

DAVID G. ROSKIES

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## The Emancipation of Yiddish

THE STORY OF MODERN YIDDISH CULTURE reads like one of its own fictions. As in a nineteenth-century dime novel, the plot begins in an East European shtetl, moves on to Berlin and the Bowery, with a climactic recognition scene in Stockholm and a denouement in, of all places, Oxford. As in Sholem Aleichem, it is a story of shattered hopes and ironic victories. As in Peretz, the leading characters are motivated by a search for transcendence, but their designs are frustrated by a profound generational crisis, as in any number of family sagas, or by vast demonic forces unleashed upon them when they are most vulnerable, as in I. B. Singer. Finally, with due credit to Abramovitsh, the frame tale provides an analogical key to the main narrative.

The tale describes a contest for cultural renewal. On one side is Hasidism, the last "major trend" in Jewish mysticism, laying exclusive claim to legitimacy, and opposing it from the West is the Enlightenment. The Westernizers fail at direct confrontation but achieve ultimate victory by a creative betrayal of Hasidism itself.

The contest begins with Nahman ben Simha of Bratslav, the great grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov. Nahman's complex allegorical tales, harbingers, we are often told, of Kafka, chart the paradoxical and tragic course of *tikkun*, or cosmic restoration. In his most revealing moment, Nahman comes across as a Marrano, cut off from his people, from prayer and public observance, struggling to achieve a higher spiritual state in the treacherous world of politics. Now it is Nahman who appears in retrospect to have launched the enterprise of modern Jewish fiction, though in his own generation, the far likelier candidate for cultural godfather was his arch-rival Yosef Perl, as staunch a supporter of enlightened despotism and as ardent a believer in advance-

ment through science as the Jewish people has ever seen. Perl mobilized his considerable literary talents to expose the charismatic leaders who claimed to speak for tradition and to burlesque their method of storytelling. For Perl, as for the Haskalah movement in general, Hasidism was the source of all exploitation, spreading its net of duplicity and fraud throughout Eastern Europe. Thus, no means were spared to check its rapid growth, including recourse to the government to ban the publication of all hasidic books.

Jumping ahead now to the end of the nineteenth century, we find Jewish political action suddenly turning inward in the wake of reaction and repression in Tsarist Russia. Political Zionism and the Jewish Labor Bund, officially launched in the same year (1897), shared the realization that the Jewish Problem had somehow to be addressed from within. This lent credence to a reassessment, among other things, of Hasidism, as an invaluable and indigenous cultural resource. To be sure, the image of Hasidism now projected by Ansky, Peretz and Berdichevsky was colored by romanticism as much as the earlier battle had been fought in the name of rationalism. Thus abstracted, Hasidism became the ideal vehicle for expounding the new "isms" of the twentieth century without foregoing a commitment to tradition.

The Nahman-Perl rivalry, then, is an exemplum of the dialectic between continuity and change, integration and rebellion, that has structured the basic patterns of controversy in all forms of the Jewish spirit for the past two hundred years. It is the great debate on Emancipation and its discontents. The sudden access to modern life effected by Emancipation gave rise to an intoxicated embrace of the new and rejection of the old, but fears of the eventual consequences of this embrace in turn fostered a spirit of qualification that sought to preserve tradition in a modern age. Perhaps no area of Jewish life had so much invested in the promise of Emancipation, was so brutally crushed by its failure, and then revised its assumptions so profoundly, as Yiddish culture. It has been the particular fate of the study of Yiddish to continue after the loss of its cultural base. To examine the pattern of its rebirth against the backdrop of recent history is to discover how scholarship revived the essential debate after the culture itself was decimated, and to appreciate anew the relation of criticism to culture.

With one bold move, the hated "jargon" became heir apparent to the throne. This palace coup was staged in 1908 in Czernowitz, where Yiddish was publicly proclaimed "a national Jewish language" in defiance of those who argued the exclusive rights of Hebrew or a preference for multiculturalism. Here Yiddishism was launched as a

secular movement aspiring towards national autonomy in Eastern Europe. A note of sobriety and moderation was introduced by the royal adviser, I. L. Peretz, then at the height of his fame. It was not the Emancipation that had paved the way for the Yiddish revival, he counseled the young rebels, but Hasidism. "Our first national bard is Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav with his seven beggars." To achieve the hoped-for status of a national Jewish language, Yiddish would have to reappropriate the religious canon, particularly the Bible, while at the same time leaving itself open to the idiom of Europe.<sup>1</sup> With his usual clairvoyance, Peretz defined the cultural dialectic for a half century to come.

