

## **Mendele's Prologue: A Comparative Reading of the Two Versions**

The text of Mendele's self-introduction that opens the first volume of Abramovitsh's 1907 Collected Works appears to purposely blur the distinction between the author and his famous persona. The independence of Mendele as a literary medium becomes unclear and the reader is led to confuse the fictionality of Mendele with the reality of Abramovitsh. Compared to the first 1879 Vilna version of the text, published at the opening of *Dos Kleyne Mentshele*, the final 1907 Odessa version not only resists acknowledging the duality Mendele author - Mendele function, but it changes the text in an attempt to weaken the dissimilarity. I shall account for the changes that support this thesis and spell out the devices of the rhetorical structure that produce this effect in the reading.

--- I ---

I believe that Mendele's Prologue expresses not only the clear ideological message of the *maskil* Abramovitsh but it constitutes a literary statement on the nature and possibilities of the narrative device as well. This is particularly relevant because Abramovitsh is making the first movements in the history of Modern Yiddish literature and Modern Hebrew prose. The interaction between two different voices (author / persona) is being played out in the text. In other words, it is a condensed playing out of the poliphony and the narrator's fragmented voice that characterizes modern prose. This text thus serves both as a formal prologue to the narrative works that further develop this interplay of voices, and as a key to the understanding of its fictional and rhetorical structure as well.

Before we compare both versions of the Introduction, let's concentrate on the fictional nature of Mendele.

The framework of the text already points to this basic issue. The strategic choice of "name" and "address" at the beginning and the end is significant. This matter is thrust before us as we enter

and as we leave the text. We are provided with markers that are meant to identify a distinctive character. The fictionality of Mendele's character, presented here as being separate from the real author, is furthermore emphasized by the theatrical setting of the monologue; which, at the same time, elevates the audience itself to the category of character. On one hand, the fictionality of both characters ( Mendele and his audience) is established as different from the real author and the real readership. On the other hand, the veracity of Mendele covers up his fictional nature very well. Only the attentive reader of the first version and the critical reader of the final version will avoid confusing Mendele's speech with Abramovitch's voice.

As if the strategic location of the identification marks were not enough to force our attention to the centrality of the name , the entire text (except for the long addition of paragraphs 10 to 16) thematizes precisely the "name" of the monologist. The Prologue unfolds the roots and origins of MENDELE, the vicissitudes of his occupation, MOCHER, and finally the nature of his merchandise, SFORIM. The speech uncovers the name Mendele Mocher Sforim and the name condenses the contents of the speech. In that sense we could say that Mendele *is* the speech.

The interdependence between the name and the speech of Mendele serves many functions:

The three components of the name MENDELE - MOCHER - SFORIM, the triade roots-occupation-books, is the subject matter of the *maskilic* message: a complicated relationship of love and betrayal vis-a-vis the past, a demand for change in the socio-economic structure of the Jews, and an educational-cultural reformist agenda. Inasmuch as Mendele's name *is* the speech, and the speech is not the naive monologue of a bookpeddler but a sophisticated fictionalization of Abramovitch's *maskilic* message, Mendele is to be considered not as the author himself, but as the literary medium used to express the author's ideology.

The "linguistic nature" of Mendele, who is being constructed here exclusively by his monologue (and not, for example, through actions) emphasizes the fictionality of the character. The speech constructs the character, who has no reality outside of the speech. In that sense, the wealthy rhetorical apparatus (even more loaded in the final version), in striking contrast with the sparing mimetic level, strengthens the fictional nature of the monologist.

This same interdependence between name and speech plays a third function. The fact that Mendele's speech here is already implied in his name marks the intimate relationship between

*what* is being narrated and *who* narrates it. It might hence be read as pointing to the relationship between narration and narrator, i.e. to the dependence of the narration on the point of view. In other words, if the reader is lead to pay attention to the narrator's voice, while distinguishing between the present narrator of the stories and the absent narrator of Mendele persona, this Prologue possesses particular relevance for the understanding of the Collected Works. .

----- II -----

I have shown how Abramovitsh's use of the fictional Mendele establishes a fertile terrain for playing out the tension and possibilities of poliphony. I have pointed out that the identification marks and the rich language build the character as fictional and as separate from the author. At the same time, they both serve to strengthen his overwhelming reality. In the midst of this ambiguity, Abramovitsh takes advantage of the confused reader and propagates his message. The examination of the rhetorical structure of the 1907 version discloses the use of a carefully planned apparatus to foster this confusion of voices, and to open up the speculation about Abramovitsh's undeclared purpose in doing so.

