowded town square. The Yiddish storylines of the German Jew and the prodigal son intersect here in the figure of Nathan Birnbaum.

Then came Birnbaum's explicit messianic statements. On several occasions he expressed that he felt a divine calling, even using the rhetoric of messianism. A review entitled 'The New Birnbaum' by Moyshe Shalit presents a first-hand account of Birnbaum's religious turn. Shalit describes Birnbaum's arrival in Vilna (today Vilnius, Lithuania) on the last day of 1911. The scene depicts the Austrian Jew as he descended from the train onto the platform, dressed "in a thin, short coat and [. . .] shivering from the cold". Shalit describes Birnbaum on the platform: "his tall prophet-like figure with the quite characteristic face, the forehead, the nose, and the beard forced us to look up."[30] The observation of Birnbaum's short jacket suggests that his clothing is not only ill-chosen for the weather, but also conspicuously foreign. Moreover, the comment on Birnbaum's "prophet-like" figure once again associates the German Jew with mythic imagery. Shalit describes Birnbaum as a prophet to foreshadow the main encounter with Birnbaum during

[27] "Wir sind das Leben, ihr seid der Todeskampf. Wir sind das Wesen, ihr seid der Schatten. Wir sind der Stamm, ihr seid die Splitter" (We are life, you are battling death. We are the life form, you are its shadow. We are the trunk, you are the splinters). Nathan Birnbaum, 'Die Emanzipation des Ostjudentums vom Westjudentum', in *Ausgewählte Schriften zur jüdischen Frage*, vol. 2, Czernowitz 1910, pp. 13–33 (p. 28).

[28] "Nathan Birnbaum ist am 10. Ijar (damals 16. Mai) 5624 (1864) in Wien als Sohn ostjüdischer Eltern geboren." 'Biographische Daten über Dr. Nathan Birnbaum (Mathias Acher)', in *Die Freistatt*, 2, no. 3 (1914), pp. 146–151 (p. 146).

[29] Compare Hersh Dovid Nomberg, 'D'r Birnboyms iberkerung' [Dr. Birnbaum's Conversion], in *Mentshn un verk: Yidishe shrayber* [People and Works: Yiddish Writers], *Gezamelte verk* [Collected Works], vol. 9, Warsaw 1930, pp. 203–206 (p. 203); and Hersh Dovid Nomberg, 'D'r Nosn Birnboym: Tsu zayn yubileum' [Dr. Nathan Birnbaum: On His Jubilee], in *Mentshn un verk: Yidishe shrayber* [People and Works: Yiddish Writers], *Gezamelte verk* [Collected Works], vol. 9, Warsaw 1930, pp. 207–210 (pp. 207–208).

[30] "Zayn hoykhe novieshe figur mit dem zeyer kharakteristishn gezikht, dem shtern, dem noz un der bord, hot undz umruik oyfgezukht." Moyshe Shalit, 'Der nayer Birnboym' [The New Birnbaum], in *Literarishe etyudn* [Literary Studies], vol. 1, Vilna 1920, pp. 66–82 (pp. 69–70).

Figure 5. Nathan Birnbaum, candidate for the Austrian parliament, in 1907 (front and centre). Photograph taken at Buczacz in present-day Ukraine. By courtesy of the Nathan and Solomon Birnbaum Archives, Toronto.

that visit, a conversation in which Birnbaum told Shalit and writer Shemaryahu Gorelik in no uncertain terms about his intention to be the Messiah. It becomes clear to Shalit and Gorelik that Birnbaum had taken on the messianic mantle and was spreading the news among his eastern European brothers. The only problem is that Shalit was thoroughly confused. Here, the conversation begins with Birnbaum speaking, after which Shalit shares his thoughts:

> "Zionism has missed the mark, and the other movements can't help either. There needs to be a new powerful religious movement of believers, a movement at the head of which stands a messiah. Do you know what?" He lowers his voice—"I feel called to it. I want to set myself up as the head of such a movement. I want to be the Messiah of the Jews!. . . I can't tell you all the details, but you will hear about it. The time will come." I looked over to Gorelik—and we both decided, as if on our own, not to say a word. We just looked at Birnbaum and understood that in this man's head some deranged thoughts were growing, to which it is difficult to say if they were going to take on a dangerous or a productive character. Nevertheless something irrational planted itself into this man's brain. And there was also something funny sounding about the "I", the obsession with "I". Gorelik's relationship to Birnbaum from that time on was especially negative. As an aside, Gorelik was carrying around religious ideas of his own then. Birnbaum didn't say a single word about it and did not make anything else known, as if he never had the discussion with us. As far as we were concerned, we also left the subject alone. It wasn't anything more than an episode, a secret conversation among three people.[31]