Vilna rather than Czernowitz emerged as the new capitol. Here, in the historic center of Jewish learning, the royal academy took up residence in 1925. It called itself the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO), advocating self-knowledge as a key to cultural autonomy. A thirty-one year-old philologist trained at Marburg soon emerged as the chief ideologue and driving force of this Yiddish renaissance.

For Max Weinreich, language was the touchstone of emancipation. The school of German-Jewish scholarship of which he was an heir had gone to great lengths to downplay the importance of Yiddish. The theory advanced by Leopold Zunz, founder of the Wissenschaft movement, was that prior to the seventeenth century Ashkenazic (European) Jews had spoken perfect German; with persecution and restrictions came a separate jargon.<sup>2</sup> Zunz's hidden agenda was of course to motivate the full eventual emancipation of German Jewry who, once all barriers had been removed, would rejoin the mainstream of Europe. To legitimate the ascendancy of Yiddish, Weinreich simply turned this argument on its head. In 1928 he tentatively charted the development of the Yiddish language as a gradual process of emancipation—from German. Yes, there had been a ruinous period of enforced isolation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but from this dark age a modern Yiddish literature had emerged. The new beginning was heralded not by Nahman or Perl (whose Yiddish writings had not yet been discovered), but by Dr. Shloyme Ettinger (ca. 1810–1856) who single-handedly forged the path "from the ghetto to Goethe."<sup>3</sup>

A more serious threat to the claims for Yiddish cultural supremacy came, as Weinreich discovered, not from the Ancien Régime in the West, but from the New Frontier in the East. In the Soviet Union, Yiddishism was being translated into an impressive network of secular schools, research institutes, publishing outlets and theaters—all government supported. In the White Russian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics, one could even argue a court case in Yiddish. The price, however, of full linguistic autonomy was uprooting Yiddish from its

cultural and religious base. As part of a consistent Soviet orthographic reform, the traditional spelling of Hebrew-origin words in Yiddish was replaced by a phonetic system. There followed a movement to remove these "clerical" words altogether from proletarian Yiddish. When, in 1931, the YIVO called a conference on the standardization of Yiddish spelling, the majority of teachers and community leaders voted to adopt the Soviet model. To this Weinreich would not acquiesce and his response, formulated in analytic terms, was the first step back in Peretz's direction.

Without Judaism, Weinreich insisted, there would have been no Yiddish language. "The Jewish religion, or to be exact, the specific social atmosphere among the adherents of the Jewish religion, is what created the need and possibility for a separate Jewish language."<sup>4</sup> Religion, with its delimitations, was a necessary pre-condition for linguistic creativity. And even in a secular age, Weinreich concluded, many of the old Hebraic words could be retrieved for modern usage.

At the outbreak of World War II, Weinreich miraculously escaped to New York where the YIVO center was reestablished in 1940. It was a painful transition at best, for Weinreich was caught between the ruins of his youthful aspirations and the aging edifice of American Yiddish culture. By the mid-fifties, when he returned to his lifetime research on the history of the Yiddish language, the premises and even the terminology of his prewar studies had been totally revised.

The first term to go was "ghetto," henceforth to be used only in reference to the Nazi Holocaust. In no sense was Ashkenaz a ghetto culture. In Weinreich's classic formulation, European Jewry strove not for isolation from the Christians but insulation from Christianity. Change and creativity in Ashkenaz came about not by adopting the ways of contemporary Christian society (a horizontal approach) but by "vertical legitimation through *derekh-hashas* (the way of the Talmud)."<sup>5</sup> The new was always reinterpreted in the light of classical sources. Present and past were fused in a kind of panchronism as Ashkenazic Jews accommodated all change into a midrashic system. To speak, therefore, of a reentry into the European mainstream was to misconstrue the nature and strength of traditional Ashkenaz. "Until the Emancipation, Ashkenaz functioned not with religion *and* the world; the cultural system of *Yiddishkayt* was the world."<sup>6</sup>

The linguistic theory followed accordingly. No longer would Weinreich speak of Yiddish being "emancipated" from its German source, because Yiddish was now defined as a "fusion language" consisting of several components, including German. The affective weight of the German component, moreover, was decidedly less than that of the Hebrew-Aramaic, because from its very beginnings until the present day, Yiddish was an organic expression of Jewish traditional

values derived from the Talmud. Finally, Weinreich developed a theory of Jewish linguistic creativity in the diaspora in which Yiddish was presented both as structural paradigm and as crowning cultural achievement. Secular Yiddishism had come full circle.

