Reading Yiddish in a Post-Modern Age: Some Trends in Literary Scholarship of the 1990s

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From the Age of Enlightenment on, attitudes to Yiddish language and culture have been ideologically motivated. Yiddish was variously perceived as a corrupt jargon or the quintessence of the Jewish soul, a propaganda tool or the idiom of the Jewish collective unconscious. But with the worldwide decline of secular education in Yiddish after the Holocaust, knowledge of Yiddish culture becomes increasingly fragmented. Although Yiddish forms a legitimate part of various academic Jewish Studies programs, it often has the secondary status of an auxiliary subject. As a result, academic research in Yiddish culture rarely tackles central topics such as literary history or monographic studies of individual writers. With Yiddish studies in the U.S. increasingly focused on border cases between Yiddish and other cultural phenomena, Germany is gradually emerging as a major center of Yiddish philology.

Yiddish Studies between Ideology and Philology

Ideology has long been an important factor influencing and sometimes determining the attitude of Jewish intellectuals to Yiddish from the Age of Enlightenment onwards. At first, Jewish intelligentsia despised the "ugly jargon" and regarded it as an obstacle in the way of progress and integration. Within the conceptual system of Enlightenment, Yiddish had a limited instrumental use as a tool for disseminating propaganda, satire, and useful knowledge for as long as the Jewish masses did not have sufficient command of a European (in the maskilic parlance, "living") language. The frustration of Jewish intellectuals in their attempts to realize the ideals of the Enlightenment under the conditions of Eastern Europe entailed a change in this attitude. Yiddish was perceived as an authentic idiom, the only language capable of expressing the essence of Jewish folk psyche. At its early stage, the Jewish socialist movement reverted to the instrumental attitude to Yiddish and considered it primarily as an effective medium of propaganda among Jewish working masses. However, later some of the ideologues of socialism on the Jewish street, most notably Ber Borochov, appropriated the essentialist attitude of Yiddish. By contrast, the majority of non-socialist Zionist intellectuals reverted to the old maskilic negativism, identifying Yiddish with the Galut heritage that had no place in the bright Jewish future. Similarly negative was the attitude of

assimilationist intelligentsia, which argued for the speediest acculturation of Jews into the culture of their host country. Both Zionists and assimilationists tolerated and even encouraged some limited use of Yiddish, but only with the ultimate "suicidal" purpose that it eventually be replaced by Hebrew or the language of the country. Thus we can identify three types of attitude, which, regardless of their ideological affiliation, can be called *negativist*, *essentialist*, and *instrumentalist*. These three types (and their various combinations) continue to inform the position with regard to Yiddish among Jewish intellectuals, scholars, and artists to this day.

The essentialist attitude requires perhaps some further clarification. In its purest form it was expressed by the prominent Hebrew-Yiddish-German writer Micha Joseph Berdyczewski (1865–1921) in 1907:

> The [Yiddish] language is still so indivisible from the Jew, so thickly rooted in his soul, that all we can say about it is, this is how a Jew talks; ... You see, anyone can learn Hebrew, provided that he confines himself to his desk for a few years, stuffs himself with the Bible and grammar, and reads some *melitse* books. The mastering of Yiddish, however, is a gift; a faculty one must be born with. I am speaking, of course, of the real thing, of radical, authentic Yiddish.[1]

Berdyczewski contrasted his notion of the "radical" and "authentic" Yiddish as spoken by "a Jew" to the language of literature and journalism of his time, which was created largely by the intellectuals, and was, by implication, artificial if not fake. Promotion of this kind of language was the purpose of the Yiddishist movement, which sought to transform Yiddish into a "normal" language like other modern European languages, with its own press, literature, and educational system. Recognition of Yiddish as the Jewish national language would lay a cultural foundation for the autonomous existence of Jewish nation in the Diaspora, argued some of the champions of Yiddishism. In this conceptual framework, Yiddish became identified not with an old-fashioned authentic "Jew" but with the modern Jewish nation in the making. Correspondingly, the opponents of Yiddish could be regarded almost as potential enemies of the people. "He who ridicules Yiddish ridicules the Jewish people. He who does not know a word of Yiddish is in fact half a gentile," proclaimed Chaim Zhitlovsky.[2] These

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[1]Quoted in Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 76–77.

