

An Introduction to the "Introduction"

As a result of the cultural policy promoted by German *Haskala* literature, throughout the XIX century Eastern European *maskilim* considered the reform and modernization of Jewish life as ultimately dependent on the disappearance of what they saw as the determining factor of Jewish separatism: Yiddish. Through the contemptuous attitude toward the "corrupted *jargon*", through the glorification of Hebrew and the idealization of German and Russian, Jewish intellectuals relegated Yiddish to a status of literary illegitimacy: the native tongue of Eastern European Jewry was viewed as unworthy of any kind of artistic expression. Because of this vehement opposition to Yiddish, any Jewish writer who strove to achieve literary acknowledgement and prestige had to write in Hebrew, the literary medium *par excellence*.

Fully aware of the masses' illiteracy in Hebrew, German and Russian, some writers did employ Yiddish as a social instrument to spread the ideas of the *Haskala*. Yet, this use of the *jargon* for didactic purposes could not remain purely instrumental: both the advocates of Hebrew and Russian were in fact blaming these writers for promoting the development of Yiddish as a literary language by its very employment. In 1862, for example, Alexander Tsederboym justified didactically the fact that he was editing, as a supplement to the Hebrew magazine *Hamelits*, the first Yiddish weekly published in Imperial Russia. He nonetheless had to face the opposition of the Jewish progressive milieu in Odessa, which accused him and his newspaper *Kol-mevaser* of supporting the literary development of Yiddish¹.

This basic contradiction in the ideology of Jewish Enlightenment, which in the 1860s by and large officially rejected the "end-justifies-the-means" approach, engendered in those authors who

¹ "Protivniki zhargona prekrasno soznawali, chto 'Kol Mevaser' znachitel'no sposobstvuet literaturnomu razvitiyu narodnago jazyka...", in I. Tsinberg, *Istoriya Evreyskoy Pechati*, 1910, p. 106.

wrote in Yiddish a sense of shame, of embarrassment. They were in fact using an "illegitimate" literary medium for their literary creations.

It is thus to no surprise if the renowned Hebraist and *maskil* Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh decided to adopt a pen-name when writing in Yiddish. His apologetic reaction to the fact that, as a major spokesman of the *Haskala* and as an advocate of the purity of Hebrew, he was "artistically" employing the language of the people, was to create the pseudonym of Mendele Moykher-Sforim. In performing this new role of *jargon* writer though, Abramovitsh needed much more than a simple literary device, more than a pen-name: he needed a persona, a character, a myth, through which he could distance himself from his own works in Yiddish, through which he could legitimize himself as a Yiddish writer. The origin of Mendele though, was not only brought about by this typical sense of shame experienced by several other Hebraists when writing in their native tongue; it was also determined by Abramovitsh's attempt to create an immediate, active, and direct relationship between author and audience. For this purpose he needed the mask, the persona, the character with its own independent identity that could carry out the function of mediator between two worlds: that could act as a mediator between the Hebrew language and the Yiddish dialect, between Abramovitsh's status of celebrated Hebrew writer and the people's status of potential Yiddish readers, between the *maskil* and the *am-orets*, nice between the author of a non-existing literature and the potential addressee of its works. Thus, through the creation of the name-persona-character of Mendele, Abramovitsh was not only attempting to distance himself from the very fact that he was writing in Yiddish, but, at the same time, he was trying to relate directly to the people and to reach the Yiddish speaking folk. His intention was moreover to create an intimate and familiar atmosphere between author and audience, to break the barriers between the status of writer and the status of reader in a literature that officially ^{did} ~~was~~ not yet existing. This paradoxical situation of a "pseudo-author" who is writing for an "ignored" and "rejected" audience in a language deprived of any right to literary

existence was further^gmore complicated by an additional element: in terms of the literary community, Abramovitsh felt no connection with other "Yiddish writers", such as, for example, Isaac Meir Dik and Avrom Goldfaden. It was only at the end of the 1880s, when a strong shift towards Yiddish took place among the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, that he seemed to accept the new concept of literary tradition and historical continuity in regards to Yiddish writing. This new concept was introduced by the works of Dubnov and Sholem Aleikhem. In the 1880s in fact, under the pseudonym of *Kritikus*, the historian Shimon Dubnov started publishing literary reviews of Yiddish works in the authoritative Jewish-Russian newspaper *Voskhod*. During the same years, under the pseudonym of Sholem Aleikhem, Solomon Rabinovitsh began publishing his own Yiddish works and, at the end of the decade, his literary journal *Yidishe-folksbibliotek*.

