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Unraveling the Mendele Riddle

Trying to peel an onion one finds that, underneath the rough chaos of peels there lies a beautifully ordered system that obeys the symmetrical dictates of nature. Like an onion, Abramovitch's prologue to *Dos Kleyne Mentshele* also reveals multiple layers of paradoxes and ambiguities, but the deeper one delves, the more likely one perceives the smoothness of its seams, and the subtle, rationale of its method. Abramovitch's prologue can serve as an introduction to all of his works because it establishes the identity of Mendele as both a person - a full fictional character in his own right - and a persona - a mediator who is far enough from the Jewish experience to criticize it and familiar enough to access his readers' trust (and thus to effectively parody their ways). The prologue manages this dual identity by establishing Abramovitch's ironic understanding with his readers through: 1) a range of criticisms masked as digressions, and 2) Mendele's definition of what is "natural" – both of which must be excavated from his inverted Tsvuatshits stance. As we forage through the layers of this richly layered onion we realize that while Mendele is reluctant to dwell on a formal description of himself, he eventually grants us the glimpse into his soul which is our most valuable understanding of him. In the end, we are left with a brief view of his innermost core - and Abramovitch's intimate message about who he and Mendele fundamentally are.

"That is not my point" Mendele continuously says, and being a native of Tsvuatshits we are immediately alerted to the truth that in fact, the six digressions in his introduction are really his most "pointed" points. Mendele's claim to the contrary only means to draw our attention to the ironic point he has just made.[1] While Abramovitch's main points are criticisms of Jewish existence (and the result of the Maskilic writer's pain at his people's poverty and ignorance), the points are also Mendele's jabs at himself in Abramovitch's attempt to create a common identity between Mendele and his readers (and thereby to mainstream his Maskilic views). In an attempt to formally introduce himself to his audience, Mendele begins "respectably" with his family lineage, but a description of the dignified ancestor Moscover's name regresses to the very antithesis of honor, for Mendele's great-grandfather "quickly shoved out [of Moscow] before they kicked him out"(122). Anyway, "that is not my point"(122) insists Mendele, but what he has attempted to expose from the start is the tragic-comic nature of Jewish experience. While in their oppression, the Jews seek pride in almost anything, they often conveniently forget that the

[1] It is interesting that like Gogol, Abramovitch not only "avails himself of the humorous device of playing upon place names"(Stillman,54), but also uses the deceptive "that is not my point" for crucial arguments.

objects of their pride may not only be nothing to boast of but even sources of disgrace. We will not be persuaded that Moscover's shame is "Foolishness!"(122), nor pacified by the proud reassurance that "he was really in Moscow with Fonye"(122), for the great-grandfather's degradation (and Mendele's persistent smoothing of it) simultaneously encapsulates both comic Jewish nature and its tragic historical reality.

Vaguely aware that only, "in his little corner of the world" did the Moscover have "a respected name and much honor"(124), Mendele nevertheless persists in praising his great-grandfather with the ironic virtue of always being consulted first in the matter of a Jewish petition to the same government which would have forcibly ousted him from his name-sake town had he not snuck off in time. Once again, Abramovitch's irony reveals that no matter how the Jew may puff himself up he is still only a *kleyne mentschele* (and a happily blind one) in the big foreign, suffocating world. Once again, Abramovitch ensures that Mendele succumb to the Jewish weakness which he himself condemns, first - in order to more explicitly expose it, but secondly, to establish commonality between Mendele and his audience – for now both are guilty of these negative traits. Thus Mendele's very deliberate points allow Abramovitch not only to criticize (in both harshness and fun) the Jewish mentality, but also to create firm foundations for the tool which will allow him to censure it in the future – both more powerfully, and yet (paradoxically) also more gently. As the reader's identification with Mendele grows and softens his criticisms, Mendele's familiarity with their ways (yet inherent alienation therefrom) will also result in harsher parodies of them.