[2]Quoted in Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture: The Story of the Yiddish Language Movement* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1977), p. 173.

two examples demonstrate that the essentialist attitude to Yiddish can be characteristic of various ideological positions, not necessarily, but often related to Yiddishism.[3]

Ber Borochov, the founding father of both Labor Zionism and Yiddish scholarship, formulated the difference between the general and national scholarship with his characteristic idiosyncratic clarity in a footnote to his groundbreaking 1913 manifesto-essay "The Tasks of Yiddish Philology": "Linguistics is a general science, philology —a national. Linguistics can preoccupy itself with completely dead or completely wild languages; in contrast, philology presupposes a cultural-historical value in a language, with which it concerns itself, at least for its past. And usually philology goes even further and presumes that its language has a national value and a future." Philology, proclaimed Borochov in the opening phrase of his manifesto, is the most important of all branches of scholarship for its role in the "national revival of suppressed nations."[4] The ideological impulse that originated in Borokhov's vision was the driving force in the creation of Yiddish academic institutions in Eastern Europe after World War I, not only of the YIVO institute in Vilno, but, in a form modified according to the Soviet Marxist doctrine, also of several institutes, cabinets, and university departments devoted to the study of "Yiddish Proletarian Culture" in the Soviet Union, the only country before World War II where Yiddish studies was integrated into the general academic institutional framework and funded by the state. None of it survived the devastation of the war and the Stalinist terror in the Soviet Union.

Ideological considerations played an important role in the creation of the first Yiddish academic center after World War II, the Yiddish Department at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (1951). As Avraham Novershtern points out,

> [T]he success of the Yiddish Department in gaining a solid academic foothold must be attributed in no small measure to the efforts of its founder, Sadan, a person utterly committed to Hebrew culture. The fact that he, like the original initiators and donors, was from the Labour Zionist camp was a "coincidence" which of course was not at all coincidental. At that time, all cultural activities in Israel, even academic matters, were permeated with ideological positions, and even though Sadan's ideological affinities did not of course directly influence his work as such, in practice they naturally facilitated the conferring of academic legitimacy on the area of Yiddish studies.[5]

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[3]For more on the ideology of Yiddishism see Goldsmith, *Modern Yiddish Culture*, pp. 259–73, and Joshua Fishman, ed., *Never Say Die! A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish life and Letters* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981).

[4]Ber Borokhov, *Shprakh-forshung un literature-geshikhte*, edited by Nachman Mayzel (Tel Aviv: Y. L. Peretz-farlag, 1966) p. 54.

[5]Avraham Novershtern, "Between Town and Gown: The Institutionalization of Yiddish at Israeli Universities," in Gennady Estraikh and Mikhail Krutikov, eds., *Yiddish in the Contemporary World: Papers of the First Mendel Friedman International Conference on Yiddish* (Oxford: Legenda, 1999),

The success of Yiddish studies at the Hebrew University, however, would be incomplete without the vital second component: in addition to the "ideological legitimacy" conferred to the subject by Sadan, it also needed a "methodological legitimacy," and that was imparted by his student Chone Shmeruk.[6] From now on, academic concerns about "methodological legitimacy" came to play a more important role in Yiddish scholarship than ideological ones.

Ideologies of Yiddish in a Post-Ideological Age

The decline of the modern Yiddish culture during the second half of the twentieth century was caused by the well-known combination of tragic events and adverse social trends: the Holocaust, Communist dictatorship in the Soviet Union, assimilation in the West, forceful Hebraization in Israel. As a result, Yiddish remains actively used predominantly among traditional Orthodox groups in the U.S., U.K., Belgium, and Israel, which maintain little cultural contacts with the outside world. Only the traditional Orthodox community has a school system where Yiddish is a language of instruction. As a result, the "modern" Yiddish sector is shrinking in the absence of a mechanism of cultural reproduction. The weakening and aging of the social base of the "ideologically motivated," or "essentialist," attitude to Yiddish as a key element of Jewish identity has resulted in the surfacing of a "somewhat denaturated Yiddish scholarship," which has replaced the old ambitious "philological" goals with the more narrow "linguistic" ones, as Leonard Prager diagnosed the situation more than 25 years ago.[7]

For many young Jews in the Diaspora, and especially in North America, universities and colleges are becoming the place of Jewish education and socialization. Judaism, Jewish history, Israel, and now Holocaust form the basic Jewish studies curriculum, which has been successfully incorporated into the general program of liberal arts education. Jewish literature and languages often occupy a somewhat marginal position in this scheme, with Yiddish usually located somewhere in the lower half of the second division of the Jewish Studies hierarchy, certainly below Hebrew. Many established Jewish Studies programs in North American universities have an instructor of Yiddish, who usually teaches the language at the elementary, sometimes at the intermediate level, as well as courses in Yiddish literature in English translation. A few of the big universities have endowed chairs in Yiddish, which creates a potential for development of stronger under- and postgraduate programs. Some of them are in the

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pp. 7–8.