The idea of a literary tradition, which in the case of Yiddish can assert itself once the language is accepted as a literary means and once criticism begins, necessarily implies an origin. And the origin of what was to become Yiddish literature were the works by Abramovitsh himself, or better, by the literary character he created in the 1860s. (Through Mendele, Abramovitsh generated in fact the myth of a grandfather, of a lineage, an ancestry, a *yikhes* for Yiddish literature. If there was a grandfather, there could just as well be a grandson: thus, *der eynikl* Sholem Aleykhem.)^{*}In order to preserve this myth and maintain the reality and credibility of his persona among the readership, Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, when writing in Yiddish, resorted to Mendele and entrusted him with the authorship of his works: Mendele would therefore be the book-seller, the editor, the author, the narrator, the character².

² In 1888 for example, in a letter to his literary grandson Sholem Aleykhem, Abramovitsh complains about the fact that the latter did not call him by his "pen name": "...*hot ir shlekht geton, vos onshtot Mendele moykher-sforim, ruft ir mikh dort Abramovitsh...*"; in N. Mayzel, *Dos Mendele bukh*, New York 1959, p. 157.

* געבן און פארענעדיגן פון די יידישע פאלקס-ביבליאָטעק און דער זשאָרנאל "יִיִדישע פֿאָלקס-ביבליאָטעק" פֿון שװעטשװע, אַן אַרבעט פֿון אַבֿראָמיטשװיץ.

Name and Identity in the Pseudo-Biography of Mendele Moykher-Sforim

“Les grandes personnes... Quand vous leur parlez d'un nouvel ami, elles ne vous questionnent jamais sur l'essentiel. Elles ne vous disent jamais: “Quel est le son de sa voix? Quels sont les jeux qu'il prefere? Est-ce qu'il collectionne les papillons?” Elles vous demandent: “Quel age a-t-il? Combien a-t-il de freres? Combien pese-t-il? Combien gagne son pere?” Alors seulement elles croient le connaitre.”³

The canonization of the Mendele myth takes shape in the introduction to the second version of *Dos kleyne mentshele*, which appeared in 1879. Some thirty years later, this same introduction was adopted by Abramovitsh, in a revised and improved version, as the introduction to the collection of his complete works, which was published in 1907 under the title of *Ale ksovim fun Mendele moykher-sforim*. This introduction, perhaps the most important literary document of XIX century Yiddish literature, is both the pseudo-biography of a writer and of an *individuum*, that is, of an author in his difficult attempt to define a relationship with his audience, and of an individual in his difficult attempt to break away from the collectivity. Mendele represents here in fact both the Yiddish author, who is trying to impose himself on his readership, and the single Jew, who is trying to impose himself on the Jewish collective body. In both versions, the *hakdome*, which appears more as an independent work rather than an introduction to other writings, can be considered as a pseudo-biography for two essential reasons. By means of this utterly nontraditional and noncanonical portrait, Abramovitsh is first of all challenging the very idea of “introducing himself”, of unveiling his identity of individual and writer: he turns the text into a parody of the *individuum*'s obligation to reveal himself to the traditional society, thus surrendering his uniqueness in the interest of the collectivity, and into a parody of the author's obligation to present himself to his audience. The *hakdome* could almost be seen as a parody of the biographical genre: because of its complete superficiality, Mendele's introducing himself to

³ A. de Saint-Exupery, *Le Petit Prince*, Gallimard 1946, p. 19.

the *klal* and to the readership becomes a “non-introduction”, and, in particular in the 1879 version, the “revelation” of Mendele’s identity never takes place. The second element that identifies the *hakdome* as a pseudo-biography, is determined by the fact that instead of describing the life and personality of Mendele the book-seller, the text becomes the biography of the Jewish people as a whole: what was supposed to be the biography of an individual develops from the very beginning into the biography of a collective entity. The faults and bad habits of the Jews are placed in the foreground of the narration which becomes a dramatic, and, at the same time, parodic and grotesque critique of Eastern European Jewish life; the entire system on which Russian-Jewish life is based is vehemently attacked and depicted in all its absurdity; this absurdity is moreover emphasized through a typical ironic procedure, which recurs throughout the *hakdome*: referring to Mendele’s shtetl of birth for example, Abramovitsh conveys the religious, intellectual and economic degeneration of Jewish life, by juxtaposing, for contrast, different concepts: “*Aleyn bin ikh a gebirtiker fun tsvuatshits...barimt mit ir gutschkayt un frumkayt, vi glupsk...mit ir khokhme, kabtsansk mit ire ashires un tunevadevke mit ire fabrikes...*” (*Hakdome*, p. 123).