In an effort to build this complex tool, Abramovitch allows Mendele to mock *his own* hometown of Tsvuatshits and harshly condemn its inhabitants' lack of kindness, knowledge and poverty – all of which have a detrimental "effect on the Jewish condition in our corner of the Diaspora"(124). While we understand that Mendele is deriding himself as well, never once do we forget that his attacks are aimed at the deficiencies of the Jewish population at large. In the same duality, Mendele's "digressions" reveal that Tunyedevke Jews have far from "much brains"(126) - a fact which pertains most specifically to himself - and that he, like most Jews has nothing but poverty, a wife and many more children than he can afford. Mendele's final devastating jab at the Talmudic students, who can easily be outdone by his horse (should the latter decide to unhitch himself from his *trafe* wagon and become an assistant Heder teacher), also aims at Mendele himself. As Mendele's sarcasm reveals, he spends his nights on the *shul* benches with poor Jewish students and beggars, "altogether free and with great honor"(132). Therefore his subversion of simile (by likening not a man to a horse, but a horse to a man) results

in a comically piercing criticism of not only the Talmudic student's respectability but also of his own – for both share the same shameful poverty.[2]

Thus Abramovitch's central criticisms are veiled in the mask of Mendele's "digressions", yet they create the foundations upon which he will continue to examine the deficiencies of Jewish nature and life, both in their content and their subtle form. Like his "digressions", Mendele's subtle treatment of what is natural as opposed to what is unnatural (in one's character and living conditions) further increases the power and efficiency of Abramovitch's objectives (criticism and Mendele-building). Once again, in the spirit of a true native of Tsvuatshits, Mendele provides us with a mirror-reflection of the truth, and just as what was "beside the point" is really "the point" - now what is "natural" is really "unnatural", for normality is defined by the community whose norms he condemns.

Enumerating the impertinent questions of an unquenchable Jewish curiosity, Mendele employs bitter sarcasm: "Such acts and many others are to be expected, since they are, for us Jews, part of the order of things for all eternity. To protest against them would make a man seem raving mad – purely crazy, strange, wild and unnatural"(122). As we well know, Mendele's whole existence is *aimed* at protesting "such acts" and their source in "natural" primitivity. In doing so, his role is the epitome of *rationality* for it attempts to restore all that has devastatingly become unnatural to the Jewish people. Although excessive meddlesomeness has "been accepted by the dispersed children of Israel as mandatory if the questioner is to be considered worldly-wise and not a backward bench warmer"(Stillman, 54), it is clear that such a trait, like so much else in Jewish life – from poverty and filth, to pettiness and ignorance, to the marking of time by Fires and Fears[3] – is truly "unnatural", not just to Jewish but to *human* survival. Anxious to create familiarity with his audience, Mendele quickly asserts: "Having no desire to go against the customs of the world, I stand ready to answer these questions as briefly and clearly as possible"(Stillman, 54), yet his role is entirely propelled by Abramovitch's express desire to *demolish* exactly these harmful customs of the Jewish world.[4]

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[2] As Miron points out, Abramovitch's future works will show that Mendele's expert parodies of Scripture hide a very thorough Yeshiva education – a fact which further subjects him to his critique of the students.

[3] In this section, it is interesting that the problem lies not with Mendele's parents' lack of memory – they remember very well – yet it is *what* they remember which is troublesome, for it is indicative of the pervasiveness of Jewish suffering (externally and internally). In the end, Abramovitch's use of what Miron calls a "rhetoric of intentional bathos"(142) compiles both huge catastrophes with domestic pleasures and sheds comic light on the Jewish way of thinking, (simultaneously bringing Mendele's parents, and himself, closer to his great-grandpa's and audience's experience), nevertheless his darker point looms larger.

[4] It is interesting that in Mendele's claim, the customs are subtly designated as belonging to the entire world. While this wording hints at the Jewish perception of their corner as "the whole world" it also points to Mendele's perception of the same – both genuinely as one of his community, and ironically as one who mocks it from the outside.

