

CHAPTER 1

The Grandfather of Yiddish Literature

Modern Yiddish literature has its origins in the life and work of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836–1917). A follower of Abramovitsh once found him working at his desk and asked what he was writing. “I’m not writing, I’m driving away flies,” he answered, and then explained his metaphor: “When I write Hebrew, all the prophets fall upon me: Isaiah, Jeremiah, the writers of the Song of Songs and Psalms, and each one of them proposes that I take a ready-made verse or an established phrase from him alone, for this expression. In order not to write in ready-made clichés, I first have to drive away all those flies.”¹ This story illustrates the basic problem that confronted modern Yiddish and Hebrew writers. Abramovitsh required the literary models of the Bible and post-biblical Hebrew writing, but he was also compelled to resist their influence. While he appropriated prophetic and rabbinic modes, he retained a critical distance.

Abramovitsh himself wrote three accounts of his life: an essay in Nachum Sokolov’s *Memorial Book* (*Sefer zikharon*, 1889); the two-part autobiographical novel *Solomon, Son of Chaim* (*Shloyme reb Khaim’s*, 1894–1917), also known as *In Those Days* (*In yener tsayt* in Yiddish or *Ba-yamim ha-hem* in Hebrew); and his serialized memoirs entitled “From My Book of Memories” (“Fun mayn seyfer hazikhroynes,” 1913–16). While these narratives should not be read as if they contained indisputable facts, they do command a privileged place in Abramovitsh’s lifework. Numerous essayists have written about Abramovitsh in Yiddish and Hebrew, and his friend Lev Binshtok printed a significant memoir of his early years in Russian (1884).

Abramovitsh offered advice to those who interpret his work. After he read Y. H. Ravnitzky’s introduction to a collection of his

¹Simon Dubnov, *Fun “zhargon” tsu yidish un andere artiklen: literarishe zikhroynes* (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1929), p. 113; henceforth cited as “FZ” by page alone.

Hebrew stories in 1900, Abramovitsh objected: “you, as the editor, should have given an historical overview and an explanation of many issues and matters in the book, such as explaining the relationship of each story to the events of the time in which it was written.”² By stressing the pertinence of historical background, Abramovitsh indicates that social contexts are essential to the meaning of his fiction.

Abramovitsh’s first Yiddish novel (serialized in 1864–65) marked both the beginning of modern Yiddish fiction and a continuation of former trends. His work responds to three powerful movements that preceded him: Haskalah, Chassidism, and (for lack of a better term) Mitnagdism. The Haskalah, or the Jewish Enlightenment, was prominent in Western Europe roughly from 1750–1830, inspired by the rationalistic movement of the eighteenth century that was associated with Denis Diderot, François Voltaire, Gotthold Lessing, and Immanuel Kant. The leading Jewish member of the Enlightenment and founder of the Haskalah was Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), who sought to educate Jews by translating the Bible into a German version written in Hebrew characters. Mendelssohn hoped that this Bible edition would assist Yiddish speakers in learning German. In Berlin at the end of the eighteenth century, proponents of the Jewish Enlightenment such as Aharon Wolfson (1754–1835) and Isaac Euchel (1756–1804) produced satiric plays. The modernizing influence of the Berlin Enlightenment prevailed over the Jews of Western Europe, and it then made inroads into Eastern Europe (ca. 1820–80). Abramovitsh took his first steps as a writer under the aegis of the Enlightenment and throughout his life shared its goals of education and progress. From 1881 until his death, Abramovitsh was employed as the principal of a Jewish school in Odessa.

Chassidism and Mitnagdism were equal and opposite forces that arose from the chassidic innovations of Israel Baal Shem Tov (1699–1761) and his disciples in Volin (Volhynia) and Podolia. Chassidic leaders emphasized the primacy of prayer, whereas their opponents placed greater weight on study. Mystical practices drawn

²Letter of 10 August 1900; translated from *Reshumot* 2 (1927), 428. A Yiddish translation is contained in *Dos Mendele bukh*, ed. Nachman Mayzel (New York: YKUF, 1959), p. 180; this volume is henceforth cited as “MB” by page alone.

from the esoteric *Book of Splendor* (*Sefer ha-zohar*, thirteenth century) were especially influential in chassidic circles. The mitnagdim (literally “opponents”) rallied forcefully against the chassidim after the Vilna Gaon, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, placed a ban on the chassidim in 1772. In the nineteenth century the chassidic strongholds stretched from Poland and Galicia to the Ukraine, while the mitnagdic center lay to the north in Lithuania. The exaggerated dichotomy between Polish Jews and Lithuanian Jews (or “Litvaks”) derives from this religious split. According to the simplistic polarity, chassidim were known for their spiritual fervor and devotion to the mystical kabbalah, while mitnagdim distinguished themselves as rigorous talmudic scholars. Abramovitsh was familiar with both communities since he was raised in greater Lithuania and traveled south through Volin and Podolia, later settling in the strongly chassidic city of Berditchev. His early work was in part motivated by a wish to spread the Haskalah to Jews in both groups.

Among the chassidim, Rabbi Nachman’s inspirational tales were printed in Hebrew and Yiddish (1815) after his death. At the same time, secular Jewish authors—influenced by the Enlightenment—fought what they saw as misguided enthusiasts and worked to improve the material conditions of Jewish life and education. For example, Joseph Perl (1774–1839) and Isaac Ber Levinsohn (1788–1860) used satire to oppose the chassidim (1819–30).³ Another precursor from the mid-nineteenth century was Isaac Meir Dik (1814–93), whose story books, “in contrast to other Enlightenment works, did not frighten the pious readership.”⁴ Incorporating aspects of all these prior trends, Abramovitsh initially experimented with didactic essays and novels in Hebrew (1857–68). But his first genuine success came in Yiddish, with his synthesis of everyday scenes, traditional motifs, and subtle irony.

³See Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), pp. 61–73, for an early discussion, in English, of Perl’s *Revealer of Secrets* (*Megale temirin*) and Levinsohn’s *Words of the Righteous* (*Divrei tzadikim*).

⁴Shmuel Niger [Charney], “Yiddish Literature From the Mid-Eighteenth Century Until 1942” (“Yidische literatur fun mitn 18-tn yorhundert biz 1942”), in the *Algemeyne entsiklopedie*, vol. 3: *Yidn* (New York: CYCO, 1942), p. 101; henceforth cited as “YL” by page alone.