[6]Novershtern, "Between Town and Gown," p. 15.

[7]Leonard Prager, "Yiddish in the University," first published in 1974 and reprinted in Fishman, *Never Say Die!*, p. 539.

cities that have or had large Yiddish speaking communities, such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Montreal, and Toronto (the only city with a rich Yiddish cultural heritage without a university program in Yiddish is Chicago, an important center of Yiddish culture during the first half of the century); others are in big state universities, mostly in the Midwest.

The exact position of Yiddish within the specific academic framework as well as the broader cultural and existential context of today's world remains somewhat flexible. David Roskies has perceptively summarized the situation of Yiddish scholars in today's academia:

> As scholars and academics, we are beholden to no one. We usually teach our subject within a broad disciplinary context: Yiddish within German studies, within linguistics, within comparative literature, within Jewish literature, within Jewish cultural history. In this respect, Yiddish is no different from other minor fields of study. But when we take a close look at the actual practitioners of the field, in whatever department or academic setting they may be found, we note a different set of choices. These choices are not methodological or disciplinary so much as personal and existential. To put it boldly: each of us, perceiving how weak and marginal our subject is even to our friends, let alone adversaries, has linked up the fate of Yiddish to something that we perceive to be more vital.[8]

A number of quotes taken from recent publications can elucidate Roskies's point about the intersection of scholarly and personal interests in the current scholarship and demonstrate the extreme diversity of interpretations of Yiddish literature:

- The authors of three monographs published by the University of California Press celebrate such aspects of Yiddish culture as modernity, cosmopolitanism, and radicalism. Chana Kronfeld argues that "As the proverbial landless language, ... Yiddish became an ideal vehicle for international radical experimentation with modernism."[9] Benjamin Harshav emphasizes the "openness of Yiddish," which "made all component languages available, within reach of a Yiddish writer and reader, to be used either as a merged element or as a quotation or as a 'foreign borrowing'."[10] Naomi Seidman endeavors to historicize what she calls the "symbolic system" of Ashkenazic Judaism based on "the myth of Yiddish

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[8]David Roskies, "Yiddish Studies and the Jewish Search for a Usable Past," in *Yiddish in the Contemporary World*, p. 23.

[9]Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 13.

[10]Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 73.

femininity," rejecting "the proposition that Hebrew should be considered a masculine language or Yiddish a feminine one."[11]

- Contrariwise, Roskies values Yiddish as "an integrative force, as a means of holding the diverse parts of culture together." He praises the "Utopian experiment" conducted by educators with a Labor Zionist background in Montreal for using Yiddish as a "means toward achieving cultural integration: of reuniting East and West, the folk and the intelligentsia, the *frume* and the *fraye*." In the educational Utopia that Labor Zionist refugees from Europe tried to implement in Montreal "Yiddish was to be the vehicle of national liberation,"[12] he concludes. On the personal level, Roskies perceives this "national liberation" in terms of "drama of rebellion, loss, and negotiated return." He argues that, although Yiddish scholarship "[h]as been guided by an unwritten mandate to decenter, defamiliarize, and recontextualize its subject," the genuine motivation of Yiddish scholars is the urge of "homecoming," which, in his view, is the main theme of modern Yiddish literature.[13] As if in writing an epilogue to Borochov's manifesto, Roskies calls upon the Yiddish scholar to "recreate the landscape of Yiddish" in a situation when nothing else—"living, struggling, singing, protesting Yiddish-speaking folk; ... Yiddish schools, newspapers and political movements" and even "broad-based institutional support for the study of Yiddish"—is left.[14] Thus, "loss and reinvention" is the theme of his magisterial study of Yiddish storytelling.[15]
- Ruth Wisse focuses, in her scholarship and journalism, on the theme of betrayal, real or imagined, first, of Jews by the European non-Jews, and, secondly, of Jews by their fellow Jews. In the emerging Manichean scheme of world civilization Yiddish is charged with moral authority: "Jews forged the Yiddish language as a moral alternative to German civilization, to protect their self-disciplining way of life."[16] The opposition to Yiddish is Europe, as cultural and political concept. To regain

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[11]Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 6.

