New Academia: An International Journal of English Language, Literature and Literary Theory

(Online ISSN 2347-2073) Vol. IV Issue I, Jan. 2015

SHOLEM ABRAMOVITCH: THE GRANDFATHER OF YIDDISH LITERATURE AND HIS NEW ORIENTATION TOWARD THE POOR

Meital Orr
Harvard University
meitalorr@gmail.com

Abstract

Since the nineteenth-century, Sholem Abramovitch has been hailed as the grandfather of modern Jewish literature, but since that time, scholarship has failed to adequately answer what makes him the rightful founder. One reason is his exposure to a much wider range of European and especially Russian literature, which he was able to integrate seamlessly into the Jewish context of his work. Another reason was his new literary orientation toward the poor – linguistically, formally and thematically. While most nineteenth-century Jewish authors wrote in Hebrew, for and about the Jewish intelligentsia, Abramovitch wrote in the language of the poor masses (Yiddish), for them and about them – as had no Jewish writer before him. While his achievements have been widely documented, no attempt has been made to decipher the reasons for them, or why was he uniquely positioned to effect such a literary transition. This study aims to unearth the personal experiences and literary influences that shaped Abramovitch's revolutionary turn toward the folk. It posits that he was uniquely positioned to effect this transformation due to his personal proximity to – and identification with – the masses in childhood, and his exposure to a far wider range of Romantic literary influences than had his predecessors.

Scholars have documented how Sholem Abramovitch pioneered the re-orientation of modern Jewish literature toward the poor. While most nineteenth-century Jewish writers wrote in Hebrew, about and for the intelligentsia, Abramovitch was the first writer to shift the focus of Jewish literature from the middle classes – as readers and literary subjects – to the lower classes. He achieved this shift not only formally – through Yiddish and the literary device of his lifelong, folksy narrator Mendele the Bookpeddlar – but also thematically, through his novel focus on poor protagonists, and treatment of them with sympathy and inner penetration. One question that has not been answered by scholarship is why Abramovitch was able to effect such a transition? What made his personal and literary situation so different from that of his contemporaries, allowing him to effect this revolutionary shift in focus? This paper will point to two biographical reasons: His early close relationship to and identification with the poor – which was unique among his contemporaries – and his literary influences from Romantic European and Russian literature – the latter which had remained largely inaccessible to Jewish writers before his time. This study aims to uncover the multiple factors which made him uniquely positioned to initiate a literary revolution in modern Jewish literature, by closely examining his early experiences and literary influences.

I. Early Experiences

A) Contact with the Folk

One of the defining traits of Abramovitch's childhood was its unique proximity to the lower classes. While most of the nineteenth-century Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement were poor as a result of political oppression, Abramovitch experienced prolonged contact with the poorest of them all. This is largely because Abramovitch's father, Chayim, was a town leader – a crown rabbi and tax collector – and from early youth, Abramovitch's home was perpetually filled with the poorest Jews who sought his father's legal, financial and medical help. Consequently, as he grew older, Abramovitch's precocious curiosity and sympathy quickly led him to seek out and befriend some of the poorest and most "outcast" of these classes: the Jewish craftsmen. In his autobiography, he describes the low status of craftsmen in shtetl hierarchy:

Craftsmen were about as despised by the Jews as the Jews were by the Gentiles…especially in places like Kapulie, where prestige depended on scholarship and lineage...A tavern owner, innkeeper and moneylender was...thought respectable...[But] the community kept the craftsmen in their places, and discriminated against them in many ways. A laborer was not permitted to wear a silk caftan or fur hat on the Sabbath, his place was in the last row of benches in synagogue. If he was summoned to the Torah, the reader would call him by the name of "friend," instead of the usual appellation of "master"; then he would read only three verses, the absolute minimum...When a meeting of householders was held to discuss community affairs, he was never invited, and his opinion never asked…For any trifling act of insolence he was scolded or slapped, and sometimes publicly flogged. His children were seized and turned over for military service in place of a rich man's sons.

Abramovitch's first contact with craftsmen came in the unlikely figure of his religious tutor, Yosef Ruveyni – who was not only a talented Hebraist and Talmudist, but also an artisan skillful with wood, stone, and copper. Consequently, Abramovitch's tutelage was unique not only in its subject matter and method, but also in the profession and social class of his teacher. While most children went to heder (religious school) and were taught by melamdim – religious teachers tolerably respected in the shtetl – Abramovitch's tutoring situation uniquely prepared him to respect the "lower classes". He also spent much of his childhood with Ruveyni's craftsmen friends: Hertzl Kailis the carpenter and town "shrieker," and Isaac the blacksmith.

Abramovitch's childhood friendship with craftsmen was unique among Jewish children in general and the intelligentsia in particular. Most Jewish children associated with playmates their own age, and the Jewish intelligentsia was taught in youth by religious teachers in heder according to traditional methods. Their introduction to the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) came later as adolescents and more frequently, in young adulthood upon chance contact with older and more established maskilim (Jewish intellectuals). While artisans sometimes initiated the journey toward maskilic identity, their influence usually occurred in adolescence rather than childhood, and resulted in mentorship rather than friendship.