EARLY EDUCATION

Sholem Yankev Broyde, later Abramovitsh, was born in Kapolia (Kopyl, Minsk province) in 1836.⁵ Jews called this region Lithuania (*Lite*), although it was then part of Czarist Russia (and now lies within the borders of Belarus). His father Chaim Moyshe Broyde was respected in the town and known for his linguistic talents. According to Abramovitsh, his father perceived a general weakness in Hebrew learning and “wanted to make an exception of Shloyme [the name denoting Sholem Yankev in his autobiographical novel *Shloyme reb Khaim’s*], to try to teach him the entire Tanakh [Hebrew Bible] together with the translation, from beginning to end. Reb Chaim himself knew the Tanakh and wrote Hebrew. People used to delight in his letters.”⁶

As a child Abramovitsh’s perceptions of the world were, in large part, guided by biblical verses. Between the ages of about seven and ten, he was taught by a private tutor, Yosi Rubens, who placed special emphasis on the Hebrew language. During that time Abramovitsh memorized portions of the Bible, establishing the basis for his literary career in Hebrew. Since the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language did not begin until late in the nineteenth century, the Bible and Mishna were the main primers for Hebrew writers; in his youth Abramovitsh knew nothing of Enlightenment Hebrew literature.⁷

Yosi Rubens made a lasting impression on the boy. He was “a remarkable Hebraist and Talmudist . . . who was exceptionally skillful in carpentry, worked expertly in wood and stone and, in

⁵According to some sources, Abramovitsh was born in 1835. See also Max Weinreich, “Mendeles ershte 25 yor,” *YIVO bleter* 10 (1936), 167–80. Weinreich reexamines the biographical information, gives Abramovitsh’s birthdate as 1 January 1834, and contests a number of other established dates in Abramovitsh’s life.

⁶*Solomon, Son of Chaim (Shloyme reb Khaim’s)*, in *Ale verk fun Mendeles Moykher Sforim (S. Y. Abramovitsh)* (Cracow: Farlag Mendele, 1911), vol. 2, p. 26; henceforth cited as “SRK” by page alone.

⁷See Abramovitsh’s autobiographical essay in *Sefer zikharon le-sofrei yisra’el ha-chaim itanu ka-yom*, ed. Nachum Sokolov (Warsaw: Halter, 1889), p. 118, henceforth cited as “SZ” by page alone. Lev Binshtok also recalls that, as a boy, Abramovitsh had little conception of European literature, which differentiates him from both Sholem Aleichem and Peretz.

addition, had an understanding of painting.”⁸ Apart from educating him in the Bible and Talmud, this teacher with his diverse talents made the young Abramovitsh aware of art, “awakened the boy’s curiosity and drew him toward another, as yet unknown, dreamlike faraway place, a calling that was beyond the limits of the Talmud” (ibid.). Yosi Rubens specialized in making ceremonial art, but his artistry gave Abramovitsh an introduction to secular artistic pursuits.

Abramovitsh’s description of his first talmudic studies echoes the multivoiced character of his fiction. He employs vivid imagery to describe his childhood encounters with the Talmud and Midrash, and he represents the textual world as a landscape. While studying the Hebrew Bible, “my teacher took me to the threshold of the Talmud, the primeval giant Og and Magog in the literature of all the inhabitants of the world. When I arrived there I was like a man who has come for the first time to a great market, astonished at the sight of all kinds of merchandise, business, and the many and various desirable objects, and I was struck mute by hearing the din, commotion, and shrieking from every side and corner. Buyers and sellers, agents and merchants, all running and pressing and rushing loudly, hastily, gripped by the lust for trade” (SZ 117). Abramovitsh’s depiction elaborates on the folk saying, “Torah is the best merchandise.” In contrast to the Talmud, which resembled a marketplace—with its exchanges between hundreds of rabbis across centuries—*aggadah* or legend seemed to him an orchard, an expansive field without an orderly plan. Abramovitsh remembered having been awakened on winter mornings and walking to the House of Study while it was still dark. The beauty of nature inspired him “to learn with all my heart. . . . My soul longed for God’s Torah, to know all the secrets of the Talmud” (SZ 118). This sentimental, spiritualized recollection is at odds with the underlying thrust of Abramovitsh’s fictional descriptions, in which he ob-

⁸Lev Binshtok, “A Celebration of Yiddish Literature: Solomon Moiseevitch Abramovitsh and His Twenty-Fifth Year of Literary Activity,” unpublished translation from the Russian by Jack Blanshei, p. 3. Modified slightly in consultation with Amy Mandelker and Nancy M. Frieden; henceforth cited as “CYL.” The original essay is contained in *Voskhod* 12 (1884), 1–32; the cited passage occurs on page 2. Abramovitsh refers to his tutor as “Lippe” in his fictionalized autobiography, *Shloyme reb Khaim’s*.

serves that nature enables Jewish children to counterbalance stifling rabbinic customs.

Following his father's death in 1850, Abramovitsh studied in traditional yeshivot in Timkovitz (Timkovichi), Slutsk, and Vilna (Vilnius). He then lived for some time with his mother and stepfather in an isolated forest in Melnik (Mielnik), where he recalls having felt the powerful attraction of nature. At the beginning of his fictional autobiography, his mother indicates the change that has come over him: no longer immersed in talmudic studies, he has begun to occupy himself with scribbling and wandering through the forest all day (SRK 7–8). As a mature writer, Abramovitsh contributed to the development of Yiddish fiction with his representations of nature. In *Fishke the Lame* (*Fishke der krumer*, 1869), his persona Mendele the Bookseller mocks the Jewish habit of going into mourning just as summer begins, on the seventeenth of Tammuz, in preparation for Tish'ah b'Av. Stories such as "The Calf" ("Dos toysefes-yontev-kelbl") express his childhood love of the outdoors, but they also show the tension caused by his elders' disapproval of what they viewed as a temptation of "the evil impulse."⁹ Experiences of nature stood in direct contrast to rabbinic textual study, and Abramovitsh's emphasis on natural beauty was a threat to those who wished to maintain the insularity of "the People of the Book." Everyday Yiddish contained limited vocabulary in which to discuss natural objects, as if the words "flower" and "rose," "tree" and "oak" sufficed to name most local flora. Influenced by the Jewish Enlightenment, Abramovitsh sought to enhance Jewish awareness of the natural world both by including vivid descriptions in his fiction and by printing a three-volume Hebrew edition called the *Book of Natural History* (*Sefer toldot ha-teva'*, 1862–72). This was Abramovitsh's reworking and translation of a German study by Harald Othmar Lenz; Abramovitsh edited the preexisting book much as he later had his character Mendele pretend to do. While he made no original contributions to the natural sciences, Abramovitsh's depictions of nature set his novels off from most prior Hebrew and Yiddish fiction.