As a parody of identification, this pseudo-biography mirrors the close relationship between the condition of the individual in Jewish society and that of a Yiddish writer in a not yet officially existing literature: both the individual and the writer are trying to free themselves from the perception that *klal* and audience respectively have of them. As the metaphor of a collective biography, the *hakdome* mirrors the exceptional condition of symbiosis existing between the single Jew and his community: the *individuum* Mendele attempts to break away from this coercive interdependence, giving the collective a vague and superficial portrait of himself, and, simultaneously, criticizing this same collective for attempting to replace the ~~single~~ ^{individual's} entity with the communal one.

The relation *yokhed-klal* and writer-audience is conveyed in the very first sentence of the pseudo-biography, that is, through the question “*ma-shmekhem?*”. The issue of the “name”, as the symbol of the individual’s and of the writer’s identity, can perhaps be seen as the central theme of this text. On one hand the “name” required of the ^{individual} ~~single~~ is the instrument through which the collectivity and the public may be able to define Mendele’s identity and thus wield influence on it. On the other hand, the phrase “*ma-shmekhem?*” becomes the symbol of the total corruption of *yidishkayt* itself, of the degeneration of cultural traditions among Russian Jews. A parallel could be drawn between the concept of “*shem*”, as the embodiment of the degraded system of Jewish *minhogim*, and the concept of Aksenfeld’s “*shterntikhl*” and Abramovitsh’s “*vintshfingerl*”: these three value systems represent, in three different works, all that is negative and degenerate in Jewish society. In order to criticize the accepted custom of the *shterntikhl* for example, the author reverses it mockingly and negates it through the assertion of its false counterpart. Just as Aksenfeld’s and Abramovitsh’s progressive heroes win over the evil powers of superstition and economic corruption resorting to a false “*shterntikhl*” and “*vintshfingerl*”, so does the author of the *hakdome* mock the value system of “*ma- shmekhem*”, present himself with a false name, and, through Mendele, assert his independence and uniqueness as an *individuum*. The relationship between single and author and between *klal* and public is furthermore emphasized by the

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- ① following analogy: the same question that obsessively haunts the *yokhed* and is put to him by the collectivity during his lifetime and by the *malekh ha-doyme* after his death, is asked of the writer.
- ②
- ③ As Abramovitsh clearly states, “*ikh veys zeyer gut az bay mayn ershtn aroysfor in der yidisher literatur...vet gevis dem oylems ershte shayle zayn: ma-shmekhem feter?*” (*Hakdome*, p. 122).

A typical rhetorical structure

The parody of the question “What is your name?” and, in general, of the instruments through which the individual and the writer can be identified, continues in the list of Mendele’s physical traits as they appear in his passport. Mentioning the total absence of any distinctive trait, Mendele is again asserting his individuality and mocking the *klal*-audience’s attempt to actually

identify the *individuum*-author exclusively through superficial and trivial matters: "Bazundere simonim - nishto. dos heyst in gantsn prost gornisht, a mentsh vi geveyntlekh ^e ~~der~~ rov mentshn... ay iz dokh di kashe glat a pasport gor on simonim volt dokh oykh dos eygene bavizn, az men iz a mentsh!" (*Hakdome*, p. 126). Thus, the passport becomes the anti-identification means *par excellence*. The political analog^e of Abramovitsh's use of the passport image appears in one of Dr. Zhitlovsky's ideological essays published in 1904 in the journal *Der fraynd*. Focusing on the perception of Jewish nationality at the turn of the century, and enumerating the official characteristics thanks to which the Jews could be recognized as a "normal" people, and Yiddish as a "normal" language, Zhitlovsky says: "Beyde - dos yidishe folk un di yidishe shprakh - hobn kimat dem zebikn goyrl... zey zoln bavayzn az zey zaynen emese: az dos yidishe folk iz bemes a folk un az di yidishe shprakh iz bemes a shprakh... shtendik darfn zey haltn ongegreyt a pasport vu es zoln zayn oysgerekhnt ale simonim. un tomer kholile felt eyn simen - iz posl."⁴

As Abramovitsh points out, what could seem ^{to be} ~~as~~ the most natural and innocuous question in any other culture or literature, becomes, within the Jewish community and in Yiddish literature, the symbol of the authority and the pressure that collectivity and readership can exert on the single-author⁵. The opposition between what is perceived as "natural" and what is perceived as "unnatural", or better, between what is accepted by the collective body and what is rejected by it as a threat to the integrity of the *klal*, recurs throughout the *hakdome*. In order to express the different perception that individual and community have of reality, Abramovitsh builds the whole text on what could be defined as "reverse construction". This consists in the fact that the

⁴ Kh. Zhitlovsky, "Di yidishe shprakh un dos yidishe folk" (1904), in *Gezamlte shriftn*, vol. V, p. 112.