Marcus Moseley notes that in most Jewish autobiographies between 1880 and 1940, the "mentor-muse" who initiates the journey toward maskilic identity is the eccentric artisan, artist, musician, rabbi, or melamed. Abramovitch's craftsmen are unique in that they unite these professions with that of the maskil. Moreover, while the artisans inspired

Abramovitch's identity as a maskil in adolescence, his early contact with them in childhood was based on an emotional bond that far surpassed this later mentorship. Abramovitch recalled talking for hours with his teacher Ruveyni, as friends, neither wanting the conversation to end. His best friend in childhood was Hertzl, the Jewish farmer (rather than Hertzl's son): "The two of them, years apart, shared many of the same feelings…The nameless dissatisfaction and longing in Shloymele's heart, which…found no counterpart among the grown-ups of the town...were matched by Hertzl Kailis...Shloymele could have found…no better friend."

Abramovitch's respect for the stigmatized classes was a value that he inherited not only from his kind, religious mother, but also from his father. Abramovitch's father – the crown rabbi of the shtetl – did not hesitate to hire Ruveyni the craftsman as a religious tutor for his most promising son. He also devoted much of his time each day to helping the poor. While his profession would eventually complicate Abamovitch's relationship to these classes, what the boy saw in childhood was his fathers' personal and professional dedication to the poorest segments of society and it had a profound influence on his own lifelong social and literary devotion to them. In young adulthood, Abramovitch also frequented the neighborhoods of the lower classes to gather material for his early work.

A powerful influence on his literature in general and focus on the poor in particular, was his experiences in young adulthood of daily life among these classes on his wanderings with Avreml the beggar. This unique and harrowing experience brought him into close contact with the poorest and most suffering segments of his nation and made clear why he would later empathize with their lot as had no writer before him. Abramovitch's shared physical and emotional hardship with these classes, is also where he witnessed with greatest clarity both "God and the Devil in the human heart," and it did much to influence his metaphysical descriptions and the dialogic (or contradictory and dual) view of human nature that would become one of his hallmarks.

During his months of enforced wandering with the beggar Avreml, Abramovitch would often sleep in shelters for the poor where beggars and thieves congregated. Such poorhouses were filled with lice, the famished and the sick – its occupants often awakening to find a corpse in their midst. In this living hell, writes Sol Liptzin, Abramovitch met "with an assortment of mendicants who ranged from the saintly to devilish characters." It was here that he witnessed both vicious brawls and unearthly selflessness. His experience of these extremes did much to inform the dialogic treatment of the masses in his work, and allowed him to write with authority about the inner life of beggars and thieves. Shmuel Niger quotes Abramovitch as saying that "one can only influence people with whom one has shared fate – on his bones and flesh – and undergone hardship." Without his experience of physical hardship among the poorest of his people, Abramovitch would never have become so close to them, nor his estrangement from them later in life so painful, and his self-revision so lasting. He would never have focused so much of his work on the poor, nor preserved so much of what was sacred to them in his literature: their language, folklore and religion.

B) Identification with the Folk

One of the reasons why Abramovitch was drawn to the folk – in youth and in his literary work – is his genuine identification with them on the basis of their "outsider" status and "childlike natures" vis-à-vis mainstream society.

1) Children and Outsiders

While the socio-economic status of his folk-caregivers and friends, the craftsmen, naturally placed them in opposition to the rest of society, so also did their childlike natures. Abramovitch's autobiography documents his constriction in the presence of the adult-world, which demanded strict obedience and long hours of study. This bondage contrasted greatly with the joy and freedom he experienced in the presence of child-like, folk-caregivers, which resulted in identification and friendship. The personalities of Abramovitch's craftsmen are defined in his memoirs by their childlike natures, their love of storytelling, and their anti-normative life joy:

After the scowling countenances of grown-ups, with their sighs and groans, and sour moralizing and lecturing, Isaac's friendly smiling face affected Shloyme like the bright sun emerging from behind dark clouds; …[he felt] completely rejuvenated in the company of an affable adult who smiles, enchants him with stories, and acts very much like a child himself. But such grown-up children are hard to find among us…To Shloyme's good fortune, there were still two in the town at this time, Isaac the blacksmith and Herzl the Carpenter. Both had an influence on the boy, helping to keep alive in Shloymele's heart the spark of childhood.

The craftsmen were also considered child-like due to their love for nature and their questioning of God – both traits they passed on to the young Abramovitch. Though in childhood, Abramovitch identified with the folk on the basis of their childlike natures, in adolescence he also experienced on his own skin the socio-economic stigmatization that was felt to a far greater degree by these classes. When, after his father's death, he was sent away for schooling for the first time at the age of fourteen, the insular youth received a rude shock from the condescension with which he was treated as a result of his lower socio-economic status. During Abramovitch's wanderings among yeshivas he was essentially homeless, often starving and wholly dependent on the charity of householders who preferred to help local boys rather than an orphan from afar. He later recalled the period as, "years of shame, sorrow and humiliation."