⁹See *Seyfer habeheymes*, in MMS, vol. 1. The Hebrew version was published during the same year in *Ha-'olam* 5 (1911), numbers 18–19, 23, 26, and 33. For an English translation of "The Calf" by Jacob Sloan, see *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, 2d ed., ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 97–111.

Abramovitsh recalls that he began to write poetry while surrounded by nature during the early 1850s. As a child in the small town of Kapolia (Kopyl), he had never read secular literature, and so when he experienced poetic feelings he thought, “this is Satan’s work; the evil impulse is endangering me and through evil thoughts is leading me away from learning Torah” (SZ 119). According to his own account, Abramovitsh’s first literary endeavors anticipated his later satiric style: “as soon as I began to write words of song, and the first fruits of my pen consecrated hymns to God, along came Satan—the angel of derision, who now rules over me in the figure of Mendele the Bookseller—and provoked me to mock human beings, to destroy their veils and tear their masks from them” (SZ 120). Thus Abramovitsh traces his use of satire to his earliest writing, and links it to “the figure of Mendele the Bookseller.” Later, in the 1869–78 prefaces ascribed to Mendele, Abramovitsh mimics a traditional religious form—hymns in praise of God (*hilyulim le-adonai*)—and enacts its parodic transformation. While Satan is known as “the angel of death” in the Talmud (Baba Batra 16a), Abramovitsh uses one of his typical literary devices and modifies this ancient phrase to “the angel of derision.”

Abramovitsh possessed a precocious talent for impersonation, as was later true of Sholem Aleichem. As a child, Abramovitsh was “very popular because of his liveliness, his habit of asking foolish questions, and even more, for his mimes. By nature he had the ability to pick up, at first glance, a person’s mannerisms and verbal peculiarities. He would imitate beautifully how any person spoke, stood, walked, until everyone held their sides, bursting with laughter” (SRK 24–25). This imitative gift advanced Abramovitsh’s ability as a novelist with affinities to French and Russian realism. The example Abramovitsh gives, referring to himself in the third person, is relevant to his literary portraits of provincial Jews: “He especially liked to imitate *Gitel*, the prayer-leader [in the women’s section], how she kissed the mezuzah on entering the house . . . ; how she pulled back her lips and said, ‘God be with you!’” (SRK 25). This simple, pious woman always affirmed, in the language of the women’s prayers, “Praised and revered be the Almighty, blessed be He and His name, who protects the People of Israel.” Such blind faith later became the central object of Abramovitsh’s satires, when he wrote in a manner that simultaneously “encourages and demasks” (MB 132). His example also shows how he combined

satire of social forms with parody of textual precursors, in this case a prayer formula.

In the midst of creative work, when Abramovitsh wanted to capture the right word or expression for a folk character, he would address the common Jew within himself: "What do you say, little Jew?"¹⁰ Thus he invoked the muse within, the everyday speech of typical Jews, which was far more accessible in Yiddish than in Hebrew. According to Y. D. Berkovitsh, Abramovitsh once commented on the difference between writing in Yiddish and Hebrew: with the former he could always consult his wife when he needed help with an elusive word, but with Hebrew he could only consult the Bible, Talmud, and Midrash.¹¹ In the term employed by Mikhail Bakhtin, the double reference to speech and literary exemplars facilitated his *dialogism*, his multivoiced fictions that convey diverse perspectives and linguistic levels through personae and narratives within narratives.

Much has been written about the persona of Mendele the Bookseller (Mendele Moykher Sforim), sometimes erroneously called Abramovitsh's pseudonym.¹² "Abramovitsh" was itself a fictitious name, since his father's name was Chaim Moyshe Broyde. Name changes were then a common ploy among Jews, as one means to avoid being impressed into a twenty-five-year military service in the Czar's army. To avoid falling prey to this system, Abramovitsh may have posed as the (exempt) eldest son of a (fictitious) family. Beyond such pragmatic considerations, Sholem Yankev possibly chose his alias to indicate that he was, figuratively speaking, "son of Abraham." The patriarch Abraham was not his role model, for he had a more immediate prototype.

TRAVELS

At the age of seventeen, three years after his father's death, Sholem Yankev wandered extensively through Eastern Europe together

¹⁰David Eynhorn, "Mendele at Work" ("Mendele bay der arbet"), in *Zikhroynes vegn Mendelen*, in *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, ed. Nachman Maysel (Warsaw: Farlag Mendele, 1928), vol. 20, p. 59.

¹¹Y. D. Berkovitsh, *Ha-rish'onim ki-vnei-adam: sippurei zikharonot 'al Sholem-Aleichem u-vnei-doro*, 3d ed. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1976), p. 363.

¹²For a critique of this practice, see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973), chapter 5; henceforth cited as "TD" by page alone.

with a beggar named Abraham (or, in the diminutive, Avreml). Avreml Khromoy—which means Abraham the Lame—had returned from travels “with his wonderful tales and novelties about the fortunate Volin and Southern Russia, ‘flowing with milk and honey.’” Evoking this biblical phrase, he “excited the imagination of the seventeen-year-old Abramovitsh, who decided to go out into the world with this Avreml.”¹³ These travels extended Abramovitsh’s horizons far beyond the Lithuanian and Belorussian towns he had formerly seen.