⁵ Abramovitsh's critique of Jewish society gains furthermore vehemence because of its attack on the very foundations of Judaism. The idea of the "name", as a symbol of "power" and authority that can be exerted over the person or thing being named, is first stated in *Tanakh*. After having created the animals, God brings them to Adam so that he can give them a name: "...ve-kol asher ikra-lo ha-adam nefesh hayah hu *shmo*: vaikra ha-adam *shemot* le-kol-ha-behemot..." (Gen. 2: 19); or again, when establishing the covenant with Abraham, God says: "...ve-lo-ikare od et-*shimha* abram ve-hayah *shimha* abraham..." (Gen. 18: 4).

why do you think Mandele doesn't mention this precedent?

author always means the opposite of what he says. Thus, the absurdity and unnaturalness of the question “*ma-shmekhem?*” is expressed by Mendele as follows: “...*azalkhe zakhn zaynen bay undz, yidn, gants geveyntlekh. azoy iz der seyder-ho-oylem fun eybike tsaytn un ontsurufn zikh akegn dem volt oysgekumen...meshuge, epes meshune vild, gor she-lo kederekh ha-teyve...*” (*Hakdome*, p. 122). As the traditional system symbolized by “*ma- shmekhem*” has always prevailed within the communal perception of reality, the individual’s rebellion against it would obviously appear as inconceivable and unnatural. Through the “reverse construction” though, the definition of unnaturalness given to this rebellion (“*she-lo kederekh ha-teyve*”) is subverted, and what is defined as natural (“... ‘*ma-shmekhem?*’ *iz a gants natirlekhe zakh, es ligt azoy in der teyve...*”, *Hakdome*, p. 121) becomes unnatural. By the same token, the expression “*nisht dos bin ikh oysn*” does not indicate a digression but on the contrary a core section in the narrative; what is defined as the *yeytser hore*, as the “evil” inclination instigating the *yokhed* to break away from the *klal* and the writer to publish his stories, is actually a *yeytser tov*, an inclination to good; when saying “*nisht far aykh gedakht, yidishe kinder*”, and referring to his departure from the *klal*, Mendele actually means “may this, yes, happen to you, *yidishe kinder*”.

Mendele’s departure from the collective body though, does not progress into his total estrangement from it. No matter how violently Abramovitsh attacks the value system of the Russian-Jewish *klal*, he still needs a mediator between himself and this reality, between himself and the readership. Thus, on ^{the} one hand Mendele represents the creative writer and the *individuum* rejecting the status quo, and on the other hand he represents the necessary medium between author and audience, between individual and collective. Just as Belkin, travelling through Russia, becomes the link between Pushkin and the stationmaster Samson, so does Mendele, travelling through the Pale of Settlement, become the link between Abramovitsh and the Yiddish multitude of “*sheyne tsures, fayne beries, modne parshoynen, alerley nefashes, gekrimte rukns, farrisene nezer, lang-hentike, klepik-fingerdike...*” (*Hakdome*, p. 136). In his function of intermediary,

Mendele operates both as an “outsider” and an “insider”: too much of a heretic to be a typical member of the traditional society, he nevertheless remains a part of it, almost a biological outgrowth of it. And it is precisely by virtue of his “prophetic” position, that the *yeytser-hore* can pass on to him the truth, “...*dos fargenign vos du vest hobn funem onzen zikh, onhern zikh untervegs sheyne zakhn...du vest zikh kukn-kukn...vestu onkukn minei yidn...vestu hobn fun zey tsu dertseyln mayses...*” (Ibid.).

The Categories of Time and Space

“This time is collective, that is, it is differentiated and measured only by the events of *collective* life; everything that exists in this time exists solely for the collective... the interior time of an individual life does not yet exist, the *individuum* lives completely on the surface, within a collective whole...”⁶

One of the technical terms employed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his literary studies regards the analysis of texts according to “the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented”. More precisely, the term “chronotope” refers to the absolute interdependence existing between the categories of time and space.⁷ This chronotopic system of analysis may be applied to Abramovitsh’s *Hakdome*.