Weinreich's was by no means the sole voice in the ideological and critical reassessment. Together with other surviving scholars of his generation who reconstituted the YIVO in New York, a new formula was arrived at: Yiddish as a language of tradition and its literature as replete with internal traditions. Yudel Mark, an ardent secularist, called for the preservation of the riches of talmudic discourse;<sup>7</sup> and Shlomo Noble presented his study of *khumesh-taytsh*, the traditional language of the Yiddish Pentateuch translation.<sup>8</sup> Later, Marvin Herzog, an American-trained scholar, showed the differential impact of Hasidism on the spread of Yiddish dialects, a thesis that no prewar Yiddishist would have thought to advance.<sup>9</sup> In Palestine, meanwhile, Chaim Weizmann signaled the end to a half century of linguistic rivalry by proclaiming Yiddish *leshon hakedoshim*, the language of the martyrs, as opposed to *leshon hakodesh*, the holy tongue, Hebrew. With Czernowitz reduced to a bitter memory, plans could get underway for the academic perpetuation of Yiddish culture. Weinreich was offered the first professorship in Yiddish studies at the Hebrew University. When he declined, the honor went instead to Dov Sadan.

In an almost novelistic way, Sadan is Weinreich's counterpoint. The hasidic South to the rationalist North; Polish Romanticism to Russian Positivism; Socialist-Zionism to Bundism; aliya to diaspora nationalism; anecdote to abstraction; and if they meet at all, it is in a psychological orientation and a common delight in the intricacies of Jewish idiom. In the same year that Weinreich assumed a leadership role in YIVO, Sadan settled in Palestine where he was soon to become a leading intellectual within the ranks of the political mainstream.

Sadan enters our discussion in the spring of 1947 with his seminal lectures to a group of Youth Aliya leaders.<sup>10</sup> Here he presented a catholic view of modern Jewish literature analogous to Weinreich's global theory of Jewish interlinguistics. A modern Jewish writer, according to Sadan, had three alternatives: to address Jewish readers in any one of their languages; to address them in *laaz*, i.e., a non-Jewish language, or not to write for Jews as Jews at all. The middle group was clearly the hardest to define, but Sadan maintained that internal evidence would reveal when a Jewish author was writing, say in German, for Jews, and when for an undifferentiated audience. How long such marginality could be sustained in the lands of our dispersion was an open question. For Sadan, only Hebrew had permanence and he viewed its revival in Palestine as the unmistakable culmination of Jewish creativity. To fully account for this miracle, however, the Has-

kalah, or the Hebrew Enlightenment would not suffice. The latter was itself but one of three competing movements in Central and Eastern Europe, with Hasidism and the rationalist orthodoxy of mitnagdic culture, all three of which found expression in the Yiddish language as well. Just as Weinreich and his colleagues had broken with Yiddish secularist dogma, Sadan here challenged the secular Zionist approach to Hebrew literary history that recognized only a single-stranded lineage. Sadan, I believe, was prompted as much by the ingathering of the exiles, by the hope for a Jewish melting pot in the new state, as by the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup>

Sadan's practice is as eclectic as his program is integrationist. Each unit of literary expression, be it a word, idiom, rhyme, metaphor, motif, or plot, can be traced vertically and horizontally, through time and space, and across linguistic barriers. All of these versions are equally valid for Sadan, but together they point to the finest, most richly allusive use of a word, idiom or rhyme on the part of the master writers (usually Bialik in poetry and Agnon in prose). As in T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," the model is one of scholar-poet and scholar-critic. What the writer believes is less important than what he preserves from the past, so that borrowings, echoes, allusions, plagiarism, and linguistic traditions are the very essence of both writing and reading literature with genuine understanding. But unlike Eliot, who would insist on a definable tradition, Sadan delights in erasing the distinction between Hebrew, Yiddish and *laaz*. Bialik's Hebrew adaptation of a Yiddish folksong is as much part of Yiddish literature as I. J. Schwartz's Yiddish translation of a poem by Bialik is part of Hebrew literature. Each paired text, moreover, cannot be fully appreciated without the other. Yiddish language and literature, in this scheme, became not only the repository of indigenous traditions, but also a vehicle for traditions to be transmitted from classical to modern Hebrew, from Polish to Hebrew, from Hebrew to German, and so on. The message of Sadan's teaching has been challenged by some of his students<sup>12</sup> and accepted by others, though none has elected to duplicate his method.