More than a decade later, Avreml’s makeshift horse-drawn cart found a literary counterpart in fictional renditions of Mendele the Bookseller’s wagon. Moreover, Avreml inspired characterizations in Abramovitsh’s seminal novels *Fishke the Lame* (*Fishke der krumer*, 1869) and *The Travels of Benjamin the Third* (*Kitser masoos Binyomin ha-shlishi*, 1878): “the memorable trip in the company of Avreml Khromoy subsequently provided our gifted folk writer with considerable material for his stories about everyday Jewish life. In these stories, replete with humor and good-natured sarcasm, and infused with truthful and unusual powers of observation, one meets places and scenes snatched directly from life, since he had the opportunity to scrutinize folk life closely with all its joys and sorrows, without any embellishment or disguise.”¹⁴ Their travels took them from Kapolia to Lutsk (Volin Province), and thence to Komenitz (Kamenets-Podolsk, Podolia). Along the way, Avreml tried to arrange for the marriage of Sholem Yankev so that he could pocket the matchmaker’s fee, but Abramovitsh foiled this mercenary attempt. The journey became increasingly difficult as Avreml became resentful of his fellow traveler and threatened to confiscate his passport and abandon him. A choir boy introduced Abramovitsh to a cantor in Komenitz, who rescued him from Avreml and helped him become a yeshiva student at the House of Study. His strong biblical and talmudic training made a favorable impression in the community, and Abramovitsh was able to support himself as the private tutor for children in a number of

¹³Zalman Reyzn, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, presse un filologie*, vol. 1 (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1926), p. 11. The ostensible reason for the trip, Binshtok recalls, was to help Abramovitsh’s aunt find her long-lost husband. But Avreml had other ideas, and took his ward on a circuitous route.

¹⁴See Lev Binshtok’s biographical essay, CYL, trans. Jack Blanshei, pp. 14–15; in the Russian original, p. 10.

wealthy families. In the mid-1850s Abramovitsh married and lived with his first wife in Komenitz, but they were divorced soon after.

Until this time, Abramovitsh had received a traditional Jewish education. In Komenitz he first encountered another kind of scholar, the Hebrew and Yiddish writer Avraham-Ber Gottlob (1810–99), who taught at the local government school for Jewish boys from 1852–54. This decisive encounter with a secular intellectual exposed Abramovitsh to the methods and contents of modern learning. Lev Binshtok recounts that he

went over to Gottlob's apartment taking with him his single literary production—a drama already written during his childhood but left without a title—with the intention of hearing the opinion of the great poet and to receive his advice and direction for the future. Gottlob, as Sholem Yankev himself told me, could not keep from laughing as he read this work of childhood fantasy. He praised him anyway for his noble effort and predicted a brilliant literary future. From the very first, Gottlob recognized an uncommon talent hidden in this young Lithuanian, and therefore without waiting for Sholem Yankev's request, he offered his assistance and the use of his carefully selected library.¹⁵

Gottlob, with his “completely unfamiliar opinions,” served as a new model for the aspiring author; Abramovitsh's first Yiddish novel presents a fictionalized representation of him in the character of Gutman. Under the tutelage of Gottlob's eldest daughter, Abramovitsh studied Russian, German, mathematics, and then passed a teacher's examination in 1854. His first publication, which Gottlob submitted to the Hebrew journal *The Preacher* (*Ha-maggid*) without the author's knowledge in 1857, was entitled “A Letter on Education” (“Mikhtav 'al dvar ha-chinukh”).

Abramovitsh taught in Komenitz from 1856–58, then moved with his second wife to Berdichev, where he continued his literary endeavors while supported by his new father-in-law. His earliest publications were in Hebrew. He wrote fiction, essays on scholarly issues, and his work of natural history designed to introduce Jewish readers to science. During the period of the “Great Reforms” in the 1860s, Abramovitsh was influenced by Russian liberal trends; in the 1870s his focus gradually broadened from efforts on behalf of social and educational reform among the Jews to a striving for

¹⁵Ibid., p. 24; in the Russian original, p. 16.

full-fledged political equality.¹⁶ At that time, in conjunction with his populist leanings, Abramovitsh decided to devote himself to writing primarily in Yiddish.

Abramovitsh expressed his commitment to social reform in his autobiographical Hebrew essay written in 1889. An ironic undercurrent unsettles its superficially pious tone, as when he justifies his worldly difficulties by attributing them to divine providence: “in the heavens it was apparently decreed, before I left the womb, that I would be a writer for my people, a poor and impoverished people, and God willed that I would learn the ways of my people to the depths, and observe their deeds; thus He told my soul: wander like a bird in my world, and you will be wretched among the wretched and a Jew among Jews on earth” (SZ 120). These words echo familiar patterns of Jewish belief and expression in the Hebrew language. Nevertheless, the reader senses a tongue-in-cheek skepticism behind this facile acceptance of misfortune. Abramovitsh also makes an implicit social statement when he indicates that only through experiencing misfortunes has he been able to become a writer for his people. His avowed goals were those of the Jewish Enlightenment: “to teach the children of our people taste and discernment; to bring their worldly life and toil into a pact with our literature, so that the people would feel affection for it; and to enlighten and to be useful” (SZ 122).

YIDDISH FICTION

Abramovitsh explains the reason for his historic switch to Yiddish in a passage dating from 1889: “Then I said to myself, here I am observing the ways of our people and seeking to give them stories from a Jewish source in the Holy tongue, yet most of them do not even know this language and speak Yiddish [*yehudit ashkenazit*]. What good does a writer do with all his toil and ideas if he is not useful to his people? This question—For whom do I toil?—gave me no rest and brought me into great confusion” (SZ 122–23). The choice between Hebrew and Yiddish made an all-encompassing social statement, indicating the author’s appeal either to an elite readership or to a wider audience. During the same period in

¹⁶See Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte: fun di onheybn biz Mendele Moykher Sforim* (Vilna: Tomor, 1928), p. 346.

Berditchev, Abramovitsh helped establish a charitable organization called “Enlightenment to the Poor” (“Maskil el dal”).¹⁷ This experience has an ironic literary correlate in *The Nag* (*Di klyatshe*, 1873), when the protagonist writes letters to an organization devoted to the well-being of animals.