[12]David Roskies, *The Jewish Search for the Usable Past* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 156–7.

[13]David Roskies, "Yiddish Culture at Century's End," *La rassegna mensile di Israel*, 1–2 (1996), pp. 477–81.

[14]Roskies, "Yiddish Studies and the Jewish Search for a Usable Past," pp. 29–30.

[15]David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 5.

[16]Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Language and Culture* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), p. 8.

his confidence in Yiddish, a writer has, as did the novelist I. J. Singer, to repudiate "his trust in Poland and Europe."[17] Wisse celebrates Sholem Aleichem's character Tevye the Dairyman, whom she contrast against the Americanized distortion of *Fiddler on the Roof*, for his discipline and conservative outlook, as "the first hero of modern Jewish literature."[18]

This list of diverse and thought-provoking examples could be continued, but I would like to point out the deficit of literary history and monographic studies on particular Yiddish writers among recent Yiddish literary studies. With the exception of Janet Hadda's biography of Isaac Bashevis Singer, an author who occupies a special position in Yiddish literature, no biography of a Yiddish writer has been published in English during the 1990s; this shortage of studies on individual authors and their oeuvres can be taken as an indication that the balance between the "text" and the "context" in Yiddish studies is shifting towards the latter.

Interpretations and Representations of Yiddish in Contemporary Scholarship

As this very brief and superficial overview shows, Yiddish can figure in various ideological and aesthetical agendas as a signifier of very different qualities and values: the quintessentially Jewish and the cosmopolitan, the communal and the individual, discipline and freedom, radicalism and conservatism, patriarchy and matriarchy. On the one hand, this demonstrates the resourcefulness of Yiddish cultural legacy and gives hope that Yiddish will further attract scholars and theorists of different persuasion as a reservoir of "authentic" imagery, ideas, and proof texts. On the other hand, such flexibility might arouse suspicion that the elasticity of Yiddish culture has no limits, and it can be bent and stretched as much as necessary to yield desirable ideological and cultural support.

In the new foreword to the second edition of his seminal study *A Traveler Disguised* (first published in 1973), Dan Miron shares his personal view on the problematic nature of Yiddish literary scholarship and vividly describes the predicament of someone who comes to study the subject from outside the Yiddish-speaking cultural milieu. He begins with acknowledgment of his debt to Max and Uriel Weinreich, whom he calls "models of the true academic man and educator, almost ... father figures" (p. xiii). As Miron tells us, his choice to study Mendele and Yiddish literature was part of the strategy of getting to the roots of his native Hebrew-Zionist culture by the means of a (temporary) distancing from it. Unconventional from a Hebrew-Zionist perspective,

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[17]Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, p. 140.

[18]Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, p. 64.

this project also "went against the grain of the collective wisdom of the Yiddish literary critics and scholars of the past" (p. xv). Underlying the literary-historical study of the relationships between the creator, the Hebrew and Yiddish writer and journalist Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, and the creation, the fictional narrator-character Reb Mendele Moykher Sforim, was the existential problem of "the *other* within us." As a result, Miron distances himself from "those who have consecrated 'Mendele' as the foundation of a modern, humanistic, 'constructive' Yiddish culture," and tries to understand "the Mendele phenomenon" as "a desperate attempt on the part of a modern Jewish artist to break through the walls of his own being" (p. xvii). Rather predictably, the first edition of *A Traveler Disguised* had no real reader when it appeared in 1973: the "Yiddishist" bias did not allow those who knew the culture to understand the meaning of the new study, whereas those who were intellectually close to the author did not know the texts and the culture. But later the book was to become "something of a starting point, or at least a central point of reference" for a new generation of scholars, particularly those "who were educated and trained in centers where the literary commentator was expected to go beyond both positivist bio-bibliographical erudition and formalistic analysis of separate poems and stories, i.e., he was expected to conceptualize and problematize a general issue" (pp. xviii–xix).