For the generation after Weinreich and Sadan, born in Poland in the 1920s, sophisticated Yiddish scholarship within the context of a modern, secular Jewish life was a natural heritage. The new cultural synthesis was captured in the cover design of the first *Young Vilna* anthology (1934): the archways of the medieval Jewish quarter set against a huge factory smokestack. It is at this point that a methodological synthesis might have been achieved as well, had history not intervened to polarize the choices.

The three disciples, Uriel Weinreich, Benjamin Hrushovski and Khone Shmeruk, equally at home in Polish, Russian, Yiddish and later

in Hebrew and English, received their postwar training in linguistics, poetics and modern Jewish history respectively. By the mid-50s, Weinreich and Hrushovski were applying the methods of Russian formalism to the study of Yiddish rhythm, rhyme, stanzaic, and narrative structure, anticipating if not actually inaugurating the structuralist revival. Hrushovski's pioneering study "On Free Rhythms in Modern Yiddish Poetry"<sup>13</sup> begins with the Yiddish folksong, its characteristic stanza, rhythmic typology, and relation to the art song. He then outlines four stages of development culminating in the free dynamic and free "speaking" rhythms of the American Yiddish poets. Each stage is further defined in terms of German, Slavic, Hebrew and internal Yiddish models and influences. Weinreich uses the same comparative-structuralist method in his concise survey "On the Cultural History of Yiddish Rime."<sup>14</sup>

Their revision was not solely methodological. By isolating these formal, poetic traditions, Weinreich's and Hrushovski's work revealed not continuity but radical innovation. Both scholars paid special attention to the modernist poets—Leyeles, Glatstein, Sutzkever and others—and showed how their bold experiments with rhythm and rhyme immeasurably enriched the expressive possibilities of Yiddish poetry. This is true even of Hrushovski's paper on the Yiddish renaissance poet Elia Levita (Eliyohu Bokher), whom he credits with revolutionizing Yiddish rhyme and discovering accentual iambs in European poetry.<sup>15</sup>

Shmeruk's is the dissenting voice for tradition. His life's work is a comprehensive search for continuity which attempts to systematize Sadan's eclectic method. As the foremost expert on Old Yiddish literature, Shmeruk has discovered and traced vestiges of the medieval tradition throughout the modern period. He has singled out for praise those writers who achieved a modern reinterpretation of classical forms and themes in the face of overwhelming ideological pressures. Foremost among these writers are Peretz and Der Nister, who forged a new vision out of their very opposition to the forces of destruction in the world.<sup>16</sup>

As recreated by Shmeruk, the historical record shows that Yiddish culture can generally live and flourish only when it is not cut off from its own larger cultural tradition and those of the surrounding nations. He traces a tri-cultural axis from the early Middle Ages to the present, encompassing the classical Hebrew heritage on the one hand, the co-territorial culture—German, Italian, Russian, Polish—on the other, with indigenous Yiddish traditions as the third component.<sup>17</sup> The forces that disrupted the internal trilingualism of Russian and Polish Jewry in the twentieth century are precisely the ones that the great writers successfully resisted: militant Yiddishism after 1908; Commu-

nism after 1919, and assimilation.<sup>18</sup> Tradition and integration become for Shmeruk not merely a literary or methodological resource, but the measure of the cultural viability of the Jewish community at any given time and of the aesthetic worth of its individual writers.

In summary, one can see in Yiddish studies how deep has been the interplay between history and method. Sustained by a deep ideological commitment, both Max Weinreich and Dov Sadan developed a wholistic approach that spanned the historical abyss. Both, in a profound way, renegotiated the promise of emancipation. If Yiddish scholarship could no longer serve the cause of Jewish autonomy, then the language itself—as a thousand year-old heritage—would become the sustaining cultural resource of a displaced people. From Sadan's point-of-view, once the ascendancy of Hebrew had been guaranteed, in a nation-state governed by Jews, then all Jews should be drawn into the act and the culture be redefined accordingly. But the earlier, secular line of development was not entirely severed. Uriel Weinreich and Benjamin Hrushovski distilled the Yiddishism of the past into a method that celebrated the new and the discontinuous, as if emancipation had won out and Yiddish studies were now an integrated branch of the humanities. Khone Shmeruk was somewhere in between. Disabused of his political faith by painful wartime experience, he came to view ideology as the enemy of culture. His search for traditions led to a descriptive method that sometimes bordered on prescription.