If Abramovitch became the champion of the "insulted and injured," it is in great part because during critical periods of his youth, he experienced himself as such. The themes dominating his early work – the exploitation of the weak by the powerful and the importance of self-worth especially for the oppressed – derive directly from his own early feelings of being discriminated against. Following the lead of Charles Dickens, he used his own experience as a half-orphan to depict a long line of "unhappy and unnaturally thoughtful children from dysfunctional families" who reflected the "outsider" status." In childhood, the death of his father increased his proximity to and identification with his folk-friends, and in young adulthood his shared experiences with beggars strengthened his identification with these classes.

2) Father and Son

Abramovitch's childhood identification with the folk derived not only from his experience of stigmatization, but also from his growing internal resistance to the desires and plans of his father. Among other influences, it was his early contact with the folk – who united an introduction to storytelling with the freedom from social norms to pursue it – which inspired his early literary dreams; however, these dreams were in direct opposition to his fathers' plans and wishes that he become "a great scholar in Israel." Abramovitch's father was a proud, solitary personality, infinitely dedicated to his work and his children. As a result, his son was torn between contradictory feelings of love, respect and moral obligation toward him on one hand, and his desire to break free of expectations that were against his will (and perhaps his inclinations) on the other.

Abramovitch writes that though the children fell quiet at his father's entrance, the household was not, "kept in fear of him, as with some tyrannical fathers...far from it! He wore a grave expression, but hardly ever an angry one....In fact, he was quite soft-hearted; the silence that greeted his appearance in the room pained him." The picture of Chayim which emerges is that of a selfless and misunderstood "pater familias": "everyone treasured and loved him, took pride in his wisdom, and accorded him respect." Abramovitch always held not only his education but also his family life as a model for national reform, in large part due to his father.

Nevertheless, Chayim was driven to desperation and untimely death by fallen pride as a result of impending financial ruin. When government decrees changed Jewish dress codes, the astrakhan trade for which the Kapulie Jews were middlemen went bankrupt, ruining also Chayim's livelihood as tax collector, and subsequently his respect in the town. Abramovitch writes:

He was a shrewd man with a wide reputation, even among the local nobles, as an intelligent businessman, and he might have pulled through. But he was as proud as he was intelligent; he couldn't bear to be gossiped about by people who had once trembled at his glance. He lost his appetite, then his health, and finally his fighting spirit.

It is noteworthy that it is the humiliation of Chayim's plunge in social status due to imminent bankruptcy, rather than the actuality of financial loss, that led to his untimely death. Abramovitch's intuitive perception of the psychological aspect of his father's demise led him to focus on two aspects of the oppressed man who is a major theme in his works: the indispensability of a sense of dignity, and the psychological rather than material importance of money.

3) Early Battles for Social Justice

After his father's death, Abramovitch's bonds to the lower classes became partly connected to guilt for his fathers' professional relationship to them. Abramovitch's guilt resulted from a belief in the injustices inherent in his father's profession (tax collection) and led to a lifelong commitment to correcting these. Particularly in The Little Man (1864) and The Meat Tax

(1869), Abramovitch exposes the corruption of Jewish officials who use the religious taxes gathered by their agents, the tax collectors, to increase their personal wealth rather than to benefit the people. Notably, these works focus also on the corruption of the tax collectors – not only of the leaders who misuse their services; however, the dichotomy between the positive tax collector in "The Draft," and the villainous band of collectors in The Tax, reflects the distinction Abramovitch made between his father's individual role and the general corrosive impact of his profession. Abramovitch blamed the institution of which his honest father was inadvertently a part. He viewed tax-collection as an exploitative institution, and his literature makes concrete efforts to reform it.

Abramovitch's connection to the poor, and guilt for his father's profession, led him to engage in early philanthropic efforts. On his wanderings among beggars, Abramovitch joined a group of Jewish youths from Lutsk who organized to establish a need-society for the most impoverished members of their small town. Voted as its leader, Abramovitch drew up the by-laws of the philanthropic society and drafted its manifesto. His larger philanthropic efforts in young adulthood were more directly motivated by the desire to effect national reform that would preclude the causes for his father's death. As soon as he became independent, Abramovitch worked tirelessly to alleviate the condition of recently impoverished merchant classes in Berdichev. In a letter published in Kol Mevaser (1865, no.4) Abramovitch outlines the two-fold purpose of his philanthropic society: "1) to help honorable impoverished people in such a way that thereby they may be able to snatch some bit of livelihood...[and] 2) to support decent people and apply all possible right measures that they should not – God forbid – be wronged." Abramovitch's two objectives – to help the honorable poor and to prevent them from being slandered – aim to prevent the two misfortunes, material and psychological, which led to his father's demise.

4) The National as Personal

Abramovitch's early humanitarianism reveals his instinctive perception of the national plight as personal experience. Throughout his life, his witnessing of social scenes was infallibly absorbed as personal experience and projected symbolically in his work.