The awkwardness in the air, as Birnbaum tells Shalit and Gorelik that he wants to be the Messiah, is tangible in Shalit's retelling eight years later. The year 1912, the same year that Birnbaum began on this visit to Vilna, has been noted as a turning point in Birnbaum's thought as he began to produce more religiously infused works, beginning with 'We have sinned. . .'.[32] After Shalit published his account, Birnbaum wrote him a letter questioning the exchange and specifically taking umbrage with Shalit's use of the word 'messiah'. In his response, Shalit defends the article ("what I wrote is, of course, exact and correct") but suggests that Birnbaum misinterprets his use of the term. Though ostensibly softening his wording for

[31] "Der tsionizm hot farshpilt, di ale iberike bavegungen kenen oykh nit helfn. S'darf antshteyn a naye mekhtike religieze bavegung fun gloybike, a bavegung, vos berosh fun ir zol shteyn a meshiekh. Oy veyst ir vos? – Do hot Birnboym aropgelozn dem kol, – ikh fil zikh dertsu barufn. Ikh vel zikh shteln berosh fun aza bavegung. Ikh vel vern der meshiekh fun di yidn!. . . Ikh ken aykh nokh nit dertseyln ale protem, ober ir vet derhern vegn dem. S'vet kumen di tsayt. Ikh hob zikh ibergekukt mit Gorelikn, – un mir hobn beyde vi fun zikh aleyn bashlosn keyn eyn vort oyf dem nit entfern. Mir hobn nor a kuk geton oyf Birnboymen un hobn farshtanen, az bay dem mentshn in kop vaksn epes metushteshe gedanken, vos s'iz shver aroystsuzogn tsi veln zey onnemen a geferlikhn oder a frukhtbarn kharakter. Al kol ponem, etvos irratsioneles hot zikh bay dem mentshn in moyekh bazetst. Un dertsu hot modne geklungen der 'ikh', di manie fun 'ikh'. Bazunders negativ hot zikh batsoygn tsu Birnboymen fun yener tsayt Gorelik, hagam Gorelik gufe hot zikh dan getrogn mit religieze ideyn. Mer hot Birnboym ven dem keyn eyn vort nit geredt, un hot mer mit keyn zakh nit gegebn ontsuherenish, az er hot vegn nit iz gehat mit undz aza geshprekh. Mir, fun undzer zayt, hobn oykh di zakh opgeleygt on a zayt. S'iz geven nit mer vi an epizod, a geheymer geshprekh tsvishn dray mentshn." Ibid., pp. 70–71.

[32] David Bondy, 'Dr. Nathan Birnbaum', in *Jüdische Presse*, 9 April 1937, pp. 1–2 (p. 1). See Nathan Birnbaum, 'Wir haben gesündigt. . .', in *Um die Ewigkeit. Jüdische Essays*, Berlin 1920, pp. 9–20.

Birnbaum, Shalit essentially repeats himself that "you felt called to work for a religious renewal of Jews and to execute this process".[33] Despite the fact that Birnbaum bristled at the word 'messiah', Shalit did not retract what he said. This exchange again shows the significance in reception and re-reception between eastern and western Jewry. Where Shalit wrote to a Yiddish-speaking audience, criticizing this western European interlocutor, Birnbaum attempts to intervene and soften that message.

Birnbaum's messianism was not as secret as Shalit made it out to be in their "secret conversation among three people". Birnbaum more than hinted at this in his writing. In the article 'On the Ocean: Thoughts and Memories', Birnbaum recalls a religious experience he had on a ship to the United States in 1907/1908. He compares this event with the biblical figure of Jonah, the prophet famous for his encounter with God and a big fish on the open seas.[34] More directly in his 1918 work *God's People*, Birnbaum wrote, "I did not find God, as one says today so nicely and so dishonestly. I did not need to find him. He announced himself in me and then entered suddenly into my consciousness. I recognized him immediately."[35] He translated *God's People* into Yiddish within a few years, thereby exposing both German and Yiddish audiences to his divine mission.[36] As his intellectual interests developed in Orthodox Judaism and its politics, he continued writing about the Messiah, but in a more detached way. At the end of his life in Dutch exile from the Nazis, he published the volume *Rufe* (*Callings*). In this 1936 compilation of his most recent German-language articles, the last essay is entitled 'Moschiach', the German transliteration of the Hebrew word for messiah.[37] The tone of the article had notably changed from personal attachment to the Messiah to a more traditional religious essay on belief in a messiah, but this article completed a messianic strain in Birnbaum's thinking through most of his life. Birnbaum's messianism, as traced here both in his own writings and in the writings of others about him, peaked in a period between 1907 and his Yiddish translation of *God's People* in 1921. In a career that began in the 1880s and ended in the 1930s, this period of fourteen years reflects the broader messianic and revolutionary atmosphere among European Jewish intellectuals before, during, and after the First World War.