We come now to the lean years, when the chain of transmission was sustained by two disciples, products of the dominant Hebrew or English culture, for whom nothing could be more unnatural than the vocation of Yiddish. Fortunately, so distilled was the world of Yiddish studies, once you found it, that its two distinct paths could merge into one given the right set of circumstances. Dan Miron studied with Sadan and Simon Halkin in Jerusalem before completing his doctorate with Uriel Weinreich, and Ruth Wisse studied with both Weinreichs in New York. Not surprisingly, the resulting dissertations focused on linguistic, generic and thematic traditions as a gauge of continuity and change. The difference is this: while Wisse discovered thematic and philosophical continuity where one would least expect it, in the traditions of Yiddish and American Jewish fiction,<sup>19</sup> Miron argued for radical discontinuity where everyone else saw the very essence of tradition.

Miron's persona theory of nineteenth century Yiddish fiction hinges upon the profound alienation of Jewish intellectuals from the mentality, and above all, the language of the masses. In the aesthetics of the Haskalah, Yiddish was Caliban, an inherently ugly language suitable only for mimicry and satire. On the practical level, however, Yiddish was indispensable for reaching the Jewish masses. Intellectuals



had no alternative but to exploit the hated language in the name of their foreign ideals and did so by creating a fictitious "little Jew" to mediate between them and the ignorant reading public. The most brilliant mediator, according to Miron, is the Mendele persona, who should be understood as a spoiled theologian, a ruthless debunker whose entry into Yiddish literature necessitated a complete personal transformation. Similarly, Sholem Aleichem's myth of Mendele as the Grandfather of Yiddish literature took root as a wish fulfillment on the part of another ambitious outsider.<sup>20</sup>

Miron reads Yiddish literature as an indictment of modern Jewish culture. For him, a surface impression of integration and insularity usually belies profound despair and alienation. Miron readily acknowledges his debt to the Soviet school of Yiddish criticism for its analysis of class conflict and alienation of labor within Yiddish literature. If Miron's method errs in overstatement, it gains in its useful debunking of critical pieties.

Now let us indulge for a moment in constructing a scenario for an imaginary symposium. Supposing the teachers and disciples of the two schools of thought I am describing were to meet someday on neutral turf, say in Oxford, England, to exchange views on a representative work by a single author. Chances are that all would agree to Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, the genius of nineteenth century Yiddish and Hebrew fiction, since each has devoted significant energy to Abramovitsh's art. Let us say that they focus their discussion on a single passage from a pivotal work, Abramovitsh's allegorical novel, *The Mare*. Here, as I draw on comments both actual and surmised, is how the debate might unfold:

"Bah!" said Ashmedai with a sarcastic twist of his lips. "Wars are perfectly normal affairs! I'd really be very bad off, if people, heaven forbid, hadn't been killing one another since the dawn of time. That's the only bit of pleasure and profit I can get from you fine and lovely creatures. That's what's so wonderful about human beings. They destroy, annihilate, wreak enormous havoc, and then put the whole blame squarely on my shoulders. They kill, and it's put on my bill. Hypocrites! In the Bible, ah yes, there the wars and carnage are quite in order. He Whose Name I can't say is the Lord of Hosts, the generalissimo there, a field marshall in a crimson uniform and spurs. There all the killing's perfectly all right. But here, it's awful, awful! . . . Don't be coy, Izzy. Look!"

"I just can't! I swear on a stack of Bibles. It's against my nature! Ugh! As sure as I'm a Jew! . . . Take me away, you devil, take me away!"<sup>21</sup>

Sadan, to whom all would defer, would begin with a thumbnail sketch of Jewish allegory in general and of the Song of Songs (which inspired the conceit of Israel as mare) in particular. He might then comment on the possible Faustian or Byronic influences on Abramo-

vitsh's all-too-human depiction of Ashmedai. From the chapter title, Sadan could launch into a discussion of how the Hebrew version complements the Yiddish, for the Hebrew *Ufarah Yisrael* echoes Isaiah's prophecy of redemption: In days to come shall Jacob take root, Israel shall blossom and bud (27:6). Playing with the double meaning of the verb *parah*, the author suggests not that "Israel shall blossom," but that "Israel shall fly," i.e. be a *luftmentsh*, always at the mercy of the forces of repression. The passage, therefore, resonates with intersecting traditions.<sup>22</sup>

Shmeruk would be likely to point out that this passage does not appear in the first version of *The Mare* (1873) but was written in 1901 and eventually incorporated into the canonized text. This is important, because *The Mare* represents the ideological turning point in Abramovitch's career.<sup>23</sup> Just as the earlier version marked a radical break with maskilic thinking, so the later additions reveal the author's growing awareness of social and political factors. The passage in question is sandwiched between generalized scenes of war and an identifiable pogrom sequence. This shows that Abramovitch viewed the Jewish problem not in isolation, but as part of the rising nationalism and militarism throughout Europe.

