INTRODUCTION

FOR A CENTURY S. Y. ABRAMOVITSH (1835–1917), popularly known by the name of his fictional persona, Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Book Peddler), has been acknowledged not only as the founding father of modern Jewish prose fiction in both Yiddish and Hebrew but also as a literary master of international significance, a writer whose work represents one of the most distinctive, poignant, and universally meaningful expressions of the Jewish imagination. Within the particular framework of the history of both modern Yiddish and modern Hebrew literature, Abramovitsh has been hailed as a towering innovator who freed these literatures from the strictures of the belated Jewish “Age of Reason,” the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment, which began in the last decades of the eighteenth century and
lingered throughout the better part of the nineteenth. Having done so, he propelled these literatures—artistically, stylistically, and ideationally—directly into modernity. Of course, he himself was born into that same Haskalah environment, both as an intellectual and as a writer, and in some ways retained throughout his long career some of its characteristic imprint. He managed, however, to transcend its limitations, to lead a host of younger writers toward freer and more accommodating artistic and ideological surroundings. In this way, he directly contributed to the historical coming-of-age of modern writing in both Yiddish and Hebrew.

As an artist of universal stature Abramovitsh gained distinction by projecting—for the first time in modern literature—the historical presence and unique lifestyle of the traditional premodern Eastern European Jewish community as a total, complex, and aesthetically balanced and self-contained "world." If the civilization of the Jewish shtetl became a source of meaningful images for modern European intellectuals and artists, it was Abramovitsh who formed the conceptual and aesthetic terms that made this possible. He was the first modern Jewish artist who learned how to balance his own modernity, and that of the culture he represented, with the traditionalism of an essentially medieval civilization without destroying the spirit of that civilization and without betraying his own commitment as a modernist to the norms of European humanism. He subjected the shtetl to a scathing expose and presented its traditional culture as deeply flawed; and yet he also managed, as an artist, not to remain at a distance from the object of his aesthetic exploration and to allow the shtetl to speak for itself, to use its own authentic voice, to project its own inherent priorities, values, and fantasies. In all of this he was the trailblazer for all of the modern Jewish artists who found in the image of the shtetl a
metaphor, ethnically distinct and historically focused but also of suprahistorical and universal significance, representing the human condition at large as well. Thus, Abramovitsh is the spiritual father not only of internationally renowned writers such as Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, S. Y. Agnon, and I. B. Singer but also of artists working in other media, such as the painters Marc Chagall, El (Eliezer) Lissitzky, and I. B. Ryback and the great Yiddish stage actors Shloyme Mikhoels and Maurice Schwartz. No wonder that with such an achievement, perfected throughout the course of an arduous career encompassing more than a half century, Abramovitsh has become something of a cult figure as the “grandfather” of modern Jewish literature, the first of its “classics,” and the quintessential modern Jewish artist.

II

This recognition, however, did not come to Abramovitsh early or easily. When his unique contribution was first acknowledged by people like Sholem Aleichem or the historian Simon Dubnov, in the late 1880s, he had already published an early version of all but one of his major works. He could already look back—not without some frustration—to three decades of literary labor. By no means could he consider himself, at that point in his career, a happy and fulfilled person.

Born in 1835 in the tiny provincial Belorussian town of Kapulye into a middle-class shtetl family, Abramovitsh lost all familial support and status at the age of fifteen when his father died and his consequently impoverished mother remarried. This was the first of several calamities he suffered during the first fifty years of his life. Abramovitsh was left to fend for himself and after spending two or three years at various ye-
shivas, as a poor student, dependent on charity, he decided to make the long, adventuresome, and perilous trek south, to the Ukraine. Within the Jewish linguistic and cultural geography of Eastern Europe, Belorussia formed a part of “Lithuania,” the center of Jewish learning and traditional scholastic prowess. However, Lithuanian Jewry underwent a continuous process of pauperization throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, and young scholars like Abramovitsh, without a future in their hometowns, emigrated to the relatively more prosperous, but intellectually more impoverished, southern communities, offering their services as tutors and teachers and seeking sustenance and social support. Abramovitsh found both in the Volhynian communities, first in Kamieniec-Podolsk (1853–58) and then in Berdichev (1858–68), in the form of marriages into middle-class families and through the guidance and friendship of some local exponents of the Haskalah. For a short while, he served as a teacher in a “modern” Jewish school, supervised by the Russian authorities; most of the time, however, the support of his father-in-law allowed him to devote himself to secular learning and soon enough (from 1857 on) to writing and publishing as well. His first, miserable marriage to a mentally unbalanced young woman had to be dissolved. The second match, to the “educated” daughter of a Berdichev notary (during their courtship Abramovitsh wrote letters to her in faltering Russian), was happier and lasted the rest of his life. For a full decade, this marriage enabled him to lead a life free from financial worries and dedicated to literary and intellectual pursuits.