Where Birnbaum actualized the blended literary portrayals of bearded, religious eastern European Jews and messianic German Jews in his own very real persona, the author and Nobel Prize laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon turned Birnbaum back

[33] "Vos ikh hob geshribn, iz, natirlekh, genoy un rikhtik. . .", "ir hot zikh gefilt 'barufn' tsu arbetn far a religiezer banayung fun yidishn folk un durkhtsufirn dem oyftu." Letters held at Nathan and Solomon Birnbaum Archives. Birnbaum wrote the letter to Shalit on 19 January 1926 (4 Shvat 5686), and Shalit's response was written on 6 February 1926.

[34] Nathan Birnbaum, 'Auf dem Meere: Gedanken und Erinnerungen', in *Der Israelit*, 4 January 1926, p. 8.

[35] "Ich habe Gott nicht gesucht, wie man das heute so schön und so verlogen ausdrückt, ich brauchte ihn nicht zu finden. Er hatte sich in mir angekündigt und trat dann plötzlich in mein Bewußtsein ein. Unmittelbar erkannte ich ihn." Nathan Birnbaum, *Gottes Volk*, Vienna 1918, p. 5.

[36] Nathan Birnbaum, *Gots Folk* [God's People], transl. by Nathan Birnbaum, Berlin 1921.

[37] Nathan Birnbaum, 'Moschiach', in *Rufe. Sieben Aufsätze*, Antwerp 1936, pp. 81–90.

into a literary portrayal in the 1920 novella *With Our Young and With Our Old*.[38] The story is set in a town with a similar sounding name to Agnon's hometown of Buczacz, the same town where Birnbaum ran for election in 1907 and the town market of which is shown in Figure 5. The beginning of the story starts after an election when the youthful Zionists are forced at the train station to bid farewell to their candidate who lost. The name for the candidate in this fictionalized account is Dr. David Davidson. The outlandish fictional name for Birnbaum, 'David son of David', presents Agnon's critique of Birnbaum for overplaying the figure of the Messiah, as Jewish tradition holds that the Messiah will be a descendent of King David. Agnon humorously deems Birnbaum not only the son of David, but David himself—David Davidson. We find in the case of Birnbaum that literary representation comes full circle, and reality comes to mimic literature. He came to embody a literary representation of a supernatural German Jew in eastern Jewish apparel. Agnon added yet another layer of representation by making a literary caricature of the already literary-infused Birnbaum.

Birnbaum's own family assisted in his messianic campaign and contributed to his reception as messiah. At the Nathan and Solomon Birnbaum Archives in Toronto, an illustration of the family tree made by Nathan Birnbaum's son Solomon is labelled 'Genealogy of Nathan Birnbaum'. It links the man to the famous medieval biblical commentator Rashi and other illustrious families who, tradition maintains, are descendants of King David.[39] Even though the family tree lists the younger generation of Birnbaums, Solomon wanted the genealogical emphasis with its messianic import to be placed on his father Nathan; thus the picture bears the title 'Genealogy of Nathan Birnbaum'. Another of Birnbaum's sons, Menachem, also fostered this reception in a 1920 German-language article published in the satirical, illustrated journal *Schlemiel*. Sammy Gronemann authored the one-page editorial about Nathan Birnbaum, which bore an image of Birnbaum drawn by his son Menachem (see Figure 6).[40]

The editorial begins and ends by referencing a quote from Jesus: "For a prophet, he is lacking nothing in actuality but the land in which he is without honour."[41] Gronemann's messianic comparison of Birnbaum with Jesus is furthered by the use of the word 'prophet' three times within only a few paragraphs. Menachem, as one

[38] Shmuel Yosef Agnon, 'Bineàrenu uvizkenenu' [With Our Young and With Our Old], in *HaTekufah* [The Era], vol. 6 (Berlin 1920), pp. 23–94. See Olson, pp. 154–155. Thomas William Hastings, 'A Study of Agnon's "Young and Old Together"', unpublished MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin 1989.

[39] David Birnbaum, Nathan Birnbaum's grandson, stated that his father Solomon drew the family tree sometime after 1933 (e-mail correspondence, 21 January 2014). It was published in the Yiddish volume, Nathan Birnbaum, *Eys laasoys: Geklibene kesovim* [Time to Act: Collected Writings], Lodz 1938.