Wisse, likewise concerned with the ideological message, might be given to evaluating *The Mare* in terms of Abramovitch's move from satire to irony.<sup>24</sup> Here the intent is ironic because Izzy the narrator-protagonist is both vehicle for the author's critique and victim of it. Izzy, with his high-sounding solutions to the Jewish question, is not only ineffectual when faced with the cynicism of Ashmedai and the barbarity of mankind, but ultimately comes to exploit the very people he set out to redeem. While accepting Shmeruk's observations on the progressive expansion of Abramovitch's vision, Wisse would insist that the original indictment of the intellectuals—both Russian liberals and Jewish enlighteners—marks the crucial turning point in Abramovitch's career. She might conclude by lamenting the lack of a comprehensive biography of the author that might explain the timing and precise nature of Abramovitch's turn.

Miron would point to the structure of *The Mare* as the key to its meaning. The work itself, according to Miron, is organized in a three-part structure of expanded meaning: eight chapters each moving from social to political-historical to philosophical allegory. In the first cycle, the author maintains a perfect balance between nightmare and reality. In the second, hallucination takes over completely in an impassioned symposium between Izzy and the mare. The third cycle, which includes the cited passage, is an almost unrelenting apocalyptic vision.<sup>25</sup> Seen within the larger structure of the work, the full and radical meaning of the passage, as interpreted by Miron, might be as

follows: Abramovitch is saying that man is bent on self-destruction. Conflict is inevitable. Progress breeds the means of destruction and there is no escape. The do-gooders of this world are either cynical exploiters or self-deluded schlemiels. In each cycle of the work, Abramovitch broadens the scope of his indictment. Every level of human life is contaminated, from the social, to the political, to the moral. *The Mare* represents the total denial of life as a moral possibility.

The interplay between nightmare and reality alluded to in Miron's analysis would be Hrushovski's point of departure. Can *The Mare* be defined as a work of fantasy or shall we say, with Todorov, that allegory allows no room for the fantastic to exist? Here Miron would interrupt to suggest that the answer hinges on the nature of Izzy's madness which we are meant to take seriously, and that Todorov's restrictive terminology bespeaks a nineteenth century anti-allegorical bias.

At this point Sadan would restore order with a cryptic comment on social Darwinism and Abramovitch's access to German psychology. He would then urge all the participants to go home and reread *The Mare*.

Our imaginary debate may also help clarify the different criteria for aesthetic evaluation. Both Sadan and Shmeruk annotate rather than evaluate, the former by atomizing a text into motifs, allusions and perversions, the latter by an historical and textological analysis. Since Sadan tends to read writers as traditionalists, whether by design or default, the chief measure of aesthetic worth becomes the referential layering of the text, i.e., its resonance with antecedent sub-texts. By the same token, Shmeruk's favored works are those which draw on various cultural strands, historical periods and exist in several variants. Wisse, like Shmeruk, responds to the ideological content of a work, but rarely invokes extraliterary criteria. The great writer, in her approach, speaks to modern concerns and transcends a specific historical matrix. Hrushovski's inquiry into the system of literature leads him to focus on a work only to the extent that it elucidates the system as a whole. For Miron, layers, textual variants, theoretical considerations and contemporary concerns may enhance the literary work, but greatness is measured by a coherent form perfectly matched by radical intent.

In this detailed discussion which covered textual variants, style and structure, genre and rhetoric, biography and history, there were still vital areas that remained untouched. For *The Mare* is a major proof-text of Emancipation, and as such forms a central link in Jewish political history, particularly since the days of Moses Mendelssohn.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*, *The Mare* was written for Jewish consumption and only then translated into Polish and Russian. What

bearing does this have on the scope and significance of its thesis? To what extent is the medium the message? How does it compare with other strategies of Jewish survival put forward in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, like Nahman's concept of *tikkun* or, closer to Abramovitsh's own time, the Mussar movement, an offshoot of rational orthodoxy? To narrow our field of inquiry, we may read *The Mare* as the final word on the origins of exploitation which preoccupied so much of nineteenth century Yiddish and Hebrew satire. How adequate, then, was the response of Haskalah literature to its own agenda? Finally, the more we explicate this work, a best seller in generations past, the less accessible we deem it to be to contemporary readers, and by referring to the author as Abramovitsh, we are not only undoing the last century of Yiddish literary criticism, but defamiliarizing the author even from his old readers. In other words, what impact does the academization of Yiddish have on the possible meanings of a Yiddish text? These are some of the questions never asked.