The creative ideas, extraordinary erudition, and personal charisma of Dan Miron have already left a strong and durable mark on the study of Yiddish literature during the past two decades, especially in North America. I would suggest, however, that so far his influence has been somewhat one-sided. Miron certainly taught many of his students to conceptualize and problematize; and in general, the intellectual climate in Jewish Studies today is very favorable for such an approach. What has been lost to some extent —or perhaps, not acquired in the necessary measure—is that very "positivist bio-bibliographical erudition" that Miron seems to be taking for granted. When he was writing his book thirty years ago, he was partly motivated by the "anxiety of influence" against the intellectual and ideological dominance of "the New York Yiddishists." Now that his triumph is a fait accompli, at least in the eyes of the scholars, one may try and have another look at the "Yiddishist" legacy in order to understand how the new generation is doing in comparison to them.

Miron was wrestling with his intellectual and ideological predecessors on their own turf, by "problematizing" the most venerable figure of the "Grandfather of Yiddish Literature." It seems, however, that contemporary scholarship is wary of tackling "big issues" of the previous, Yiddishist generation. Nobody so far has followed suit and tried to do a comprehensive revisionist study of two other classical writers, I. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem. The major figures of the post-classical generation—Sholem Asch, Joseph Opatoshu, H. Leyvick—have not received due attention, and the old "Yiddishist" monographs of Niger and Mayzel remain until now the only studies of

these authors available. The case of Bergelson is particularly unfortunate because the two excellent dissertations[19] on this writer remain unpublished after two decades. There were, of course, recent attempts to deal with great Yiddish authors: books such as *I. L. Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* by Ruth Wisse and Delphine Bechtel's study of Der Nister's early period are undoubtedly important contribution to the field, and yet they deal with their subjects from particular oblique points of view rather than approaching them head-on, in their entirety.

Ken Frieden's study of the three classical Yiddish writers[20] is an example of some difficulties faced by a contemporary literary scholar when he tries to deal with the problem of synthesis and generalization in Yiddish literature from a comparativist perspective. Frieden's strategy is to present Yiddish literature as a case study: "'Literature in the Margins' might be another title for this study of a minority tradition, shaped and distorted by its marginal status"; he believes that "the case of Yiddish fiction might be a prototype for the study of any minority (or colonized) culture that arises amid hostile surroundings" (p. 4). In classical Yiddish literature Frieden emphasizes such fashionable features as intertextuality, mutual influences, throwback, rivalries, etc. (p. 6). At the same time, in contrast to Miron, Frieden "deproblematizes" the individual aspect, asserting that "[t]he three classic authors do not possess independent voices; their work resonates together in moments of harmony and dissonance." He puts forward parody and satire as dominant genres for this transition: "Parody well describes their ambivalent relationship to a foreign culture they longed to emulate and yet held at a critical distance" (p. 7). Concluding his introduction, Frieden states: "[c]lassic Yiddish fiction inspired the East European Jews' search for a modern identity that could replace outmoded forms." On the one hand, Frieden consciously draws upon ideas of Harold Bloom, particularly when he applies the concept of "anxiety of influence" to the case of Sholem Aleichem's attitude to his predecessor Mendele (p. 135); on the other, he, probably unaware of that, revives the scheme of Yiddish literary history that was invented in the second decade of the past century by the theoreticians of socialist Zionism, Jacob Lestshinsky and Moshe Litvakov. Like Frieden, Lestshinsky and Litvakov interpreted the classical period in Yiddish literature as a reflection of the process of transition from the collectivism of the pre-modern "congregation of Israel" to the individualism of the modern "Jewish nation." As Frieden's book demonstrates, the cross-fertilization of the Yiddish intellectual tradition and contemporary literary

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[19]Susan Slotnik, "The Novel Form in the Works of David Bergelson," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1978; Avraham Novershtern, "Aspektim mivniim baproza shel David Bergelson mereshitah as 'Midas ha-din,'" Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 1981.

[20]Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995).

scholarship can be illuminating; a more thorough and systematic effort in this direction can produce even more impressive results.