The independence of Mendele is first softened by the weakening and even elimination of his identification marks. While in the first version Mendele's passport states his exact age of 52 (footnote 16), in the final one it is less accurate and vague ("שטייען אפילו בפירוש מיינע יארן"), paragraph 5). Also, his wife's name, Yenta, disappears from the text (footn.53). The clearest expression of the intentional adherence of the two voices is the ambiguous declaration in paragraph 7: "האנדלען האנדל איך, [ווי איר קוקט מיר אן,] מיט ספרים." Who is speaking here, Mendele or Abramovitsh? Both deal with books! The equivocal statement is further strengthened by the 1907 addition, "[ווי איר קוקט מיר אן]". As we the readers have already been drawn by the master speech and have been encouraged to identify with Mendele's audience, we can neither see the author nor his persona. Thus, *who* are we supposed to be "seeing" or "not seeing"?

Mendele undergoes another clear change in the final version: he comes much closer to the communal body of the Jews. While he is more of an outside observer in the previous version, the new text attempts to present him (Mendele-Abramovitsh) as "one of us"(Jews, audience/readers). This effect is provoked in two rhetorical ways.

First, through the significant increase of *folksprach*. The resulting monologue is now loaded with popular sayings, the function of which is to bring about Mendele's familiarity with the Jews and to gain their/our confidence. For example: "אין עין-חרע", "ברוך השם", "שווער איך איך"

"ווי געוויינטלעך א ייד", "כ לעבן", "נשקשה", "נישט היינט געדאכט"

These expressions, which do not serve any grammatical or communicative function, succeed in a double sense. By sharing the same linguistic codes, the unwary readers are led to believe that they also share his worldview. All suspicion is therefore cancelled and the text is perceived as being inoffensive, as coming from within, as legitimizing the communal ideology. However a critical reading reveals this as an astute strategy to propagate the opposite agenda. The use of *folksprach* establishes an ironic understanding between Mendele-Abramovitsh and their audiences. This ironic understanding "between the lines" is a powerful tool for the same reformist goal.

Second, another strategy used to make Mendele appear as an insider is the even stronger "Judaization" of his language. More universal and neutral expressions are changed into "Jewish issues". This rhetorical change, in an apparent superfluous gesture which does not add to the issue itself reveals much of Abramovitsh's intentions. The first example is found in Paragraph 1. Mendele begins his monologue by describing the bad manners, meddling and clumsiness of his fellow Jews, in the third person: the Jew asks, inquires, bothers, is disrespectful to others, etc. and Mendele appears either as the neutral outside critic or as the victim of annoying inquiries. To remove Mendele's exclusion from the collective, Abramovitsh adds to the original the phrase in brackets "אזעלכע זאכן זיינען, [ביי, אונדז, יידן], גאנץ געוויינטלעך"

In the addition that occurs in Paragraph 4, Mendele is presented as sharing the fate of his people: "אין אונזערע ווינקל דא אין גלות...". Notice that the use of this expression plus another "ברוך השם" counterbalance and make possible this incisive addition. Apparently, Mendele is describing the virtues of some *shtetlech* as supporting the respectable position of Jews in that Diaspora. Yet the names of the *shtetlech* themselves already deflate the statement about their merits, like "Kabtsansk ["Paupersville"], renowned for its wealth". The climatic irony is the deflation of the pompous statement "the position of the Jews in our corner here in the Diaspora" into the portrayal of misery. As we see from this, the changes in the rhetorical apparatus allow

the introduction of more subtle and scathing criticism.

A final and most eloquent example are the changes that the last lines in Paragraph 6 underwent in order to make a wonderfully ironic statement about the issue of poverty. According to the 1907 text in footnotes 32 to 36 state, Mendele refers to his own poverty as his personal fate, in the context of his personal story. He presents himself as a poor man hopefully in contrast to his audience, "און בין געווען, לא עליכם, א גרויסער אביון". In this case the *folksprach* imposes a distance between the characters. Not only is this distance removed in the later text, but the issue becomes one of national poverty and simultaneously the object of refined irony

(״וואס דען האט א יד ? ..נישט דאס בין איך אויסן.״)

The outright statement of individual poverty disappears, and instead the mention of the family as a source of wealth is completely inverted by Mendele's "This is beside the point" which closes the paragraph. Furthermore, the reference to poverty added in Paragraph 8, attaches his individual poverty to his Jewishness: "אז איך בין א יד, אן אביון".