Though he promises brief and clear answers to his identity, Mendele's deliberate responses will prove almost worthless compared to his final unplanned divulgence. In the guise of a reluctance to expose himself, Mendele commences to show exactly why the formalistic answers he is "asked" to provide are not only impertinent, but meaningless. In an effort to show the futile results of petty Jewish questioning, Mendele offers us the details of his passport specifications, but they can reveal nothing because, like Mendele's past occupations - they are the features of "Everyman". "This is completely meaningless" Mendele concludes, "I am merely a person like most other people, and not a tomcat or an animal, God forbid"(126). [5] Through distorted and comic logic, Mendele heightens the absurdity of formalistic questioning by implying that it assumes his inhumanity until it achieves its coveted details. Reassuring us, he concludes that even without his passport specifications, he'd still be a human being just by virtue of having a passport, "for who ever heard of giving a passport to an ass?"(Stillman,55). Nevertheless, if Mendele's horse is just as smart (or more so) than most Talmudic students, it *is* actually very likely that an "ass" would be given a passport, whose subsequently pointless specifications would not reveal a thing about his true identity. For all we know then, Mendele himself might be an ass, and the meaninglessness of his passport qualifications would still deprive us of the knowledge of who he really is. Therefore, advises Mendele, "It is wise not to ask questions"(Stillman, 55), for while this type of questioning is "natural" to the questioner, it follows an "unnatural" line of reasoning and proves ultimately useless.

Mendele's mockery of a possible description of his features is less digestible than the utterly futile passport qualifications, for the potentially realistic features he could provide would create a valuable visualization and a fuller picture of him.[6] Nevertheless these details too are brushed aside comically, the good sense of which will be revealed by Mendele's inadvertent revelation later of so much more. As we shall see, the result of Mendele's reluctance to expose himself is three-fold: First, as we have seen, his superficial answers reveal the Jews' unnatural line of reasoning. Secondly, Mendele's formal answers have strengthened Mendele's role as an "insider" to the Jewish community for his lack of specificity has allowed him an amorphous identity of an "insider". As we shall see, the information he volunteers further allows him to complete his difficult balancing act of the "insider-outsider". And thirdly, Mendele's formalistic

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[5] Later Mendele apologizes for any missing information with the claim that: "I am only human"(136) but he could well have said "I am only a human, like all of you" – just as did his author, who signed *Dos Vinshfingerl* in the form of a Hebrew acronym that was his initials: "*Ish*" (man).

[6] Indeed Miron takes Mendele's supposition that he might be smiling "very acidly" as implying that "his face goes well with his evident satirical inclinations"(167).

answers will set the stage for a finally natural (inadvertent) and truly meaningful method of gaining knowledge about him.

In revealing the bare necessities of his existence, Mendele accomplishes a brilliant synthesis of his many contradicting attributes by expertly walking his tight rope and fulfilling the complex requirements of his intended role. Constantly he weaves dexterously between the chasm of blasphemy and traditional faith, that of shame and dignity – all the while approaching nearer to his readers. While Mendele divulges that he also sells modern (maskilic) booklets, he begins his list of wares with *Khumoshim* and prayer books, and takes care also to include the necessities of "wolves teeth, [and] amulets"(130). This same cautious middle road guides Abramovitch much more subtley elsewhere, for though Mendele is the son of Yudl, the addition of the title "Reb Jew" on his mail is nevertheless unnecessary.

The prologue reveals that Mendele is respected in the town for his occupation, with Jews flocking like "locusts" to his trade in the belief (albeit false) that they can be rich like him, but to collapse the distance they have created Mendele reassures them: "I swear to you Jewish children, that I am a Jew and a pauper"(130). Though he explains his carriage of unrelated copper wares as the result of the fact that, like all other Jewish professions, one must also have an odd job – his own odd job is on the more benign side of those he lists ("a small town Rabbi must have some confidential business deals afoot [1907 version]...a rich idler must have his finger in the tax-farming pie"(130). Nevertheless, Mendele takes care to diminish his elevated moral status in the end with the assurance: "I swear to you, that I don't have a single *groshen*"(130). Always walking the golden middle path, even Mendele's toughness for his horse's pain fuses again with compassion. When the horse's tail-hairs are plucked by naughty children Mendele responds: "It is not a misfortune, let it be thought as a type of fashion. Oy! What a sorrowful creature!"(132).