On a summer day in 1872, Abramovitch's heart contracted at a brutal scene of a mare being mercilessly beaten by a local boss, and he immediately associated her with the suffering Jewish masses whom he embodied in a mare in his next work. In this situation, Abramovitch was deeply stirred by a public and social matter in which he was strictly speaking, not at all involved. Numerous instances of his penchant to see the national as personal abound. Abramovitch was consumed by the sight of a beggar sack which, like the beaten mare, embodied for him the fate of his hapless nation. In the preface to Fishke, often used as the introduction to his oeuvre, he writes: "I always dream of beggars. Before my eyes, I always see – the old, familiar, Jewish beggar basket. No matter which way I turn my eyes, the basket is before me…"

At the same time that national experience became personal for Abramovitch, so too conversely, his personal experiences were translated into national terms. Abramovitch's

beggar sack, carried on his travels, became the symbol of the poverty of the Jews (Fishke the Lame), his estrangement at homecoming became a recurring motif among his intelligentsia characters, and his autobiography became a work of Jewish history (Of Bygone Days). In young adulthood, his painful awareness of a social gap between himself and the folk is projected in his work in national terms as a symptom of the intelligentsia's alienation from the people.

Because he desired to bring about national social change – to a far greater degree than most nineteenth-century authors, for instance Dickens or Gogol (and rather much like Dostoevsky) – the characters and works of Abramovitch reflect and grapple with immediate national – cultural and ideological – issues. It is a testament to the fervency of his social commitment that Abramovitch was ready to sacrifice his literary dreams to alleviate the condition of his people (by writing in Yiddish). While his target audience was not the very poorest classes, he aimed for a "lower-middle class" readership which was able to buy and read his books. This class and the poorest one, with which he had shared daily life, always remained closest to his heart. In his last years, he considered his life's work accomplished because he was greeted by thousands of adoring readers from the "lower-middle" classes. When Abramovitch toured the Pale in 1909 he was amazed at his reception: "Now I begin to believe that my work was not in vain. Can you imagine? Porters, plain street-porters, came to greet me!"

One of the most important indications of the centrality of the folk in his life and work, is the fact that his cosmic entities are to a large extent reflections of his relationship with the people. While painful intellectual alienation from the people shaped his depictions of the Devil, early identification and later "re-unification" with them forged his artistic views of God (a symbiosis between romanticism and religion).

II. Literary Influences

1) German and Russian Literature

Abramovitch was uniquely positioned to become the champion of the "insulted and injured" not only due to his early experiences, but also his literary influences. Although Abramovitch and his Russian literary contemporaries belonged to very different cultural and literary spheres, their shared lives in Tsarist Russia in the mid-nineteenth century determined their influence by many of the same authors and literary trends from Russia and Europe. A major reason for their cultural overlap was Tsar Alexander's efforts to assimilate the Jews between 1855 and 1862. His easing of residence and university restrictions, and expansion of government-sponsored Jewish schools (which taught Russian) hastened Jewish exposure to Russian and European culture. In addition, the lifting of a thirty-five year ban on Jewish publication in 1862 opened dialogue between the Jewish and Russian intelligentsias through press and literature. Abramovitch's literary coming-of-age in 1855 coincided with these reforms, and with the subsequent cultural shift of the Haskalah from Germany to Russia in the 1860s.

In the 1860s, Abramovitch was the recipient of a much wider range of Russian and European literary influences than were his predecessors. His secular literary education included not only the classical Haskalah canon of German writers – Schiller, Kant, Schelling and Goethe –

but also the works of contemporary Russian authors – Karamzin, Pushkin, Gogol, Nekrasov, Shchedrin and Turgenev. In addition he was exposed to the work of Russian critics: Belinsky, Dobroliubov, Chernyshevsky and Pisarev. To these names could be added many other major and minor German and Russian writers. Through Hebrew, German and Russian translations Abramovitch became acquainted with the works of English writers – Swift, Fielding, Thackeray and Dickens – French writers – Rousseau, Hugo, Sand and Sue – and the Scottish writer, Walter Scott. It was largely due to this rich literary inheritance that he was uniquely positioned to become the "founder" of modern Jewish (Hebrew and Yiddish) literature – and to inherit the romantic influence that allowed him to revolutionize this literature's treatment of the poor.

2) French Social Romanticism

While like most Jewish writers, Abramovitch was conditioned by the German romantic cannon of the Haskalah – Schiller, Kant and Schelling – his literary influence by French romanticism was unique among his Jewish contemporaries. While many of them read the French romantics, few so thoroughly incorporated the literary and social demands of the French social romantics into their literature, as did Abramovitch – who took their call for equality and social justice into the linguistic and formal arenas, as well as the thematic. One of the major focal points of his oeuvre was precisely that of the social romantics: the lives of poor folk ground down by poverty and the crushing weight of an inhuman social order. While his childhood experiences with the poor initiated his literary focus on social justice, the Social Romantics gave him a complex model for expressing this concern through literature.