The following are other cases of the "Judaization" of Mendele's language. The attachment of "a Jew" ("א יד") to every question in Paragraph 3, reinforces the Jewish nature of his questions and the Jewish context to which they allude. The replacement of the neutral "נישט היינט געדאכט" (footn. 19) by "נישט פאר יד ישע קינדער געדאכט" once again strengthens for the reader the familiar context and anules the suspicion of foreign influences.

### Conclusions

Both the 1879 and the 1907 versions of Mendele's Prologue play out the tension between narrator(s) and readers while exploring the possibilities and the limits of the narrator's voice. Considering the work of rewriting that Abramovitsh undertook, and confining ourselves to the textual material, the Prologues in correlation could be read as a textual experimentation in the effectiveness of certain literary devices (voices, rhetorics) in the transmission of an ideology.

The two main ways attempted by Abramovitsh to make the text more permeable to his pointed *maskilic* criticism have been proven above as being highly efficient. Blurring the differentiation between author and narrator does not only increase the fictional character of Abramovitsh the author; but also and most important, it invests the fictional Mendele with

veracity, reality, closeness and familiarity. Abramovitsh is intentionally playing with the effects of veracity and fictionality. The text succeeds in effectively using its sophisticated literary devices but also in hiding these strategies.

The rewriting of the rhetorical structure is basically meant to make it appear less pedagogical and apparently inoffensive, while as a matter of fact it becomes more ironic and poignant. More pointed and "juicy" attacks (like the issue of the tax on Kosher meat, footn 43) are removed and replaced by for more indirect and refined irony.

The one very significant and powerful exception to these two strategies is the long addition of Paragraphs 12 to 16. The characters are repositioned similar to the way they are depicted in the 1879 version: Mendele steps outside and returns to his position of the other, different from the community of Jews:

"אוי, איך ווייס, ווייס זייער גוט, אז אזוינס פאסט נישט פאר א יידן,

(...) דאס איז ביי מיר, לא עליכם, אזא געבוירענער מיחוש..."

Mendele presents himself as a nature lover, an admirer of the beauties of world, as a searcher for sensual pleasures ; and, in another irony, he contrasts with "the authentic", the really important [matters] that Jews deal with, like *Yiddishkeit* and sustenance.

The voice of the author resounds in the crude and derogatory words of the *Yetser Harah*. If the *Yetser Harah* is considered as the personification of Abramovitsh, this episode is the only time in the whole text where the duality narrator-author is clearly acknowledged. The *maskil* Abramovits condescendingly describes the Jews from above and Mendele criticizes from outside. The Jews become mere objects of their criticism.

" - אין וועג, און קומענדיק אין שטעטלעך, אין שטעט, וועסטו אנקוקן מיני יידן, שיינע - צורות, פיינע-בריות, מאדנע פארשוניען, אלערליי נפשות,

געקרימטע רוקנס, פארריסענע נעזער, לאנג-הענטיקע, קלעפיק - פינגערדיקע, .."

Having gained the confidence of the readership, the core of the *maskilic* message is disclosed: a new, modern world view antithetical to the traditional Jewish one (i.e. the open world, nature, life, liveliness, freshness, beauty, progress as opposed to the closed *shtetl*, darkness, the primitive, death, poverty). The more general issue of a return to nature points to a reformist agenda that goes beyond the internal struggle within the traditional community, i.e. the confrontation between hassidim and *misnagdim*. This comprehensive goal applies to the Jewish people as a whole without regard to its religious nuances. Mendele uses no gimmicks to express

this:

"דאס גלייכן איז מיט דעם אתרוג, מיט דעם לולב, מיט די חושענות. איך פארגעס די מצווה, דעס לשם ייחוד, וואס דריינען: קודשא בריך הוא מיט דטר זייט, מיר טוט חנאה ווי שיינ, ווי פריש, ווי זיי שמעקן א מחיה. דער עניין צום תשליך גיין, אזא יידישע ערנצטע זאך, אפשלאקען זיך פון די עבירות, ווערט ביי מיר גאר א שיינער שפאציר."

In conclusion, the relevance of the text is born out by the examination of the coexistence and interplay of the two voices, the author's and the narrator's.

In addition, although the modifications are extensive and significant, the texts do not seem to reflect a change of ideology. They do not manifest a choice between art, in the original, and of ideology in the later version. Rather, in the latter, Abramovitsh chooses a more permeable and effective point of view in order to intensify the same *maskilic* idea.