THE HAGDOMAHS: A PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

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"But who shall be the master? The writer or the reader?"

Denis Diderot, "Jaques le fataliste et son maire," 1796

Fine, so Mendele is not Abramovitsh.

But while Mendele certainly was a rhetorical prophylactic initially fashioned to protect Abramovitsh from the humiliation of writing in Yiddish, he was even more so an ingenious rhetorical device designed to reach the Yiddish masses on Abramovitsh's terms. A wolf in wolf's clothing.

Abramovitsh required someone he could send out into the literary world to travel for him since he could not or would not go himself. He needed a fictional go-between whose rhetoric was familiar to those Abramovitsh wanted to reach, yet would also have the range and versatility to bear the ambiguity and the tension which Abramovitsh himself had experienced as one who straddled two worlds.

It could be that the much maligned phenomenon of self-hate, properly channeled, is a primary tool in stirring up a critical mass of inner turmoil so that the process of escaping the suffocating hammerlock of rationalization and acceptance can begin. Certainly Abramovitsh was the Yiddish Shakespeare of self-hate, albeit his venom had a calculated, even noble purpose laid upon the shoulders of Mendele Mocher Sforim.

Abramovitsh was an educator by profession, and Mendele was intended to play a didactic role without appearing to do so. Abramovitsh needed Mendele as a projection of potential, a point of attraction towards which shtetl-minded Jews could be drawn. At that starting point, Mendele was to be like a marathon race barker who would slyly send yidelech racing on their way towards

the 19th-century finish lines of Progress, Enlightenment, Education and so forth. His inventory of non-holy books likely expanded over time and abetted this process. He doesn't tell the reader everything he has in the wagon.

But Mendele, despite the folk-to-folk folksiness of the various "Hagdomahs" of Dos Kleyne Mentshele, is not one of folk really. He has seen too much. What the apple was to Adam, travel was to Abramovitsh/Mendele. They both gained knowledge of good and evil on the road, and it utterly changed their consciousness. Abramovitsh infused Mendele with a knowledge which separated him radically from the masses of immobile Jews grounded in their respective shtetls. Where Mendele differed from most other Jews, despite his highly traditional garb, was in his unmistakable ability to "compare and contrast", to use the grade school test formulation. But the knowledge of good and evil flowing from a life on the road is a burden as much as an awakening. Frustration, anger, bitterness and cynicism constitute the psychic fallout of seeing the way of the world and the discrepancy between purported ideal and cruel reality, between what the purveyors of the holy advocate and how in fact they behave.

The hagdomahs, despite change and elongation, are about identity and identification, and Mendele really gives nothing away about his true self when he divulges facts because the facts themselves are shallow ones. They constitute a successful snowjob on the newly born Yiddish readership, telling them almost

nothing of value and nothing essential about Mendele. Their impact lies in form, not content. The hegdomahs are intended to produce the effect of bumping into someone in the street and beginning a conversation. But who one actually bumps into is Abramovitsh's undercover agent, Mendele.

As if fighting the notion of Jewish collectivity from the outset, Mendele, born into individuality with travel as its midwife, treats the question "What is your name?" somewhat as a violation of his person. Not because such a question in and of itself is always such a violation, but rather knowing this collectivity as he does the question represents for Mendele the opening salvo in a landslide of questions and actions by a folk which believes that everything but everything is everyone else's business. In this regard, Mendele is a breed apart because he has been on the road constantly. His objections are unique because he anticipates something is up in asking his name. He seems to be saying that the asking of a name in this Jewish world at this moment in time belies a feeling of proprietorship on the part of the questioner which Mendele would like to resist -- "but protesting against [such questions] would make a man seem raving mad and perverse."[1] Needless to say, the culturally-based Anglo-Saxon concept of privacy and private identity is utterly foreign here. For Mendele, the unacceptable solution is to be anti-

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[1] S.Y. Abramovitsh, The Parasite, trans. Gerald Stillman (New York, 1956), p. 19. All subsequent bracketed numbers are from this text.

social, that is, to ignore his questioner, maintain the drawbridge up and the walls secured and declare war against the collectivity. This he cannot do and knows he must play the game.

His grudging concession to the way of his world is that these violations "and many others are to be expected, since they are part of the order of things for all eternity." (19) Here Mendele is also fighting a reality as old as Genesis. A name is a means of gaining control over someone or something. Adam gained power over the animals in Eden by naming them. To extract a name from someone is an exercise in power over that person, though it is rarely seen as such, certainly not in the world in which Mendele travels. Giving out one's name can mean venturing involuntarily something highly personal to a total stranger. The name is the starting point, a breach in the defenses. It is somewhat the way a joke works in provoking laugher and also breaking down defenses. Attributing to someone "disarming humor" carries with it a military metaphor, not without good reason. This socially sanctioned violation is what Mendele slyly objects to because he knows, particularly in regard to the people he is dealing with, that this is just the beginning. There is irony in his willingness to accommodate the practices of his folk: "Sheer benevolence dictates that these questions be answered... Having no desire to go against the customs of the world, I stand ready to answer these questions as briefly and clearly as possible." (20-21) But he does nothing of the kind. Apart from the passport list, clearly his answers about his birth year, physical

characteristics and occupation are either long-winded or riddled with obscurity and paradox. What is proffered are facts that ultimately reveal little about him as a man.