According to Meir Viner, the maskilim tried to formulate their social demands by using the template of the biblical prophets with their ethical pathos, but since abstract justice required translation to contemporary life, the maskilim also drew from modern French, English and Russian literature. Since the eighteenth-century, the maskilim had been enamored of the abstract French slogans of equality and fraternity, and they translated French protest literature into Hebrew up until the 1850s. Among their most beloved authors were George Sand, Eugene Sue and Victor Hugo. Another French favorite of the maskilim was Jean Racine, whose plays "Esther" and "Amelie" were translated by Solomon Rappoport and Meir Halevi Letteris. Abramovitch's Hebrew reviews in the 1850s show that he had become acquainted with the works of the major European Romantic writers, from the German Schiller and Goethe, to the French Hugo and Sand. Viner points to Abramovitch's influence by the Social Romantic theme of the biographical, social and cultural development of poor youth through the use of social critique and tragic-comedy. One of the main models for this theme in the works of Abramovitch was Charles Dicken's David Copperfield (1850), immensely popular in Russia.

Though Abramovitch was also heavily influenced by Dickens and English Romanticism, his Social Romanticism came primarily from the "philanthropic" protest literature of the French, especially as developed by Hugo, Sue, and Sand, and their many Russian adaptors. The works of Eugene Sue and George Sand were almost immediately translated into Russian upon publication, and took by storm both the Russian and Jewish intelligentsias. As critics

have noted, Abramovitch considered no genre too "low" for incorporation into his work, and he freely borrowed from writers like Sue. Often he employed what Dan Miron calls "the techniques and conventions of the cruder forms of the sentimental novel," such as thrilling episodes, sensational details, parallel plot lines, coincidences and twists of fate.

French romanticism had a profound impact on Haskalah literature. Eugene Sue's Les Mysteres de Paris (1843) spawned many Russian adaptations and a Jewish one by Kalman Shulman (1858) which caused a sensation, selling two thousand copies of its first part in one year. Haskalah literature was also influenced by Alexander Dumas and the "outcast" characters of the 1820s French Romantics who were Hugo's sources. Among the many Haskalah works that George Sand's "village poetry" of the 1840s inspired are, Abraham Mapu's Ahavat Zion (Love of Zion, 1852) and Abramovitch's, Limdu hetev (Learn Well, 1862).

The topics of the French Social Romantics which came to Russia and found their way into the hands of Abramovitch's Russian contemporaries give us a taste of the kind of reading that, aside from Hugo's well documented influence, Abramovitch also encountered through Hebrew and Russian translations and adaptations. August Barbier's work, as one critic put it, "breathed indignation against the vices and misfortunes that now torture the poorer classes of European society and...weep bitter tears over those forced by need into corruption." From Barbier, Sue, Sand and Hugo came the long line of spiritually superior "fallen women" in Russian literature – a trend which Abramovitch continued with the prostitutes of The Wishing-Ring (1865).

The devil in the work of Abramovitch and many of his Russian contemporaries was influenced by Frederic Soulie's Les Memoires du Diable, which treated the subject of social justice by drawing from Romantic Satanism. By inverting good and evil in a bitter social satire combined with melodramatic intrigue, Soulie showed that "virtue was normally exploited, and vice, cunningly masked as virtue reigned triumphant." As the early Abramovitch would do (especially in The Little Man) Emile Souvestre specialized in novels with parallel plot lines contrasting the fates of noble, self-sacrificing characters devoted to bettering humanity with that of cold, ambitious careerists; the first were fated to fail while the second reached the highest rungs of the ladder in a depraved and unjust society. This classic Social Romantic plotline was the template for most Haskalah writers; however only in Abramovitch's hands did it reach its artistic climax – in The Little Man, and ultimately, in Fishke the Lame.

Unlike his Jewish contemporaries, Abramovitch also explicitly embraced the central Social Romantic credos. In his oeuvre he demanded that the people's liberty be realized by providing them with the material means that are the prerequisite for full self-realization. He attributed the defects of the poor not to their natures but to their environments, and he went further to incorporate in varying degrees the "idealization" of the people as the repository of goodness. Abramovitch's placement of responsibility for Jewish social ills with the environment rather than with the Jewish character, for example, has been widely noted. Often he maintained that when poverty is honest, it is virtuous, and that unlike the upper classes, the poor are always willing to give (The Little Man and Fishke the Lame).

More than any other French writer, it was Victor Hugo (1802-1885) who influenced Abramovitch with the humanitarian ideals of the Social Romantics, and inspired his early literary dedication to the poor. Hugo wrote: "With book and play, in prose, in verse, I have / Taken up the cause of the weak and those in misery; / Pleading with the happy and the pitiless; / I have raised up the clown, the comedian, / All human beings who are damned, Triboulet, Marion, / The lackey, the convict, and the prostitute." In the preface to Fishke the Lame – a novel revolutionary in Haskalah literature for documenting the lives of Jewish beggars and thieves – Abramovitch echoes Hugo's commitment to the poor in a statement that is often taken as his literary credo: "It has been my lot to descend to the depths of our Jewish life…My dealings are with paupers and beggars, the poor wretches of life; with degenerates, cripples, charlatans, and other unfortunates."

Hugo had a profound impact on Haskalah literature in general and on Abramovitch in particular. His influence on Abramovitch was first discerned by Sholem Aleichem, who noted it in Fishke the Lame (1869-1888). Especially after Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1831), Russian and Jewish authors began to focus on physically defective social outcasts to emphasize the Romantic point that the highest and deepest humanity could exist especially in the "lowest" strata of society. Hugo's works, particularly Les Miserables (1862), inspired the motifs of "poor gangs" and of the "poor man turned criminal" in Haskalah literature. Both themes were central to Abramovitch's oeuvre, and to the two most influential Hebrew Haskalah novels of the period: Perets Smolenskin's Hatoeh bedarkey hachaim (The Wanderer on the Paths of Life, 1868) and Reuben Asher Braudes' Hadat vehachaim (Religion and Life, 1875).