Abramovitsh directed a great deal of energy to educating others; his main literary impulse was didactic, even though he satirized would-be enlighteners like himself. Because his professed goals were to enlighten and to be useful, his heavy-handed messages may obstruct our appreciation of his literary accomplishment. For instance, in spite of contemporary parallels, we may have difficulty responding to his satiric play *The Tax* (*Di takse*, 1869; not available in English translation) in which Abramovitsh exposes scandals associated with the distribution of kosher meat. His play is based on what he witnessed in Berditchev, and his outrage propelled him from light irony in the early 1860s to bitter satire in 1869. As early as 1864 he wrote that “at times I am filled with rage against the wealthy, and then one must not even mention the name of a rich man in front of me; I flare up like a volcano, I spew scorn and boiling anger, and my words turn into cries of protest.”¹⁸ His radicalization was furthered by community leaders’ hostile response to his satiric play, *The Tax*, in 1869. He was compelled to relocate, and he continued his education at the rabbinical school in Zhitomir. Zalman Reyzn states that Abramovitsh “successfully passed his examinations, but his trial sermon in the synagogue was too radical, so that he did not receive a rabbinical degree.”¹⁹

Yiddish was underdeveloped as a literary language when Abramovitsh turned to it in 1864. There were few exemplary works of fiction, the best of which were the Yiddish versions of Rabbi Nachman’s chassidic tales and stories by Isaac Meir Dik. Yet chassidic lore and Yiddish fiction were entirely foreign to Abramovitsh’s youthful interests. Thus he describes Yiddish in the 1860s as “an empty vessel” containing little more than idle words destined for

¹⁷See Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte*, pp. 331–34.

¹⁸Letter of 15 December 1864, in MB, p. 79.

¹⁹Zalman Reyzn, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, presse un filologie*, vol. 1 (Vilna: Kletzkin, 1926), p. 18.

the uneducated (SZ 123). In general, Yiddish was associated with women's books that were scorned because they fell short of the merits associated with scholarly Hebrew. Yiddish held a subordinate role, and fiction was deemed frivolous, suitable only to women who could not read "higher" essays such as Abramovitsh's Hebrew edition of a work on natural history (*Sefer toldot ha-teva*^c).

Abramovitsh and several other writers prevailed upon Alexander Tsederboym, then editor of the Hebrew newspaper *The Advocate* (*Ha-melitz*), to print a Yiddish supplement. Thus began *A Voice of Tidings* (*Kol mevasser*, October 1862), and for this new Yiddish publication Abramovitsh wrote his first Yiddish book, *The Little Man* (*Dos kleyne mentshele*), in 1864–65. Serialized in those pages starting in November 1864, it was eagerly awaited by the readership. When an issue appeared without a new installment of *The Little Man*, "we heard a lot of people complain about it: 'What's this? Why isn't *The Little Man* there?'"²⁰ Shmuel Niger comments that as contemporary readers were increasingly prepared for Enlightenment ideas, they were "no longer frightened by the sharp opposition to Chassidism, and enjoyed the demasking of the community ring-leaders."²¹ Abramovitsh attacked the corruption of wealthy and powerful Jews in books written primarily for the disenfranchised.

Abramovitsh expressed contradictory views about chassidic customs. In the first edition of one novel, *The Magic Ring* (*Dos vintshfingerl*, 1865), his persona Mendele mocks the chassidim of a certain town who cannot bear the thought of an enlightened man coming and sweeping away the filth in the House of Study: "The chassidim were not pleased, because Gutmann dressed like a German. And when the floor of the school was washed, they became furious. What's the meaning of this? To do such a thing in a school! What's this, washing off the mud that our ancestors left behind! . . . Only a non-Jew does something like that. But a Jew,

²⁰Letter to *Kol mevasser* (1865), number 9, as quoted by Max Weinreich in *Bilder fun der yidisher literaturgeshikhte*, p. 342. A few years later, the same journal serialized Y. Y. Linetsky's important satiric novel, *The Polish Lad* (*Dos poylishhe yingl*, 1867). Abramovitsh disclaimed any association with this author, whose work Sholem Aleichem admired, but the similarities deserve closer examination.

²¹Shmuel Niger, YL, p. 104.

who has a soul. . . . What does it mean? Is it befitting?”²² Such satiric portrayals led to Abramovitsh’s unwilling departure from Berditchev in 1869, after which he moved to Zhitomir.

Decades later, in the Hebrew versions of his Yiddish novels and in his collected works, Abramovitsh softened his critiques. In the second part of his fictional autobiography (ca. 1910) Abramovitsh even praises the spirituality of the chassidim he met at an early age in Timkovitz: “for the first time he saw chassidim, of whom there was not a trace in K.[apolia], and about whom bitter mitnagdim circulated sayings and ugly stories about sinners of Israel, wild creatures, species of animals. . . . T.[imkovitz] was a new discovery for Shloyme. . . . Chassidim are also Jews! But still there is a difference between them and mitnagdim, among whom he had until then grown up in his town. A mitnaged has a frozen spirit; he has only a head, for his heart is ice-cold.”²³ Among the chassidim, Abramovitsh recalls sentimentally, “prayer was a bright beam of light that burst through the clouds of depression; they lit up the orphan’s gloomy spirit” (ibid., 8). Such nostalgic recollections contradict the satiric thrust of Abramovitsh’s important early fiction. Simon Dubnov more accurately refers to the youthful days when Abramovitsh carried out “the Haskalah mission and the struggle with chassidim in Komenitz and Berditchev.”²⁴

A major breakthrough came with Abramovitsh’s play *The Tax*, in which “for the first time in Yiddish literature, the socio-economic antagonism that divides and disrupts the Jewish community is clearly and distinctly dramatized; for the first time the question of the poor and the rich is sharply posed” (YL 105). During the 1860s and 1870s, as Shmuel Niger asserts, Enlightenment writing moved beyond the issue of education and indicted corruption within the upper echelons of the Jewish populace. This social criticism made Abramovitsh a favorite author among Soviet Yiddishists in the 1930s, inspiring them to initiate the most

²²Translated from *Dos vintshfingerl* (Warsaw: Joseph Levensohn, 1865), p. 7.

²³Translated from *Shloyme reb Khaim’s*, book 2, contained in *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher Sforim* (Warsaw: Farlag Mendele, 1928), vol. 19, pp. 8–9. This opposition between cool-headed mitnagdim and passionate chassidim had become a cliché by the time I. L. Peretz wrote his central chassidic stories in 1899–1901.

²⁴Simon Dubnov, FZ 107.

ambitious critical edition of a Yiddish author ever attempted. Its completion was, however, rendered impossible by Stalin and the Second World War.