One of Miron's innovations was his acknowledgement of the Soviet Marxist critics, primarily Max Erik and Meir Wiener, as intellectual predecessors. Perhaps it's time now to revise the whole legacy of Yiddish criticism in the past century, from David Frishman and Bal-Makhshoves to Yankev Glatshteyn, from a "post-ideological" perspective. As we have seen, one can—and does—interpret Yiddish literature in many ways and use it for many purposes, but it is nevertheless important to preserve some degree of "cultural memory." Readings and interpretations by contemporaneous critics may today seem outdated, naïve, and methodologically primitive, but they retain their relevance as examples of the reception of literary texts by the cultural community. They not only provide a future student with the referential framework, but can sometimes be truly provocative and intellectually stimulating. Without extending its referential base, our understanding of Yiddish literature risks soon becoming fossilized and fragmented, and turning into a repository of various images, metaphors, aphorisms, and phrases that can be utilized for any purpose. This *ornamental* attitude to Yiddish is already gaining currency in some middlebrow Jewish publications in English, and one of the tasks of serious scholarship is to challenge it with serious studies.

The Vicissitudes of Yiddish: Back to the Rhineland?

How can one acquire the expertise in the fields of both Jewish culture and general studies necessary for moving the study of Yiddish forward? Nobody reads Yiddish literature in school anymore; undergraduate students also very rarely are able to read it in the original. As a rule, devoted students can familiarize themselves with the basic corpus of Yiddish literature only at the graduate level. Even learning to read in Yiddish presents a problem, particularly for speakers of English. Behind all these practical problems looms the main question: what for? What can a thorough knowledge and innovative interpretation of Yiddish literature contribute to our life? There is little doubt that Yiddish will be taught as a kind of auxiliary subject in Jewish Studies programs across the world, thus retaining its instrumental usefulness and providing material for occasional ornamental use to spice up and add authentic flavor. But what about essence, study of Yiddish culture "lishma," for its own sake?

From this point of view the center of gravity of Yiddish studies might shift in the future toward Germany. German students have two great advantages when they start learning Yiddish: closeness of their native tongue to Yiddish and experience in learning foreign languages. Many of them come out of high school with a solid knowledge of European history and culture, sometimes also some command of Slavic languages. For them, the acquisition of reading skills in Yiddish means familiarization with a few aspects of grammar and Hebrew and Slavic components, which usually does not take

long. Among other advantages of the German academic system are practically free tuition (also for foreign students) and relatively stable state funding, which allows scholars to pursue projects which may not look too appealing for private donors. Presently there are two chairs in Yiddish, at the Universities of Trier and Düsseldorf. The older one, Trier, has already established itself as one of two (along with the Hebrew University, with which Trier has been collaborating for long time) major centers of study of the Old Yiddish; Hienrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, where the chair in Yiddish culture, language and literature was established in 1997, is rapidly gaining strength. Yiddish language is taught in a number of other German universities and is becoming increasingly popular.

The main (and probably the only serious) problem with development of Yiddish Studies in Germany is the moral one. Many enthusiasts and scholars of Yiddish simply would not set foot on German soil; for some of them it is inconceivable that the country that killed Yiddish speakers should now become a major center of Yiddish Studies. This, of course, must be left to personal choice, which ought to be respected. Regardless of that, however, Yiddish Studies in Germany is set to grow, probably with new professorial positions to come. Moreover, German universities and research centers offer good opportunities for international cooperation, particularly attractive for students and scholars from Central and Eastern Europe, where the field is still struggling for recognition. The annual conference in Yiddish Studies (the only event of this kind in the world), which started a few years ago, gathers over one hundred participants. Traditionally German scholars have concentrated on the Old Yiddish and Yiddish linguistics; now they are becoming increasingly interested in modern Yiddish literature as well.

Angelika Glau's doctoral thesis *Jewish Self-consciousness in Transition: Yiddish Literature at the Beginning of Twentieth Century*[21] deserves attention as the first academic study of modern Yiddish literature in Germany. It is devoted to the "post-classical generation" of writers who entered the Yiddish literary scene during the first decade of the past century, and therefore form a direct continuation of Frieden's *Classic Yiddish Fiction*. The aim of Glau's work is to discover new elements in the writing of the post-classical generation in comparison to the more traditional classical authors. The purpose of literature of the new generation was not to teach the reader the traditional Jewish worldview, but to inquire about the meaning of human existence, according to the author. She uses the traditional German methodology of *Motivstudien*, which she applies to a select corpus of sixty-five short stories by Asch, Bergelson, Nomberg, and Reisen. The motifs used in these short stories are divided into three categories, which

[21] *Jüdisches Selbstverständnis im Wandel: Jiddische Literatur zu Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999).

characterize the traditional way of life (such as marriage, poverty, parent-child relationships, Jewish-Gentile relationships), its collapse (decline of the shtetl, alienation, emigration, uprootedness), and the new urban mode of existence (solitude, political activity, love and sex, suicide). Glau comes to a conclusion that the "*Postklassiker*" "created a literature which united the awareness of Jewish identity [*jüdisches Identitätsbekentnis*] with literary consciousness [*Bewusstsein*], connecting the reality of Jewish life and individual dimensions of human existence" (p. 335). In other words, the post-classical authors created a modern literature that adequately reflected the reality of the time.