III. A New Orientation toward the Poor

Abramovitch's revolutionary turn toward the poor in Jewish literature manifested itself in three ways: linguistically, formally and thematically. For the nineteenth-century Jewish intelligentsia (maskilim), no discussion of social issues could avoid sooner or later taking a position on language. Among the maskilim, Miron writes, "language was hardly ever regarded solely as a means of articulation, a communication system only. It was seen also, and perhaps primarily as the declaration of a cultural credo and an ideological commitment. The writer's choice of language or languages as well as his handling of language were examined and judged as acts of faith…" Abramovitch's turn to Yiddish was an act of faith in the Jewish poor. After his first Hebrew novel in 1862, he became thoroughly disillusioned with the idea that the poor would receive aid and enlightenment from the merchant classes whom he was helping:

Thus, Abramovitch gradually cut himself off from the socio-ideological moorings and the traditional attitudes of the Hebrew Enlightenment, and this was undoubtedly connected with his switch to Yiddish, for as a popular Yiddish writer, he was now bonding with the poorer people, who were among his most enthusiastic readers. By writing his fiction in Yiddish instead of Hebrew, he was not only replacing one language with another and one narrative order (authorial, all-knowing, objective) with another (colloquial, monologic, subjective), but was also discovering new issues and new protagonists. He turned his back on both the fathers

– the middle-class merchants – and the children, the heroic young scholars…who as followers of the Enlightenment clashed with their parents. Instead he became interested in helpless and ignorant characters such as Hershele (Wishing Ring, 1865) – a poor shtetl kid left to fend for himself in a large commercial town….and Fishke (Fishke the Lame, 1869), an ignorant, simpleminded cripple who much more than his "betters" knows how to respond to the call of human emotion.

Abramovitch was not alone in his sympathy with the poor:

Some maskilim genuinely sympathized with the lot of the lower classes – the artisans, servants, pauperized hawkers and penny merchants. They were fully aware that these people were not only poor, hungry and ignorant but also brutalized, manipulated and exploited in various ways…None of them, however, addressed the poor directly. No one considered that the poor were possessed of a presence of mind sufficient to 'receive the light.'

Abramovitch initially shared their attitudes and looked to the mercantile classes as the "socio-cultural vanguard" from which rationality, realism and liberal attitudes would arrive to the lower classes; however, his turn to Yiddish marked a decisive move directly to the poor, who in his view were more than sufficiently intelligent to "receive the light" of Haskalah.

According to Miron, Abramovitch's pioneering work for the development of Yiddish language and literature in the 1860s was far ahead of his time. Only twenty years later, after the assassination of Alexander the Second and the pogroms – when the Haskalah saw its hopes of emancipation and enlightenment as lost causes – did it finally catch up to Abramovitch in the sense that it went "back to the people" with Yiddish. Only in the 1880s did a resurgence of national feeling initiate the view that Yiddish language and literature should be developed for its own sake, and Abramovitch was hailed as a classic – his fame growing exponentially in less than a decade.

Abramovitch transformed the relationship of the Haskalah toward the lower classes foremostly by his development of the Yiddish language and its literature. As Miron writes, "Lifshits…[and] Abramovitch…were in practice dedicating their lives to the exploration and amplification of the artistic possibilities of Yiddish." Abramovitch's pioneering development of Yiddish into a language with literary status, and his indefatigable revisions of his works, point to an ideal of literary and stylistic perfection, or a "positive aesthetic rationale," that went far beyond his time. In late life, upon witnessing the adulation of thousands of readers on a tour of the Pale, Abramovitch joyfully exclaimed: "The greatest triumph is that a generation grows for whom Yiddish is not a jargon but a real literary language".

He re-oriented the Haskalah toward the poor not only through Yiddish, but also through his sympathetic folk-narrator Mendele. This lifelong narrator was not only a friendly folk-Jew, but the first consistently used folk-narrator in Jewish literature. While others had written popular Yiddish literature for the masses, and preached their message like a maggid (popular Jewish preacher), the unification between the writer and his uneducated reader through a narrator was, before Abramovitch, unprecedented.