LATER WRITINGS

After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, the Russian government adopted reactionary policies, and changing conditions provoked doubts about the adequacy of goals that had been set by the Enlightenment. As anti-semitic pogroms and reactionary politics rapidly altered the atmosphere surrounding Jewish writing, satire and social criticism were often replaced by neo-romanticism, idealized pietism, and nationalism (YL 110). Even Abramovitsh was less inclined to condemn the hapless Jews and, in the 1880s and 1890s, he limited himself to suggesting that passivity and quiet faith were not adequate “responses to catastrophe.”²⁵

In the midst of political turmoil between 1878 and 1884, Abramovitsh suffered from a depression that rendered him nearly inactive as an author. Simon Dubnov attributes this setback to the difficulties associated with his poverty in Zhitomir, followed by his demanding position as director of a Jewish school in Odessa. Lev Binshtok reported in 1884 that Abramovitsh “was suddenly somehow burned out, and his literary activity came to a complete halt” (CYL 47). The author himself described his inability to write in a letter to Binshtok dated 16 January 1880: “As soon as I take up the pen, I feel an overwhelming heaviness: my hands are bound as if by magical chains. The feelings strive to pour themselves onto the paper, but I am as if paralyzed and can’t write!” (MB 107). Four years later, he wrote to another correspondent that “the misfortunes of the recent period have turned my heart into stone, so that my tongue has not allowed me to speak and my hands have not allowed me to write a word. This is the sort of silence that comes upon a person who suddenly experiences great suffering and it costs him health and life much more than groaning and crying with tears of blood” (MB 128).

²⁵Compare David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), chapter 3. See also Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), chapter 4.

Abramovitsh for the first time received a stable position in 1881, as the director of a Jewish school (“Talmud Torah”) in Odessa. While his material conditions subsequently improved, his Yiddish creativity never regained the heights attained in the 1860s and 1870s. He became an educator in a more immediate sense than he had been as a Yiddish writer in earlier decades. Abramovitsh resided in Odessa for the rest of his life, with the exception of two years spent in Geneva, Switzerland, following the Odessa pogrom of 1905.

In light of anti-semitic incidents across Russia in 1881 (and later in 1903 and 1905), Abramovitsh reexamined his prior opinions, admitting that “the Jewish question has lately become unclear to me, and my view of many things has changed decisively.” He continued, in a letter written to a friend in Russian: “this period of misfortunes for Jews, which has called forth so much literary and nationalistic activity, had the opposite effect on me, and stamped upon my lips the seal of silence” (MB 114). In another letter from 1882, Abramovitsh noted that the cultural climate was inimical to literary endeavors: “Almost our entire public from great to small, young and old, has worked itself into a talking frenzy; everyone is crying out with one voice. . . . This is the time to be silent and to remain silent until the public shouts itself out and then comes to its senses” (MB 115–16). Abramovitsh’s silence, as a response to the turmoil of his milieu, articulates the interdependence between his fiction and the social context. Whereas earlier he had used satire to foster social reform, he later toned down his critical voice and attempted to preserve neutrality while surrounded by a turbulent political drama.

On one level, then, Abramovitsh’s silence was his answer to the harsh conditions of Jewish life in Russia after 1881. Binshtok refrains from disclosing two more personal causes of his depression: in 1882 his daughter Rashel Abramovitsh died at the age of nineteen, and his son Meir (Mikhail) Abramovitsh (b. 1859), a Russian-language poet, was exiled as a result of political activities. Subsequently his son lived with a non-Jewish woman and converted to Christianity. Since Moses Mendelssohn, whose daughter Dorothea eloped with Friedrich von Schlegel and converted to Christianity, enlightened Jewish intellectuals had reason to fear the social consequences of their quest for political equality. The theme of intermarriage resurfaces most poignantly in Sholem Aleichem’s 1906 story “Chava,” as narrated by Tevye the Dairyman.

According to other accounts, Abramovitsh suffered from extreme duress at the hands of a ruthless man from Berditchev who blackmailed him to exact revenge for Abramovitsh's critical play, *The Tax*.²⁶ After these contretemps, the success of Russian and Polish editions of Abramovitsh's novels (1884–86) and celebrations of his literary jubilee encouraged him to return to literary projects. (Nevertheless, when a Polish journal began to print a translation of *The Nag* in 1886, its allegorical critique of the Czarist regime became obvious and this journal was shut down by the censors.) During the late 1880s, at the center of a vibrant literary circle in Odessa, Abramovitsh resumed writing in Hebrew, and his prose was charged with the dynamism of his intervening experiences with Yiddish fiction. Although Abramovitsh continued to produce fiction in Yiddish, the rise of modern Hebrew literature gave added impetus to his Hebrew writing.

Sholem Aleichem bestowed on Abramovitsh his honorific title, "the Grandfather of Yiddish Literature." In a 1910 essay written for the Jubilee edition of Abramovitsh's works (1911–13), Sholem Aleichem states: "I declare openly before the entire world that I was the one who crowned Reb Mendele Moykher Sforim with the name 'Grandfather.' That was a quarter century ago. Then I was still just a wag and a 'frivolous grandson,' as the Grandfather called me in one of his letters to me. From then on it was always 'Grandfather! Grandpa.'"²⁷ The word "crowned" (*gekroynt*) is significant: there are elements of prestige, as well as of familiarity and affection, in this name. But there is also a hint—never openly acknowledged by Sholem Aleichem or his contemporaries—of dismissal. To call Abramovitsh "Grandfather" was, for Sholem Aleichem, to relegate him to a remote age while still establishing a noble pedigree for himself. At the distance of two generations, Sholem Aleichem had less to fear from his precursor.

Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem were in fact just one generation apart, since Abramovitsh's prodigal son Mikhail was born in the same year as Sholem Aleichem. A Freudian might argue that

²⁶See S. L. Tsitron, *Dray literarische doyyes: zikhroynes vegn yidishe shriftshteler* (Warsaw: Sreberk, 1920), vol. 1, pp. 109–13.

²⁷Sholem Aleichem, "How Beautiful Is That Tree!" ("Vi sheyn iz der boym!"), in *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher Sforim* (S. Y. Abramovitsh), vol. 17: *Kritik iber Mendele Moykher Sforim* (Cracow: Farlag Mendele, 1911), p. 193n. Reprinted in SA 15:21–28.