"My address is Mendele Yudelovitch Mocher Seforim Tsuatshitz, Teterivke" and "My wife's name is Yenteh" mean something and they mean nothing.

Mendele demonstrates the shallowness of names most strikingly in reference to his great-grandfather, Reb Mendele Moscower. Based on one visit an individual in Eastern and Central Europe could assume the name of a great city and attach it to his identity as a mere appendage. What does that say really about Reb Mendele or Moscow itself? The pomposity of the man and the greatness of the city? Not very enlightening, pardon the pun.

It may be that the clearest denotation of identity, "Reb Jew", does not have to be spelled out because the surrounding society makes sure he never forgets. Here what Mendele does not say goes without saying. And this is one of the most deafening statements of all and perhaps the point of the Hagdomahs. The action is in the silences, in the discontinuities. Every time Mendele employs the phrase "it's beside the point", in fact it **is** the point. The digression is the message. The action is in the gap. It is not the content but the form; it is the rhetorical style which is the information. The intimacy of meeting Mendele in the street in an unrehearsed exchange -- is the message.

Abramovitsh knew that to be understood by the Yiddish-speaking masses meant the adoption of a literary language that was virtually nothing more than the extension of oral culture into written form. It is well known he "composed" his books orally, giving virtuoso performances of his various characters as his secretary transcribed his orations. And Mendele was his sublime creation -- a wolf in wolf's clothing. It may be that Abramovitsh, as a concession to sell his books, was a print culture man at home and an oral culture man in the streets via Mendele. But how Mendele speaks is in no way what Coleridge brands "the product of an uncultivated man."[2] Mendele bursts forth in speech as a primary exemplar of a vibrant oral culture, discursive, circuitous, non-linear and spontaneous. Only a print man's bias would dictate that this was "uncultivated." Furthermore, what is both primary and distinctive about Mendele's rhetoric is that strange uniquely Jewish mix of fierce individuality and subsumed collectivity.

To juggle both this paradox and his own literary aims Abramovitsh could not fall back on conventional writers' strategms with roots in Dante. Whereas Dante could split the rhetorical functions of knowing guide and traveller into two as he did in his Divine Comedy, Abramovitsh had to combine them both in the schizophrenic figure of Mendele. To bridge the gap between what people believed and how things really were

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[2] Dan Miron. A Traveller Disguised (Syracuse, New York, 1973), p. 160.

-- all the while keeping himself out of the picture -- Abramovitsh knew he would need the rhetorical power of a personal guide for his readers. But where would his model come from? All the guides from maskilic literature were pompous, remote and usually Hebrew-speaking. On the other hand, if he used the traveller alone as a rhetorical channel, he was in danger of drifting into the world of inane bumpkins which populated Isaac Meir Dik's literary world and would detract from the power of an accompanying guide. Though entertaining, neither of these models for guide or traveller had the potential, either for growth as characters, or the ability or power to move their readership along toward the abstract "higher forms" inculcated by Western European culture -- Civilization, Culture, Progress.

So Abramovitsh did what he had to do -- he combined both the traveller and guide in one character. He made "Mendele the Traveller" representative of the starting point at which most readers found themselves. But he built in as well "Mendele the Guide" who plants not so secret aspirations of inhabiting a world free of poverty, persecution and backwardness and then cultivates some of the means of attaining such goals. As an embodiment of both traveller and guide, Mendele, like Jacob and the Angel, is playing out a kind of inner battle between Olam Ha-zeh and Olam Ha-bah but in maskilic renderings of the terms. Within Mendele is the hostile, poverty-stricken fallen world he travels through in conflict with the vision and directives for reaching an earthly Olam Habah free of that very hostility and poverty.

Perhaps rather than having "abandoned" Hebrew for Yiddish at that stage of his life as the standard Abramovitsh biographies state he did, Abramovitsh actually managed to preserve the internal bilingualism of Ashkenazi Jewry by making the guide "Hebrew" and maskilic in relation to the traveller which is "Yiddish."

He had to do it this way because like any good writer, he knew the change and development which he hoped to foster required a starting point from which the character like the readership was expected to depart from. But unlike most writers in other cultures, he had to, dafkeh, provide that starting point too.

Such was the role of the Hagdomahs.

They serve as a symmetrical "portrait of Dorian Gray." As the readership intellectually filled out so too did the portrait of the artist as a mendel-man. As the readership grew more sophisticated between 1864 and 1907, so too did the inner "portrait of Mendele" change. The book peddlar had served his purpose well.

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