Modern Yiddish literature poses a challenge to any model of a secular culture, because this literature is never secular as a static condition, but always secularizing, poised between centripetal references to the Jewish tradition and centrifugal aspirations toward the world beyond. This tension is a consequence of Yiddish’s linguistic character and its function in pre-modern Jewish life as a “fusion language” — that is, a language that consists of several otherwise unrelated linguistic sources (like English!). Yiddish brings together a Hebrew alphabet and liturgical rhetoric with a Germanic grammar and vocabulary, as well as Slavic terminology and syntactic structures. Thus it is simultaneously rooted in a Jewish tradition of textual study and in the Eastern European society to which its speakers trace their origins. By extension, Yiddish literature emerges in the Middle Ages and Renaissance out of a mediating function, alternately translating sacred Hebrew texts, such as biblical stories or rabbinic legends, into the vernacular language and expectations of its readers, or translating and transforming non-Jewish literature into a Judaic language and worldview. Starting in the 19th century, modern Jewish writers used Yiddish literature to challenge the norms of Jewish society via the rhetoric of Talmudic learning and the Slavic marketplace. These typically satirical works introduced modern ideals via a camouflage of familiar, parodic rhetorical devices that captured the location of Jewish society between tradition and modernity, as well as the contradictions of a secretly polemical, outwardly conventional literary discourse.

The Yiddish literature produced in Weimar-era Berlin is a provocative example of how Yiddish writers dedicated themselves to a secularizing ideology and aesthetic while remaining bound to traditional habits of Jewish rhetoric, reference, and sensibility. In the aftermath of World War I, Berlin emerged briefly
as a leading center of Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian literature. Dovid Bergelson (1884–1952), Der Nister (Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, 1884–1950), and Moyshe Kulbak (1896–1937)—all of whom resided in Berlin during the 1920s—were among the most experimental Yiddish authors, yet each utilized the resources of the Yiddish language and culture that most conspicuously tied them to the Jewish tradition. Bergelson, for example, wrote a novel in 1927 describing the transformation of a Ukrainian border shtetl into a site of revolutionary struggle and Soviet triumph during the Russian Civil War. He titled this work *Mides ha'din* (roughly, “strict justice”), a Kabbalistic term that refers to God’s capacity for judgment, distinct from God’s mercy. It also refers to the messianic vision of divinely ordained violence and cruelty that precedes the utopian dispensation of peace and harmony, to be achieved with the restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem. Although Bergelson used the term, semi-ironically, to identify the Soviet Union as the true location of Jewish aspirations for a better future, the residue of religious rhetoric and memory is essential to the poetics of the novel and the reactions of its characters.

Moyshe Kulbak, similarly, devoted his first prose work, *Meshiekh ben-Efraim* (“The Messiah of the House of Ephraim,” 1924) to imagining the Kabbalistic conflict between an anticipatory redeemer of strict justice and the messianic fulfillment of love and mercy as a comic and grotesque effort. His story takes place in 19th-century Poland as Hasidim, Christian peasants, assimilating Jewish women, and a deranged philosopher seek to anoint a reluctant Jewish recluse as their redeemer. This work mixes Jewish and Christian mysticism, parodies of Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, eroticism and asceticism, ritual laughter and sacrificial violence. Using poetry and prose, it creates a montage of traditional Eastern European life on the precipice of modernity, revolution, and catastrophe. Every incident in the narrative mobilizes secularizing and sacralizing impulses, leaving this dialectic unresolved for traditional Jews or Christians as much as for the cosmopolitan author himself. Der Nister, likewise, devotes the final story he conceived while in Berlin, *Unter a ployt* (“Behind a Fence,” published in 1929 after the author had returned to the Soviet Union) to a Hasidic-influenced account of a hermit’s fall from grace under the influence of a femme fatale, inspired from the tales of Reb Nakhman of Breslov, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Heinrich Mann.

While the “Berlin” Yiddish modernists were creating these syncretic, politically and aesthetically radical narratives, German-Jewish intellectuals—journalists, novelists, critical theorists, filmmakers, and composers—were also questioning the equation of secularization with progress that had been the hallmark of 19th-century German-Jewish liberalism. For these thinkers, Jewish sources such as the Bible, Hasidic culture, and Yiddish literature itself signified a means of reengagement with Jewish tradition as well as independence from what they saw as the naively conformist values of their parents. At the same time as Dovid Bergelson was reimagining the shtetl in Marxist terms, German-language writers such as Alfred Döblin (1878–1957) and Joseph Roth (1894–1939), both born in Eastern Europe, were writing travelogues of their journeys to the newly independent Poland and the Soviet Union, to report on Jewish cultures that confounded their own stereotypes of authenticity. The critical theorist Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), under the influence of his friend Gershom Scholem, was analogously engaged in a philosophy of language and history derived equally, if obliquely, from Kabbalah and Marxism. And the composer Arnold Schoenberg
(1874–1951), who had converted to Christianity in the 1890s, consecrated his greatest work, the unfinished opera *Moses und Aron* (“Moses and Aaron,” abandoned in 1933) to a biblical spectacle dedicated to his re-identification with the Jewish religion and the Jewish people.

Berlin thus functions not as a center so much as a crossroads for cosmopolitan Jewish culture in the 1920s. German and Eastern Jews, as well as questions of secularization and sacralization, meet one another coming and going, in historical, territorial, linguistic, and aesthetic terms. The concept that connects these otherwise unrelated aesthetic and cultural strands is *allegory*, understood according to Walter Benjamin’s definition as a rhetorical figure that combines conceptual and figurative language. Allegory replaces the kinetic energy of metaphor or metonymy with the static electricity of abstract thought clinging to the language of poetry or the poetics of fiction. It nonetheless provides an ideal poetics for modernism in Berlin because allegory functions as the intrusion of a superseded temporality onto the present—just as, for example, the image of the shtetl in the imagination of Yiddish and German-Jewish modernists signifies the intrusion of the Jewish past onto a cosmopolitan future these thinkers attempted to imagine. Allegory characterizes a work that is caught among territories, temporalities, and languages, precisely as Jewish modernism in Berlin is.

The juxtaposition of the figures in this comparison is itself allegorical, in that the artists working in one language had little knowledge of the work being produced in the other. And yet this allegory of allegories is intended to suggest a methodology that brings these coteries together to imagine the limits of Jewish secularization as well as the enduring appeal of Jewish sacralization, even in parodic terms. By remaining suspended between past and future, tradition and modernity, and sacred and profane, these artists characterize not only their own precarious time and place, but also anticipate the anxieties and aesthetic responses of the present moment as well.

This image, *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee (1920), was owned for a time by Walter Benjamin. It inspired his “angel of history,” the allegory he proposed for understanding the dilemmas of perceiving the past in relation to the future and disenchanting the modern myth of progress.