Most importantly, though Mendele may lack wealth and honor, he is nonetheless a free man, who follows his trade not from a lack of choice but from a love of nature and an itinerant life. With both pride in his mode of existence and modesty at its meagerness, Mendele describes his trade with humor and optimism: "It is a miracle that with such a trade in books, one need not fill up a stockroom with pride. As long as one has a horse, one has a way"(130), and even though "The horse is worn-out and limps a bit and almost gets his feet tangled up – one need not chase like the post"(132). Without pomp and circumstance, with little money or fame, Mendele sells his wares in health, good spirits and most importantly, in complete freedom.

Mendele's offered information intricately weaves between the inner and outer spheres to which he must remain loyal, and at the same time his formal answers have furthered

Abramovitch's criticisms of the "unnatural" in Jewish thought and life. The final goal of Mendele's formalism is the paving of our path to true and "natural" knowledge. Up to now Mendele has pretended a deliberate frankness which resulted in our knowing virtually nothing about him (except that despite his quirks, he is to be thought of as "one of us"). Now it is Mendele's un-premeditated exposure of himself - which is the result of his unquenchable love of life and humanity - rather than his conscious "effort" to quench our curiosity, which gives us the key to his identity. Mendele's outburst at the end of the prologue provides us with so much more than his bare facts of existence, his lineage or his parent's memories, for it gives us a brief glimpse into his (and Abramovitch's) beautiful and artistic soul – and to what is ultimately "according to nature". While Miron claims that, "Mendele keeps answering these self-imposed questions at great length and with barely concealed relish"(167), Mendele continually rejects these questions which he assumes are ours, and the most important question of all: "Why am I dealing in this trade until today?"(133), is the only truly *self*-imposed question (in the sense that it originates from Mendele's wishes to explore the answer, and not his supposition of *our* desire for knowledge). It is only this last question which Mendele answers with not only relish – but exuberant joy. Throughout the superficial questions his tone is not "one of pretended impatience"(Miron,167) but genuine repulsion at the primitivity of "our" reasoning, and it is only when meaningful exposure can be achieved - when the the prospect of achieving genuine dialogue arises - that he fully abandons his reservations

Mendele knows that his community's norms dictate it completely foolish and totally inappropriate that he, "a Jew with a beard...a needy Jew, a married Jew, a father of children, who should according to nature provide for his own, think clearly and with definite purpose" and occupy himself with "serious, important work, as with Judaism"(134) – that such as *he*, could abandon himself to a seduction by beauty. Nevertheless, Mendele's Tsvuatshits background allows us to see through his initial identification with their judgments, an underlying mockery of the Jews' inability to fathom the beauty that is more natural than anything in their religious lives. Mendele is unable to check his abandon to "nature-shmature"(134) because it is the food of his soul and the essence of his existence, and moreover, he doesn't want to check it, because deep down he doesn't think it *natural* to suffocate this beauty and freedom the way that his people do. To him, Jewish existence is a "vicious parody of nature"(Miron,138), for the Jews are paralyzed in their immobile and stifling world of religious *shtetl*-hood.

Much as he might condemn his "weakness"(134) as an evil urge, a wanton thing, simple and spiteful, foolish and shameful, we know that he deeply cherishes his love of nature not only

because it sustains his livelihood – as a peddler and eventually co-author – but because it sustains his soul, and is the most glorious and natural communion between man and God. Mendele cannot be guilty of blasphemy because his adoration of "God's beautiful Creation"(136) is not only natural - it is prayer itself. While Judaism may indeed be serious and important, for Mendele there is nothing more essential than the natural beauty for which his innermost being longs. In an ecstatic enthusiasm which characterizes the entire monologue, Mendele exclaims, "Strolling is my life"(136) and this is true not only literally, but fundamentally, for it grants him both peace and freedom - the lack of which he laments in his people, who live in "beautiful Tunyedevke"(124). "The trade in books is perfectly suited to you"(136) Mendele concludes (both to himself and the prospective peddler - for the moment forgetting his earlier dismal description of the profession) and indeed, not only does the natural worship of Nature bring him joy as a person, but it fulfills his literary role as a persona.[7]

