



Dan Miron. *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996. xviii + 347 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-0330-6.

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## The Real Mendele Mokher Seforim

Mendele Mokher Seforim, commonly identified with Sh. Y. Abramovitsch and regarded as his pen-name, is widely accepted as “the grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature. In his book *A Traveler Disguised*, Miron explores this phenomenon of identifying Mendele (the literary character) with Abramovitsch (the author) in the context of the rise of modern Yiddish fiction in the nineteenth century in general, and the development of the “Mendele phenomenon,” in particular.

Given that nineteenth-century Jewish literature was generally to “be of use to the people” and to contribute to the education of the ‘unenlightened’ and that Yiddish was the spoken language of the Jewish masses in Eastern Europe, the use of Yiddish would seem natural to Jewish authors as their literary medium. In his book, Dan Miron addresses this notion of “naturalness” as it relates to Yiddish as a language for East European Jewish literature. He points out that there are several phenomena within the development of nineteenth-century Jewish literature which raise questions as to the legitimacy of this notion, such as the “internal bilingualism” of the authors (with few exceptions, Yiddish writers did not write exclusively in Yiddish—if they did use Yiddish, they felt the need to justify their choice—something which they never did when they chose Hebrew as their literary medium) (p.14), use of pen-names, etc. In the eyes of nineteenth-century Jewish intellectuals, Yiddish was seen as an illegitimate literary medium—compared by Abramovitsch to a “strange woman” in his metaphor, where relations with Yiddish language are compared to “sinful sexuality” (p.14). Miron points out (pp.20-21) that to most nineteenth century Jewish writers, the idea of writing in their native language did not occur to them naturally—they had to “discover it”—and yet the work of some of them, such as Sh.Y. Abramovitsch or Sholem Aleichem, is considered “quintessential Yiddish”. Yiddish as a literary medium was rejected on aesthetic grounds; when usage was unavoidable, it was seen only as a temporary

medium (as stated even by Abramovitsch himself, p.49). Yiddish was not thought to be an appropriate language of artistic expression—it was only for “artistic imitation”. Books in Yiddish were, similarly to children’s books, created according to Miron, “for the reader” and not to satisfy writers’ artistic needs (p.69).

Unlike Hebrew writers of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth- centuries who could find ‘respectable’ literary precedents, Yiddish writers of this period found no artistic link with older Yiddish literature (e.g. *Tsene Urene*, *Bovo-bukh* or the Hasidic writings) because they found it offensive to their maskilic sensibilities (p.23). Until the 1880’s the existence of modern Yiddish literature was generally ignored - even by Yiddish authors. Sholem Aleichem, for example “knew next to nothing about the existence of Yiddish literature” before 1881-1882 (p.28).

In order to legitimize Yiddish literature and make it respectable, there was a need to create a “tradition”, which Miron traces to “a few writers and journalists” in the 1880s (p.27). Miron poignantly describes the creation of the tradition:

“what was unimaginable in 1885 was taken for granted in 1895. In 1880 Yiddish writers did not suspect they had a history, by the early 1890s, they already had produced one “classic writer;” before the century ended *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* was written in English for American readers by a Harvard instructor” (p.31).

What was Mendele’s place in this tradition? While traditionally seen as “the grandfather” of modern Yiddish literature, Miron argues convincingly that Mendele is wrongly identified with Sh. Y. Abramovitsch. The process of amalgamation of Mendele, the character, and Abramovitsch, the artist, began with Sholem Aleichem’s efforts to create a tradition of Yiddish literature. Miron stresses that Mendele is not a pseudonym of

Abramovitsch (pp.157, 201) he was another literary facet of Abramovitsch. Abramovitsch himself was aware of the existence of this duality and underscored Mendele's independence.

As pointed out by Berditshevsky (1906), a tension between "us" (intellectual Europeanized Jews) and "the Jew" (traditional Jews) was definitely present (p.76). Hence the need for a 'mediator' between these two Jewish worlds—someone like Mendele who is traditionally seen as a 'simple' Jew, a folk character. However, Dan Miron convincingly argues that Mendele cannot be regarded as a *folkstip*. He is not a 'typical' shtetl or village Jew. He is detached from communal life. Mendele's attitude towards the Jewish religion and Jewish people is very ambiguous. Under a mask of tradition he says things that members of traditional East European Jewish communities would not or could not: he subverts tradition. He is a traveler disguised. In order to underscore this point, Miron compares Mendele with Sholem Aleichem's characters - in particular with Tevye (pp.174-76).

According to Dan Miron, Mendele's function as an ironic persona and his status as a *rhetorical medium* give freedom of narrative movement which is, as the author of *The Traveler Disguised* argues, one of Abramovitsch's greatest contribution to modern Jewish literature.

Dan Miron offers a non-traditional, thought-provoking interpretation of Abramovitsch's writings and of Abramovitsch's creation, Mendele Mokher Seform. Even though this book was originally published over 20 years ago, it still offers a compelling discussion of the development of nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction. Its thought-provoking argument, the valuable notes, and bibliography render this book a rewarding resource for both students and teachers of East European Jewish history and literature, as well as for those more generally interested in Jewish literature.

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