What makes these questions so crucial is that more than ever before, the critics have become part of the Yiddish texts they study, having moved from the role of commentator to participant-observer to prime mover. As a story, it would read something like this:

There was once a culture especially conceived to explain the world to the Jews. After a lengthy incubation, it emerged with a sophisticated symbolic language, just in time to face the incursions of modernity. Fighting bravely, for the culture was being attacked from all sides—as stepchild of emancipation, as anomaly of national self-determination, as tool of internationalism—it vanquished the foe only to discover that meanwhile all the speakers of the language had either been murdered or anesthetized. But, in a last-minute reprieve came universal acclaim: Behold the perfect vehicle for explaining the Jews to the world. And so the lovers celebrated their emancipated marriage at the prize-giving ceremony in Stockholm and lived happily ever after.

Or did they? Yiddish stories normally end with something akin to Mendele's descent into the inferno of Glupsk; Tevye's stay of expulsion granted only temporarily; the heavenly prosecutor's sardonic laugh, or Reb Mordechai Joseph's return to exorcize the dybbuk, which still leaves us with Mendele's perverse anger, Tevye's ambiguous word games, Bontshe's silence and Rechele's death. Sure enough, our story too has a bitter-sweet twist. The applause died down, the audience dispersed, and no one was left to learn about the true fate of the Jews except for some other Jews. This too would be tolerable if only, in their impatience to learn, Jews weren't intent on reducing Yiddish to a metaphor: to a language of ghosts and magicians, a memorial and paradise lost, even to a prophetic denunciation of false

gods. This poses the threat of a new kind of ghettoization, one that would use Yiddish to escape both one's Jewishness and the world.

A great deal, therefore, hinges on the next move. A new generation of critics who do not speak the language with fluency and do not respond to the specific claims of its past will be sorely tested either by this popular reductionism or by an easy academic retreat into close reading and formal analyses. To recognize the contemporary role of Yiddish culture as explaining the Jew to his estranged self is to jump right back into the fray, this time, hopefully, armed with the critical work that has gone before.

By adding their voices to the great debate on emancipation and its discontents, the postwar Yiddish critics have placed their work within the mainstream of Jewish life and thought. Emancipation, in fact, has only deepened a split which was in evidence all along. The traditionalists who argue for the continuity between modern and medieval Jewish culture, between Yiddish and Hebrew, are practicing what Max Weinreich termed "vertical legitimation." The study of structural complexity, formal innovation, and modernist angst in Yiddish literature is the horizontal approach which seeks to legitimate Jewish art in terms of contemporary non-Jewish creativity.

Clearly both are needed, and if life no longer provides the context for this debate, the only one that really matters, then criticism will have to carry the load. For it is scholarship that spanned the Great Divide of 1939–1952 and it is scholarship that today provides the only avenue for cultural transmission, there being no school system, political movement or state apparatus in which Yiddish occupies a central role. Yiddish has been so thoroughly emancipated—of its native landscape, its poverty, its collective base—that, like Izzy, it hovers in a precarious state of limbo, susceptible to entrapments of any kind. Knowing the precursors, then, has become the measure of continuity. Their iconoclasm has become the new tradition whose creative reach must now be extended beyond the ruined palace and the royal academy, out into the streets, into suburbia, across the seas, up into the airwaves—if not higher still.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Nachman Meisel, ed., *Briv un redes fun Y. L. Perets* [The Letters and Speeches of I. L. Peretz] (New York, 1944), pp. 371–4.

<sup>2</sup> Y. L. Zunz, *Haderashot biYisrael* [The History of Jewish Homily] (2 1892), ed. Hanokh Albeck (Jerusalem, 1954), pp. 202–203.

<sup>3</sup> Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literatur-geshikhte fun di onheybn biz Mendele Moykher-Sforim* [Studies in Yiddish Literary History from the Beginnings until Mendele Moykher-Sforim] (Vilna, 1928), pp. 3–29, 267–291. The quote is on page 280.