One of the most interesting and revealing aspects of Mendele's joyous ode to Nature at the end of his prologue, is the way in which he reveals his own method of performance and even foreshadows his evolution as an artist and a creator in Abramovitch's work. In fact, it seems that even here, in this first work, the voices of author and mediator meld in such a way as to allow for an intimate glimpse into the artistry of both. Like Abramovitch the author, Mendele the actor is also the artist entranced by the wondrous details of life: "a trinket, a pretty face, a picture, a figure, a blade of grass, a little tree, a murmur, a little bird"(134). As he describes his experiences as a bookpeddlar, he may as well be describing those of an artist, who observes life with a perceptive eye full of love, and then creates from it: "You'll look at different parts of God's artistic, beautiful work and his creations...you will see all types of Jews, beautiful shapes, fine creatures, strange handsome people, all types of souls, crooked backs, haughty noses...from old to new make. Someday you will have many stories to tell from them"(136).

The artist possesses not only sharp sight, but a far more piercing vision which others do not - a gift which renders him capable of revealing unseen truths. This evil urge, Mendele assures, "is with me, not upon you all"(134), it is an "inherent instinct"(134) which provides him with the hyper-sensitivity and distance necessary to clearly see his people. It is the force which pushes *him* to "take and publish [and in the end almost totally write] the stories that you have to tell about the Jews from the whole time that you wandered among them! All right, they may hear – that won't, God forbid, hurt them"(136). By the end of Mendele's monologue, he may have

[7] Miron goes further to claim that Mendele achieves not just the illustration of "naturality" but the embodiment of it, for "by his artistic function he expresses the common human experience and sets the limits of human 'normality'"(183).

well fused with Abramovitch's voice, and as we know, throughout his working years the director gave increasingly more freedom to his actor – long also his apprentice. It is no surprise then, that in the end, it is *Mendele's* name which will grant Abramovitch eternal life.

As Mendele's digressions gradually cease, he reaches (ironically) his most important point of all - the core of his existence - a love for nature, for humanity and for the creation of his art. In Mendele's closing paragraphs, he returns to his formalistic tone, promising to satisfy our remaining curiosity by letter, but this reversion only further highlights the depths from which we have just emerged. In the 1879 version of the prologue, Mendele completes the absurdity of "knowledge" by suddenly remembering that he has "forgotten the most important thing..." his wife's name...Yente. Such deliberate superficialities jolt us into the realization that despite Mendele's reluctance to expose himself, he has after all briefly revealed to us, the "root" of his being.

"For all his lucidity as an observer, he himself cannot be easily penetrated"(Miron,130), and yet in Mendele's prologue, the unwieldy outer layers of the riddle that is him have been unpeeled to reveal his very core before our hungry eyes – if only for a brief instant. In his introduction, Mendele has revealed his essence both as a person and a persona – for he has accomplished the acrobatic task of crystallizing the ambiguities of his existence: close yet far, inside yet outside – "rounded yet pointed". At the same time, he has also established the foundations of Abramovitch's criticism (and self-criticism) - in the form of "digressions" and in the definition of what is "natural". In most of his appearances Mendele "scarcely has any personal existence that transcends the limits prescribed by his function as caretaker of the machine that sets Abramovitch's stories in motion"(Miron, 186) and for this reason the intimate look we are given in Mendele's prologue is especially valuable. Here not only does he transcend his role, but he also teaches *us* how to transcend our own. By starting his introduction with dry, concrete, matter of fact descriptions of himself, Mendele prepares the later total transcendence of the notion of "knowing" by revealing that this is done only by the divulgence of one's deepest loves, by the sharing of the most fervent longings of one's soul. Ultimately, Mendele's baring of himself is the most precious treasure that one person can give to another – and it testifies to the beauty of his (and Abramovitch's) character. Though in the process, our onion has revealed itself pungent and disagreeable, it has given us also the most natural wholesomeness, and the very spice of life.

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