As typical of all traditional societies, every single event, be it of historical, social or personal nature, is filtered through the collective perception of it and interpreted on the basis of the accepted value system. Similarly, the individual is defined by the sole perception the community has of him, and the personal events of his life are assimilated into the collective memory. Yet, at the moment of the individual’s rebellion against the collective entity, new categories of time and

⁶ M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981, pp. 206-207.

⁷ Ibid., p. 425.

space are created, which inevitably result in the negation of those categories already accepted by the collective body.

✓ Considering Abramovitsh's *Hakdome* as the biography of the Jews of the Russian Empire, the categories of time and space become collective. The "chronotope of the *klal*", as opposed to the "chronotope of the *yokhed*", results clear when, for example, replying to one of the superficial questions put to him by the community-*oylem*, Mendele mentions the controversial issue of his date of birth. As he explains in fact, he has no exact knowledge of his age: "...*nor in em^es vifl ikh bin alt, ken ikh...bashtimt aykh nit zogn*" (*Hakdome*, p. 124). The matter was still being discussed by his own parents: if his father believed he was born "*beshas di groyse krires zaynen farshlept gevorn in undzer vinkl, punkt in der tsayt, ven der alter...iz nistalek gevorn*", his mother claimed he was born "*gor...mit a yor tsvey nokh der ershter behole*", when she had made such good dumplings that the whole *shtetl* still remembered⁸. Thus, there is no individual time: the *yokhed* is not considered to be born when he was actually born, but when certain events, such as the death of a great rabbi or his mother's cuisine, enter the collective memory. This conception of time, bereft of any kind of personal and individual perception, specifically belongs to the space of the community, of the *shtetl*, of the Pale. The chronotope of the Jewish collectivity is therefore determined by the interdependence between the time of the *luakh* and the space of *Tsvuatshits*, between the "*eybike tsaytn*" of tradition and the space of the "*vinkl*", between the stillness of time and the space of the *shul-hoyf*. This necessary relationship is furthermore explained by the fact that one of the main features of the chronotope consists in its reading the texts as "x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring"⁹.

⁸ "*Individuums* are representatives of the social whole, events of their lives coincide with the events of the life of the social whole, and the significance of such events (on the individual as well as on the social plane) is identical"; in *ibid.*, p. 218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

If the time process in the chronotope of the collectivity is utterly determined by a collective perception, in the chronotope of the *yokhed*, it is determined by an individual perception. The space of the *shtetl* is here replaced by the space of nature, where the “mobility” of the individual, as opposed to the immobility and fixedness of the group, can finally express itself. Mendele’s breakaway from the collective coincides with his devoting himself to the metier of bookpeddling: in order to aver his identity as an *individuum*, he parts from the eternal set of rules imposed upon him from the very moment of his birth, rejecting the lack of evolution, growth and change of the communal body, and becoming *de facto* a traveler. And it is precisely through this dimension of moving, of going, of travelling, that the private sphere, absolutely nonexistent in a traditional society like *Tsvuatshits*, can find its unique expression. The chronotope of the individual is determined by the interdependent relationship between the time of nature and the space of nature: here only can Mendele really assert his own voice on the poliphonic reality, on the multitude of voices and questions oppressively assaulting him on the space of the collectivity, on the time of tradition. As he clearly states: “...*shpatsirn geyn iz mayn lebn. afn feld, in vald bin ikh gor nit der, vos in shtot, kh'bin fray, oysgeton fun yokh*” (*Hakdome*, p. 136). The opposition between the space of the *vald* and the space of the *shtot*, between the time of the nature and the time of the *luakh*, is rendered, for example, through the image of God: if in the space and time of the community even He accepts the “*ma-shmekhem* policy” and, through his emissary, asks Yankev Ovinu his name (“*Der malekh, vos hot zikh geranglt mit yankev ovinu, er afile hot nit meshane geven funem seyder-ha-oylem un im bald take...a freg geton, vi er heyst*”; *ibid.*, p. 122), in the chronotope of the *individuum*, He becomes an integral¹ part of Mendele’s “*libshaft tsu der natur*”, of Spinoza’s idea of nature (“...*di luft frish, a getilekhe shtilkayt in toln, berglekh un veldlekh...*”; *ibid.*, p. 134). The difference between the space and time of the community and the space and time of the individual is moreover reflected in the contrasting images of Mendele’s horse and of the “*shtolts-shvimendike gendz*”: if the former, as part of the