Glau's study may become the first sign of the emerging new school of Yiddish literary scholarship in Germany. It is interesting therefore not only because of its own merits and flaws (which are not discussed here), but because of its approach, methodology, and ideological background. It combines a traditional philological textual analysis with an attempt to conceptualize East European Jewish cultural history along the line of evolution from "tradition" to "modernity." It "normalizes" Yiddish literature by demonstrating that it followed the same pattern as other minority literatures in Central and Eastern Europe. Of course, such results can only be achieved by ignoring or simplifying the "abnormal" aspects of Yiddish literary development, which were central, for example, for Max Weinreich and Dan Miron. It is no accident therefore that in her brief overview of the "classical generation" Glau does not venture beyond a rather eclectic mixture of diverse ideas, without even trying to systematize or evaluate, let alone "problematize" these views. I would venture to predict that a descriptive, "philological" (in a traditional German, not in a Borochovean sense) approach will for some time be predominant in German Yiddish scholarship, as opposed to the more analytical and problem-oriented attitude of American scholars.

One area, which arouses least controversy and where German Yiddish scholarship can and hopefully will provide invaluable service, is textual criticism, editing and publication. Today's academic climate in America does not seem to be very favorable for critical editions of Yiddish texts, in the original or even in translation. This tradition has been established in Israel and undoubtedly will continue there; apart from the major series Yiddish Literature of the Magnes Press, one should mention superb Haifa University editions of Mendele's individual works prepared by Shalom Luria.[22] German scholars have already made a major contribution to publication of Old Yiddish texts (Erika Timm's and Chone Shmeruk's edition of *Paris un Vienna*, Jerusalem, 1996) and

[22]Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Ha'ishon hakatan. Dos kleyne mentshele*, trans. and ed. Shalom Luria (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1984); *Ktavim be'ibam: Dos vintshfingerl; Fishke der krumer*, trans. and ed. Shalom Luria (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 1994); *Perek shira*, trans. and ed. Shalom Luria (Haifa: University of Haifa Press, 2000).

Yiddish linguistics (*The Language and Culture Atlas of Ashkenazic Jewry*, ed. Marvin Herzog and others, Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, New York: YIVO, 1992–). Hopefully, this publication activity will gradually expand into the field of modern Yiddish literature (the forthcoming publication of Isaac Aykhel's comedy *Reb Hehekh oder vos tut me dermit* by the Düsseldorf scholars).

Conclusion

Fragmentization and compartmentalization of the study of Yiddish is probably an inevitable process that will not likely revert in the future. Few students are attracted by Yiddish "lishma," for the sake of it, and of those who are, ever fewer are capable of going through the rigorous academic training in Yiddish studies. The majority of students taking Yiddish are doing it as a side interest in addition to their main area of specialization. This situation is a natural consequence of the marginal status of Yiddish both in the general academia and in Jewish studies. Today there is no grand Yiddish narrative that could capture the imagination of young men or women and impel them to devote their life to Yiddish. Yiddish has some attraction, intellectual, sentimental, even practical, but it is unlikely to be ever again regarded as the core of Jewish identity, "the idiom of their collective unconscious," to use Max Weinreich's words related by Dan Miron.[23] Therefore it is probably not productive to try to endow Yiddish culture with large and deep metaphysical meaning(s). More relevant is the task of preserving the integrity of the field, maintaining certain academic standards, and expanding international cooperation. Yiddish studies is undergoing the process of geographical expansion, particularly in Europe. New publications on Yiddish are now regularly appearing not only in English, Hebrew, German, and French, but also in Dutch, Polish, Italian, Russian, Ukrainian, Hungarian, and other languages, including Japanese. In a way, Yiddish studies is following the trajectory of Yiddish itself, which spread, during the first half of the past century, to all five continents.

[23]Dan Miron, "Between Science and Faith: Sixty Years of the YIVO Institute," *YIVO Annual*, vol. 19 (1990), p. 14.