As Miron has shown, the dialogic genius of Abramovitch was that his narrator represented both the Jewish intellectual and the folk-Jew, the author and the reader. While Mendele

shared with the folk, their manner, language, culture, interests, feelings and needs, he was also endowed with the subtlety and complexity of thought of a Jewish intellectual – lending the "folk-Jew" character in Haskalah literature, unprecedented depth and humanity. It is important to remember that Abramovitch desired that his narrator be perceived by the masses as a folk-Jew, or a member of his readership. Because Mendele united the most attractive traits in the mentalities of the folk-Jew and the Jewish intellectual, he became a sympathetic figure who won the hearts of his uneducated readers. According to Miron, Mendele was "Abramovitch's tremendous literary and cultural breakthrough" because, "With him, the mental chasm [in Jewish society] separating modernity from tradition…could be bridged or at least viewed from both sides…"

Abramovitch re-oriented the Haskalah's relationship to the poor not only through Yiddish and Mendele, but also through his nuanced treatment of poor protagonists. According to Liptzin, Abramovitch was the first Haskalah writer to definitively depart from the dry, idyllic depictions of maskilim as cardboard prophets who are unshaken in their mission. Instead, he endowed them with all "the dreams, longings, experiences and disillusionment, of his entire generation of maskilim." Through protagonists such as Hershele, Isroel, Benjamin, and above all Mendele, writes Liptzin, Abramovitch gave the Jewish intelligentsia its first honest glimpse of itself.

While none of his characters completely escapes his hallmark of the grotesque, unlike the masses, his protagonists are ultimately depicted tragically. Crushed by omnipotent forces without and within, his poor heroes both maintain a vision of their dignity and rebel against their fates in the service of an ideal. Unlike the masses, their initiative and courage are not lacking, but the tragedy is that the obstacles they face are too large – and the fault lies with both the external Russian and internal Jewish environments. Through his protagonists, writes Shaked, Abramovitch shows the "very real heroism and tragedy" in Jewish life. Shaked also crucially notes that Abramovitch's poor heroes battle not only for concrete goals but also for self-respect and dignity – a point that links them with the most developed lower class protagonists in contemporaneous French and Russian literature.

Abramovitch's new orientation toward the poor manifested itself not only linguistically, formally and thematically – but also in his work across genres. For instance, he translated into Yiddish innumerable scientific, historical, agricultural and even religious texts for the benefit of the uneducated poor. Abramovitch translated Jewish calendars and "Chapter of Hymns" from the Hebrew, and he also adapted a German natural science textbook whose writing spanned his lifetime. Most importantly, he was the first maskil to separate social and religious criticism in Haskalah literature. Shmuel Niger notes that previously, social justice issues – the exploitation of the poor by the rich and community leaders – was depicted alongside religious criticism – the exploitation of the poor by religious leaders, who were often the agents of communal leaders. By disconnecting the social issues from the religious ones with which they had been bound, Abramovitch placed social justice at the forefront of Haskalah literature, more closely approximating its European counterpart, Social Romanticism. According to Niger, a similar focus only on social issues would occur in Haskalah literature twelve to fifteen years after Abramovitch initiated it. Abramovitch is also

the acknowledged father of Jewish "populism" – his formal and thematic orientation toward the masses in the 1860s preceding both the Russian populism of the 1870s, and the Jewish populism of the 1880s.

Perhaps the greatest testament of Abramovitch's new orientation toward the poor was the immense popularity of his works among them. From the beginning, his Yiddish novels were greeted with immediate, widespread, and after the 1880s, also open adulation in the thousands – his fame surpassing that of any previous Jewish writer. Despite his harsh criticism, it is in great part the new respect with which he treated the uneducated masses who were his readers and subjects, that led to their widespread and enduring love for his work.

His new re-orientation toward his folk-readers – in language, form and content – makes understandable the critical Soviet claim that he is the quintessential "Socialist" Jewish artist. The most perspicacious of these critics, carefully differentiate between political Socialism and Abramovitch's extraction of humanism from it. Meir Viner writes that Abramovitch

was a social battler more than any other Yiddish prose klasiker….All his life was devoted to social justice on behalf of the masses, and the subject closest to his heart was his love for the folk and hate for their oppressors … In the 1860s and 70s Mendele's huge popularity came from his democratic perspective….[However] He did not work for concrete political or economic goals. The plight of the masses, their fate and worth was the meaning of his work and the most precious and beloved of his goals.

Max Erik similarly writes:

He was a battler and a fighter, a propagandist but only in the universal humanist sense....Mendele did not follow these thinkers [Chernishevsky, Dobroliubov and Pisarev] politically...but he had a deep love of the suffering poor masses of Jews...His democratism is the legacy he left us...He saw mostly the needy Jews, but he also saw the hidden power within them...

What Abramovitch expressed in his oeuvre was not socialism, but a thoroughly egalitarian and humanistic view of the poor in the service of which he altered several deeply entrenched and time-honored literary conventions at the risk of demolishing his most sacred literary hopes. His re-orientation of Haskalah literature in the service of "humanism" – linguistically, formally and thematically – is perhaps his greatest contribution to Jewish literature. He was the first Jewish writer to treat his readers as equals and friends, rather than pupils and sinners. He was also the first to respect not only their humanity but also their intelligence. By drawing on more complex European models than had his predecessors, he propelled Jewish literature most decisively into modernity. While his awareness of social issues derived from his unique early experiences, the Social Romantics provided him with a sophisticated template for the function and methods of art in addressing these.