[40] Sammy Gronemann was a Zionist activist, an author, and a contributor to *Schlemiel*. Hanni Mittelmann, *Sammy Gronemann (1875–1952): Zionist, Schriftsteller und Satiriker in Deutschland und Palästina*, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 51.

[41] Gr., (pseud. Sammy Gronemann), 'Dr. Nathan Birnbaum (Mathias Acher)', in *Schlemiel. Jüdische Blätter für Humor und Kunst*, no. 14 (1920), p. 189. The title of the article refers to one of Birnbaum's pen names, Matthias Acher. For New Testament references to this quotation by Jesus, see Matthew 13:57, Mark 6:4, Luke 4:24, John 4:44.

Galerie des Schlemiel.

Dr. Nathan Birnbaum (Mathias Acher).

Zum Propheten fehlt ihm eigentlich nichts als das Land, in dem er nichts gilt.

Er hat das Schicksal, daß viele sich zu seinen Anhängern zählen, weil sie ihn nicht verstehen, und daß die, gegen die er seine Anklage erhebt, ihm zujubeln und nicht begreifen, auf wen er zielt.

Er ist gläubig im höchsten Sinne, — er glaubt nicht nur an Gott, — das tun selbst die Agudisten, — er glaubt sogar an die Menschen, die — Still! Er hat lange genug für uns gewacht.

Sein Standpunkt: — er steht da, wo Ulrik Brendel sein ganzes Leben stand.

Und alle die, welche sich nicht scheuen würden einen edlen Renner vor ihren Trödelkarren zu spannen, reklamieren ihn mit Geschrei für ihre Fraktiönchen. —

Er ersteigt Höhe um Höhe, und jedesmal erblickt er einen neuen Aufstieg vor sich und dünkt sich in der Tiefe. Aus welcher Höhe wird ihm der Rückkehrruf aus Zion ertönen, der an Mathias Acher anders erklingen wird als einst an Elischa ben Abuja?

Ohne Feindschaft, — ohne Haß, — ohne Spott, — ohne Verfolger, — Nein! Das ist nichts für einen Propheten! Am Ende macht den Propheten doch gerade das Vaterland, in dem er nichts gilt! *Gr.*

Menachem Birnbaum

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Figure 6. Menachem Birnbaum's drawing of his father as prophet. Gr. (pseud. Sammy Gronemann), 'Dr. Nathan Birnbaum (Mathias Acher)', in *Schlemiel. Jüdische Blätter für Humor und Kunst*, no. 14 (1920), p. 189.

of *Schlemiel*'s illustrators and editors, composed an image of his father's likeness for this article, accentuating the impressive bearded profile with a prominent forehead. Important is the fact that Birnbaum's sons Solomon and Menachem, in the genealogy and in this article, assisted their father in fostering a prophetic presence.

Yiddish literature, German-Jewish literature, and Zionist culture of the fin-de-siècle and First World War periods made messianic longing a central motif. I have argued here that Nathan Birnbaum performed both the Yiddish representation of the German Jew as supernatural redeemer, the *daytsh*, and the German reception of the authentic eastern European Jew, the *Ostjude*. This back and forth of reception, transmission, and re-reception of Jewish lifestyles furthers our understanding of the cultural exchanges between German- and Yiddish-speaking populations.[42] Birnbaum was but one of the mediators between German and Yiddish and not alone in his desire to live an alternate Jewish existence. A small group of German Jews took a similar route and became religious in an eastern European Orthodox manner, rather than the neo-Orthodox German fashion.[43] Birnbaum distinguishes himself, however, from the newly observant, such as Jiří Langer or Ahron Marcus, by combining the assumption of a foreign Jewish life—linguistically, religiously, and culturally—with the literary portrayals of the Jewish Other.[44] He wove both of these aspects into his layered Jewish identity and cultivated a messianic image easily legible for an eastern European audience. Birnbaum's life was the aesthetic culmination of his mediation between western and eastern Jewries.

[42] See Nick Block, 'Ex Libris and Exchange: Immigrant Interventions in the German-Jewish Renaissance', in *The German Quarterly*, 86, no. 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 334–353.

[43] For Birnbaum's disdain for German-Jewish Orthodoxy, see Nathan Birnbaum, *Ausgewählte Schriften zur jüdischen Frage*, vol. 1, Czernowitz 1910, pp. 51 and 243.

[44] Langer and Marcus were from Prague and Hamburg, respectively, and as teenagers they went to learn in Chassidic *yeshivot* in Belz and Radomsk. See Sander Gilman, 'The Rediscovery of the Eastern Jews: German Jews in the East, 1890–1918', in David Bronsen (ed.), *Jews and Germans, 1860–1933: The Problematic Symbiosis*, Heidelberg 1979, pp. 338–365.