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, "What would Yiddish be without Hebrew?" [Yiddish], *Di tsukunft* (March, 1931), 196-7.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, "The reality of Jewishness versus the ghetto myth: The sociolinguistic roots of Yiddish," in *To Honor Roman Jakobson* (The Hague, 1967), pp. 2199-2211.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher shprakh. Bagrifn, faktn, metodn* [History of the Yiddish Language. Concepts, Facts Methods] (New York, 1973), I, 211.

<sup>7</sup> Yudel Mark, "Let us preserve the linguistic riches of the Talmud scholar" [Yiddish], *Yidishe shprakh*, I (1941), 65-77.

<sup>8</sup> Shlomo Noble, *Khumeshtaytsh. An oysforshung vegn der traditsye fun taytshn in di khadorim* [The Traditional Language of the Yiddish Pentateuch Translation] (New York, 1943).

<sup>9</sup> Marvin I. Herzog, *The Yiddish Language in Northern Poland: Its Geography and History* (The Hague, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Dov Sadan, "Al sifrutenu. Masat-mavo [On Our Literature. Introductory Essay] (Jerusalem, 1950). Reprinted in *Avnei-bedeck* (Tel Aviv, 1962), pp. 9-66.

<sup>11</sup> For Sadan's own postscript, see "On Our Literature—Concluding Essay" [Hebrew], *Orhot ushuilim* [Ways and Paths] (Tel Aviv, 1978), II, 173-184.

<sup>12</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, "Israeli Hebrew literature: A historical model" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut*, IV:3 (1973), 427-440.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Hrushovski, "On free rhythms in modern Yiddish poetry," *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore and Literature* (New York, 1954), pp. 219-266; *idem*, "The typical stanza of the Yiddish folksong" [Hebrew], in *Sefer Dov Sadan* (Jerusalem, 1977), pp. 111-128.

<sup>14</sup> Uriel Weinreich, "On the cultural history of Yiddish rime," in *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought Presented in Honor of Salo Baron* (New York, 1959), pp. 423-442.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Hrushovski, "The creation of accentual iambs in European poetry and their first employment in a Yiddish romance in Italy (1508-09)," in *For Max Weinreich on his Seventieth Birthday. Studies in Jewish Languages, Literature and Society* (The Hague, 1964), pp. 108-146.

<sup>16</sup> Khone Shmeruk, "Der Nister's 'Under a Fence': Tribulations of a Soviet Yiddish symbolist," in *The Field of Yiddish. Second Collection* (The Hague, 1965), pp. 263-287; *idem*, *Peretses yiesh-vizye. Interpretatsye fun Y. L. Peretses Bay nakht afn altn mark un kritishe oysgabe fun der drame* [Peretz's Vision of Despair. An Interpretation of I. L. Peretz's *Bay nakht afn altn mark* and Critical Edition of the Play] (New York, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> Khone Shmeruk, "Jewish culture in the Soviet Union" [Hebrew], *Gesher*, 47/48 (1966), 58-80; *idem*, "Contacts between Polish and Yiddish literature: The story of Esterke and King Casimir of Poland" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut*, 21 (1975), 60-100; *idem*, *Sifrut Yidish: perakim letoldoteha* [Yiddish Literature: Aspects of Its History] (Tel Aviv, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Khone Shmeruk, "Yiddish literature," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1971, XVI, 814-817.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago & London, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised. The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973).

<sup>21</sup> Mendele Moykher-Sforim, *The Mare* in Joachim Neugroschel, translator, *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult* (New York, 1978), p. 632. For other editions, see chapter 19.

<sup>22</sup> This observation actually appears in Yirmiyahu Frenkel, *Perush le "Susati" shel Mendele Mokher Sfarim* [An interpretation of *The Mare* by Mendele Moykher-Sforim] (Tel Aviv, 1946), p. 123.

<sup>23</sup> Shmeruk, "Yiddish Literature," 810; *idem*, "Problems concerning the Yiddish texts of Mendele Mokher Sfarim" [Hebrew], in *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Papers*, II (Jerusalem, 1968), 26-29.

<sup>24</sup> Compare her analysis of Abramovitsh's *The Travels of Benjamin III* in *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, chapter 2.

<sup>25</sup> Dan Miron, "Introductory remarks on Abramovitsh's *The Mare*" [Hebrew], *Hadoar*, LI (1972), 606-608, 682-683, 698-699.

<sup>26</sup> Compare Ismar Schorsch, "On the History of the Political Judgement of the Jew," *The Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture*, No. 20 (New York, 1976).

Department of Jewish Literature  
The Jewish Theological Seminary of America