---

[1] Viner, "Problemen fun Mendeles realizm," 128. "Mendele moykher sforim un di traditsyes fun velt literature," 9. Mendeles Stil," 43; Niger, "Mendele in zayn 75 geboyrntog,"; Klausner, *Historiya shel hasifrut haivrit*, vol. 6, 478; Kurzweil, "Olamo haepi shel Mendele,"

Sifruteynu hachadasha, 180-181; Shaked, *Beyn tschok vedema*, 122, 178; Liptzin, *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature*, 26, 43-45; Werses, "Haroman haivri harishon," 82; Lurya, "Mifishke hachiger lesefer hakabstanim," 102.

[2] Abramovitch, *Of Bygone Days*, 291-292.

[3] Ibid., 333-335.

[4] Ibid. 293.

[5] Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone*, 433.

[6] *Of Bygone Days*, 332.

[7] For the influence of Abramovitch's mother, see Niger, "Mendele in zayn 75 geboyrntog," 19.

[8] Abramovitch documented the poor in Berdichev. (Binshtok, "A Celebration of Yiddish Literature," 200.)

[9] Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature*, 43.

[10] Niger, "Mendele in zayn 75 geboyrntog," 24.

[11]*Of Bygone Days*, 331.

[12]Werses, "Jewish Education in Nineteenth-Century Russia in the Eyes of Mendele Mokher Sefarim," 259.

[13]Orwin, *Consequences of Consciousness*, 143.

[14]*Of Bygone Days*, 294.

[15]Ibid., 350.

[16]Ibid., 351.

[17]Astrakhan was a heavy cloth used to line Jewish women's kerchiefs, which the government wanted to replace with "Lithuanian bonnets." (Ibid., 342.)

[18]Ibid., 351.

[19]While most of Abramovitch's downtrodden characters evince the first trait, the psychology of avarice is portrayed in *The Little Man, The Wishing Ring* and "The Upper and Lower Assemblies." The last story describes how wealthy Jews rent out whole floors of their homes even in good times because they fear bad times to come.

[20]Binshtok, "A Celebration of Yiddish Literature," 190.

[21]Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 12, 110.

[22]For the best encapsulation of Abramovitch's penchant to see the national as personal and vice versa, see Shalom Lurya, "Mifishke hakhiger lesefer hakabtsanim," 96, and Israel Zinberg, "Abramovitch-Mendele," 358.

[23]*Fishke the Lame*, 15.

[24]Gerald Stillman, Introduction to *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 20.

[25]Viner, "Mendeles stil," 22.

[26]Zinberg, vol. 10, 57, 117-118.

[27]Stillman, Introduction to *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 18.

[28]Viner, "Realizm un romantik"

[29]Miron, A *Traveler Disguised*, 3.

[30]Ibid., 210.

[31]Ibid., 3.

[32]Viner, "Mendeles stil," 41.

[33]Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 11, 129.

[34]Frank, *Dostoevsky*, vol. 1, 110.

[35]Ibid., 128.

[36]Ibid., 129.

[37]Shmuel Niger, "Mendele in zayn 75 geboyrntog"; Yosef Klausner, *Historiya shel hasifrut haivrit*, vol. 6, 478.; Baruch Kurzweil, "Olamo haepi shel Mendele," Gershon Shaked, *Beyn tschok vedema*, 178; and Sol Liptzin, *The Flowering of Yiddish Literature*, 26.

[38]Hugo, *Complete Works*, 1882.

[39]*Fishke the Lame*, translated by Gerald Stillman, 14-15.

[40]Sholem Aleichem compared Abramovitch's *Fishke the Lame* to Hugo's story, "The Man who Laughed." (Viner "Mendele Moykher-Sforim un di traditsyes fun der velt-literatur," 9.)

[41]Ibid., 43.

[42]Werses, "Haroman haivri harishon shel mendele vegilgulav," 77.

[43]Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 101.

[44]Ibid., 88-89.

[45]Ibid., 87-88.

[46]Miron, *A Traveler Disguised*, 51.

[47]Ibid., 94. See also Viner, "Problemen fun mendeles realizm," 124-126.

[48]*A Traveler Disguised*, 51.

[49]Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 219.

[50]On the maskil as "maggid," see Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*. On the unprecedented use of the folk-narrator, see Kurzweil, "Olamo haepi shel Mendele," in *Sifruteynu hachadasha – hemshech o mahapekha?* (1960), 174.

[51]While Miron has shown that Mendele is far from being a collective character, symbol or archetype, he also admits that Mendele is partially a representative of the folk-Jew and that he was intended to be perceived as a collective Jewish "Everyman". (*A Traveler Disguised*, 180; Ftnote 13, p297.)

[52]Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, 119.

[53]Ibid., 123.

[54]Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature*, 44.

[55]Shaked, *Beyn tschok vedema* (1965), 188-189.

[56]Bal Machshoves, "Sh. Y. Abramovitch," 139-140.

[57]Niger, "Mendele in zayn 75 geboyrntog," 39-50.

[58]Because among the Jews, there was no true "common" class, Abramovitch's social protesters (like Vekker in *The Tax*) speak on behalf of the poorest social classes in the shtetl: beggars, craftsmen and small merchants.

[59]Niger, "Mendele in zayn 75 geboyrntog," 45.

[60]Viner, "Mendele in di 60-er un 70-er yorn," 75-87.

[61]Erik, "Vos shetsn mir in Mendelen," 131-137.