Sholem Aleichem dissimulated his Oedipal rivalry with Abramovitsh by fictitiously situating him at a safe remove. Their dynamic relationship evolved rapidly in 1888–90, when Sholem Aleichem played a role in Abramovitsh's return to Yiddish literature by commissioning him to write for *The Jewish Popular Library* (*Di yudishe folks-bibliotek*).²⁸ During that period, Sholem Aleichem maintained a delicate balance between playing the part of an admiring disciple and acting as a critical editor.²⁹

LITERARY RECEPTION

Abramovitsh published his first Hebrew essay in 1857 and remained part of the Yiddish and Hebrew literary world until his death in 1917. But the zenith of his creativity was limited to 1864–78 (in Yiddish) and 1886–96 (in Hebrew). He made his greatest contributions to Yiddish fiction in the 1860s and 1870s, and he later wrote Hebrew stories that assumed a seminal place in the evolution of modern Hebrew literature. After working extensively in Yiddish, Abramovitsh learned to create a more malleable Hebrew prose.³⁰

Abramovitsh is remembered as a Hebrew author for his *nusach*, a particular Hebrew diction, style, or method. He wrote to Ravnitzky that “in your article you also should have set aside a section on my style (*signon*) itself, because of its importance and because of the benefit it has brought to literature and to our writers.”³¹ In a letter of 1906 he lightly parodies Genesis 1 when he asserts that “the style of my stories in Hebrew was a new creation. In the beginning I took counsel with my heart and mind and said: ‘Let us

²⁸See MB 148–76 and Sholem Aleichem's response in the dedication to *Stempenyu*, contained in *Di yudishe folks-bibliotek* 1 (1888), v–viii; reprinted in SA 11: 123–26. The adjective “yudish” then referred to the Jewish people and was not yet regularly used to designate the Yiddish language. In order to mark this distinction, I refrain from transcribing the title as *Di yidische folks-bibliotek*.

²⁹Compare Dan Miron, *Der imazh fun shtetl: dray literarishe shtudies* (Tel Aviv: Peretz farlag, 1981), p. 54.

³⁰For a cogent statement of this view, see Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988).

³¹Letter to Ravnitzky of 10 August 1900, translated from the Hebrew original, contained in *Reshumot* 2 (1927), 429. For a Yiddish translation, see MB 181.

make a Hebrew style that is lively and speaks *clearly and precisely* as people of our time and place speak, but the soul should be Jewish [*yisra'elit*] and should be worthy that one use it to write Hebrew stories for Jews. This was a very difficult thing to do, and praised be the Lord who came to my assistance so that I could create these stories; since that time Jewish writers have begun to use this new style, writing essays and stories—without praising or even mentioning the name of its creator.”³² In this characteristic mock-biblical passage, Abramovitsh figures himself as a creator who has been impiously neglected by mundane imitators.

H. N. Bialik was an admirer who did appreciate and acknowledge Abramovitsh's linguistic and literary accomplishments. Born in the Ukraine in 1873 and living in Odessa after 1891, Bialik received an informal education from the intellectual circle that included Abramovitsh, Ravnitzky, Ben-Ami (Mordecai Rabinovich), and Ahad Ha-Am (Asher Ginzberg). In the 1890s, as he was coming into his own as a Hebrew author, Bialik was accustomed to thinking of Abramovitsh as the literary leader of his age. Indeed, Bialik asserts that Abramovitsh went far beyond the individual creativity that characterizes all artists: he “created for literature a *nusach*. That is, he was the first to give us a literary style [or pattern, model—*shablon*].”³³ Bialik states that this *nusach* or *shablon* cannot be reduced to a “style, language, rhythm,” nor is it a matter of “types, popular psychology, natural description, landscape.” He recognizes Abramovitsh as a founder who made possible all future accomplishments, and he views Abramovitsh's *nusach* as the “stable ground” on which later artists created. Using an economic figure of speech, Bialik compares this *nusach* or *shablon* to coinage. He explains that “to create for literature a *nusach* means to provide, once and for all, fixed and enduring forms for the feelings and thoughts of the people and so, as a matter of course, to facilitate their expression; it means helping the people think and feel, disciplining its spirit, giving shape to what was

³²Letter to Ravnitzky of 11 September 1906, translated from the Hebrew original contained in *Reshumot* 2 (1927), 431. A Yiddish translation is contained in MB 202.

³³H. N. Bialik, “Mendele's *nusach*,” in *Ale verk Mendele Moykher Sforim* (S. Y. Abramovitsh), vol. 17: *Kritik iber Mendele Moykher Sforim* (Cracow: Farlag Mendele, 1911), p. 151.

without form; bringing forth gold from the raw earth and melting it into current coinage” (ibid., 154). Bialik clearly valued Abramovitsh’s Hebrew *nusach* because he appropriated it for his own poetic creations. As Abramovitsh’s Hebrew fiction gained currency, Bialik’s poetry became an equally compelling source of modern Hebrew verse.

Judaic literary history since Bialik has, for pragmatic reasons linked to the rise of Zionism, emphasized Abramovitsh’s importance as a Hebrew author. Much as Sholem Aleichem dubbed Abramovitsh “the Grandfather” of Yiddish literature and in so doing accorded himself a venerable lineage, Bialik exalted modern Hebrew by extolling the virtues of Abramovitsh’s influential style. In fact, other authors made equally remarkable advances in Hebrew style; I. L. Peretz adopted a more streamlined, modernistic narrative voice in his Hebrew stories of 1886–94. Abramovitsh’s Hebrew, often spoken through his mouthpiece Mendele, is consciously archaic: it is baroque, reflective, slow-paced, descriptive, and brimming with recondite vocabulary drawn from disparate layers of biblical, talmudic, and post-talmudic writing.³⁴ He succeeded in reaching a general audience by capturing the oral intonations of Yiddish speech, whereas his highly allusive, literary Hebrew remains an acquired taste.

Abramovitsh encouraged a misreading of his early fiction through the lens of his final period. In his Odessa phase, he became more conservative and tried to preserve neutrality at a time when Jewish nationalists were engaged in a fierce struggle against assimilationists.³⁵ His own livelihood was at stake because the school he directed “was permeated by russifying tendencies” (FZ 122). During the 1860s and 1870s Abramovitsh continued the line of Enlightenment writing by opposing ignorance, superstition, and cor-

³⁴In contrast, Peretz’s prose is sparse, fast-paced, and written in a more accessible vocabulary. His Hebrew remains highly readable today, in part because the intervening development of Israeli fiction has followed Peretz more than it has emulated Abramovitsh. One may thus refer to Peretz’s *nusach she-k’neged*, his “style in opposition” to that of Abramovitsh. See Gershon Shaked’s section on Peretz in *Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit 1880–1980*, vol. 1: *Ba-gola* (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1977), especially pp. 130–31. For a detailed discussion of Abramovitsh’s use of language and satire, see Gershon Shaked’s *Bein tzechok le-dema’: ‘iyyunim bi-yitzirato shel Mendele Moykher-Sforim* (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1965).

³⁵See Simon Dubnov, FZ 109–10, 121–22.

ruption. But after the 1890s he ceased to aim at specific social ends, instead seeking to establish his fiction as a classical monument in Yiddish and Hebrew culture. To the extent that he remained an ideological writer, he was primarily committed to advancing the cause of Jewish cultural life.

Abramovitsh created alternatively in Hebrew and Yiddish, complementing the scholarly dignity of the Holy tongue with the oral fluidity of the mother tongue. He began in Hebrew, shifted to Yiddish for the benefit of a broader readership, and returned to Hebrew while continuing his Yiddish writing. For Abramovitsh, as for Peretz, creative translations between Hebrew and Yiddish comprised a part of his literary accomplishment. The first transition, in which Abramovitsh moved from Hebrew to Yiddish, was a highly successful period; he also exerted great influence on Hebrew writers in Odessa and elsewhere during his second Hebrew phase that began in 1886. The spoken language of Odessa intellectuals was Russian, while Hebrew and Yiddish served other purposes. Simon Dubnov recalls that in the 1890s Abramovitsh “spoke Russian with everyone, even with those writers who wrote Hebrew or Yiddish. That had become an accepted rule: one must write for the ‘people,’ who speak only the mother tongue, in Yiddish. But in life the intelligentsia needed to use only the state language. No one in our circle thought of speaking Hebrew” (FZ 44).

A particularly important instance of autotranslation occurred in the case of Abramovitsh’s *The Magic Ring* (*Dos vintshfingerl*), written in 1865 and immensely expanded for Sholem Aleichem’s two anthologies entitled *The Jewish Popular Library* (*Di yudishe folksbibliotek*, 1888–89). After this Yiddish publication folded, Abramovitsh had nowhere to print the planned continuation of *The Magic Ring*. Hence he translated the first part of the book into Hebrew and added further chapters in Hebrew. Simon Dubnov recalls, however, that when Abramovitsh “had the first part of the Yiddish original of the *Magic Ring* before his eyes, he made the Hebrew translation—or rather, the reworking—masterfully and without any difficulties. But when he came to write without the Yiddish original, he felt that it would not go smoothly” (FZ 46). Dubnov comments that a writer cannot simultaneously be creative in form and content. First Abramovitsh needed to “create the content in the language of that life which is depicted in the artwork.” Even Hebrew fiction, Dubnov suggests, had to remain close to

Yiddish, the spoken vernacular of everyday Jewish life. Abramovitch's Hebrew style owed a profound debt to Yiddish as well as to the multiple layers of ancient and medieval Hebrew.

Publishing practices have obscured readers' awareness of Abramovitch's literary evolution. There are virtually no critical editions of classic Yiddish fiction, and material conditions have not been conducive to reliable printings. Most classic Yiddish fiction first appeared in newspapers or journals; to varying degrees, the authors oversaw the canonization of their works in collected editions. Yet even the seventeen-volume Jubilee edition of Abramovitch's *Ale verk* (*Complete Works*, planned for 1907 but postponed until 1911–13) was marred by numerous misprints, as Abramovitch himself complained bitterly to the publisher (MB 225–26). Ber Borokhov refers to the “general deficiency of all editions of our classics: they are provided by publishers who have no scrap of an idea about scientific demands, no hint of an historical sense, and have in mind no more than an exclusively commercial interest. Considering the primitive behavior of our ignorant publishers it is no surprise that their editions are full of the most foolish misprints.”³⁶

While textual philology often follows the principle of accepting the final version passed by an author, this approach is problematic in the case of Abramovitch. The last edition of Abramovitch's Yiddish works published in his lifetime is that of 1911–13, and the Hebrew canon was established by an edition from 1909–12. Yet the author's own assessment of his work was skewed because he consistently underestimated the significance of the early, short versions of his novels. As a result these first versions are seldom consulted. The Soviet critics alone, especially Meir Viner and Aharon Gurshteyn, attempted to restore the centrality of Abramovitch's contribution in the 1860s and 1870s.³⁷ Abramovitch's creative

³⁶Ber Borokhov, “Di Peretz-bibliografie,” in *I. L. Peretz: a zamlbukh tsu zayn ondenkn* (New York: Literarisher farlag, 1915), p. 108. This seminal essay has been reprinted in Ber Borokhov, *Shprakh-forschung un literatur-geshikhte*, ed. Nachman Mayzel (Tel Aviv: Peretz farlag, 1966), pp. 226–31.

³⁷See Meir Viner, “Mendele in the ‘Sixties and ‘Seventies” (“Mendele in di zekhtsiker un zibetsiker yorn”), contained in his *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19-tn yorhundert (etyudn un materialn)* (New York: YKUF, 1946), vol. 2, pp. 74–221, and Aharon Gurshteyn, “On Solomon, Son of Chaim” (“Vegn Shloyme reb Khaims”), in Abramovitch's *Gezamlte verk* (Moscow: Der emes, 1935), vol. 6, pp. 7–45; see also Gurshteyn's “Der yunger Mendele in kontekst fun di zekhtsiker yorn: shtrikhn,” *Shriftn* 1 (1928), 180–98.

impulse was strongest from 1864–78, after his shift from Hebrew to Yiddish made possible the future course of Yiddish fiction.

In a sense, the canonical image of Abramovitsh has been distorted by his success. Under the impression of celebrations, new editions, and translations, Abramovitsh extensively revised his works and sometimes weakened them in the process.³⁸ His greatest formal innovation, later emulated by a score of writers, was his parodic appropriation of a dignified, pseudo-religious tone combined with an undercurrent of satire. This attracted traditionally inclined readers through the mouthpiece of the folksy Mendele the Bookseller, while also offering critical observations of their milieu. As Abramovitsh tempered his critique and increased the sentimental dimension, his original social thrust faded from view. The popular reception turned a fiery reformer and innovative stylist into a doting grandfather.

³⁸Compare FZ 117–18, in which Simon Dubnov recalls that Abramovitsh “ceaselessly polished” his works.