Berdichev, a relatively large urban center that served as the capital of Jewish commerce in the Ukraine, had its intellectual circle as well as a small literary community. Here, young Abramovitsh could truly develop as a writer and a thinker. He
read, wrote, became acquainted with the “enlightened” people of the town, and engaged in communal and charitable activities. What interested him most were the classics of eighteenth-century German rationalist philosophy, nineteenth-century Russian “progressive” literary criticism, and, above all, popular science, which he absorbed from German biology, chemistry, and physics textbooks. His central project was to assemble a large compendium of science textbooks, beginning with a zoology textbook, which he adapted from the German. In 1862 he also published the first part of a Hebrew novel. Somewhat earlier, in 1860, he had made a name for himself as a literary critic, creating a “scandal” by attacking a literary miscellany of an older fellow-maskil. He also became known as a journalist and a writer of essays, focusing on current Jewish affairs, particularly the problems of education. Moving from one genre to another, he achieved prominence in none.

Two important qualities characterized his work. First, Abramovitsh proved to be an innovator and a pioneer from the very beginning of his writing career. When he wrote his “notorious” critical essay in 1860, “professional” Hebrew literary criticism was yet to be invented. Along with his rival and enemy A. A. Kovner and his fellow Kapulyer A. J. Pernaa, Abramovitsh became one of the founding fathers of this genre in Hebrew. The same is true of his role as the author of the 1862 novel Limdu hetev (Learn to do good). As a novel which focused on contemporary Jewish life in Eastern Europe, it had but one predecessor, A. Mapu’s then as-yet-unfinished Ayit tsavua (The hypocrite). Applying the language to brand-new ends, Abramovitsh had to adapt stiff, pseudo-biblical Hebrew to the representation of contemporary Jewish affairs, and create from scratch the vocabulary needed for scientific textbooks. Second, Abramovitsh’s efforts were in-
formed by a central idea: his goal was to orient the mind of Hebrew readers, particularly the younger ones, toward “real­
ity” by distancing them from the world of abstraction and mystification and making them encounter “things as they are.”
Then, as later, Abramovitsh believed this was a moral neces­
sity. Thus, he adapted texts dealing with biology and chem­
istry not merely to introduce his readers to the rudiments of scientific knowledge but also to strengthen their moral equi­
librium and mental clarity. The novel was meant to present an encounter with social reality, just as the science textbooks of­
fered a close-up view of the material-biological sphere. In his literary criticism Abramovitsh attacked a literature which he thought did not relate to reality and was immersed in its own flowery verbosity.

Of course, there was nothing particularly original in all of this. The Haskalah literature as a whole based itself on the premise that the Jews, caught within the “dreams” of their old, and by then archaic, cultural traditions of legal exegesis and kabbalistic mysticism, had to be awakened, jolted if nece­
sary, into facing up to present social and cultural realities. They had to shake off their ostensible inertia and actively join the progressive European community of the nineteenth cen­
tury. After Alexander II, the great liberator-czar, ascended the Russian throne in 1856, the literature of the Hebrew Enlight­
enment reverberated with Y. L. Gordon’s cry, “Awake, my people!” In this climate, Abramovitsh’s ardent faith in the transforming power of “education” was hardly original. What was relatively new about his definition of the “reality” princi­
ple was the very concrete and literal identification of the “real” with one’s immediate material, biological, and social surroundings. Although “progressive” Russian and German thinkers had insisted on this identification for some time and Abramovitsh had found it in Russian literary criticism, which
he read avidly, the idea was still quite new in the essentially idealistic milieu of the Hebrew Enlightenment.

III

In 1864, Abramovitsh’s radical allegiance to the “reality” principle led him into a literary experiment far riskier than anything he had attempted before: the writing of a short novel in Yiddish, entitled *Dos kleyne menshele* (The little man). In Eastern Europe, the language of the Jewish masses was Yiddish; in order to spread their ideas, local exponents of the Haskalah had to address their intended audience in its own spoken medium. Most Jewish men used some Hebrew for liturgical purposes, but only a scholarly minority knew the language well enough to read a Hebrew literature which presumably was written for their benefit. Women understood Yiddish only. Clearly, the “simple” people and the female readership could be reached only through Yiddish. The leaders of the Hasidic movement had understood this well enough to develop a hagiographic and homiletic literature in Yiddish as well as in Hebrew; only their more abstract theological and kabbalistic treatises did they publish exclusively in Hebrew. Faced with the growing popularity of Hasidism, adherents of the Haskalah had to acknowledge a need for popular Yiddish literature through which their ideals could be propagated. However, despite their many attempts to initiate such a literature, by the end of the first half of the nineteenth century it barely existed. There were many reasons for this failure, beginning with a deep-seated “objection” to Yiddish on the part of the *maskilim*. Most of them violently despised the language, which, besides offending them linguistically and aesthetically as a “hodgepodge jargon,” symbolized to them Jewish sepa-
rateness, that inbred solipsistic Jewish self-sufficiency rendering Jews "a nation unto itself" in the midst of their host nations. While Hebrew served as the vehicle of the authentic Jewish tradition embodied in the Bible, in the liturgy, and in religious ritual, and thus had to be preserved and developed as the core of Jewish identity, Yiddish allegedly presented nothing more than a stubborn vestige of medieval particularism, an unwillingness on the part of its speakers to engage in a cultural dialogue with the non-Jewish environment. As such, Yiddish formed a barrier which had to be removed and eliminated rather than preserved. Because of this attitude, by the beginning of the 1860s, Eastern Europe contained no more than two "professional" maskilic Yiddish writers. One, Yisroel Aksenfeld, a novelist and playwright, could get scarcely any of his work into print. The other, A. M. Dik, the author of many popular novellas and homiletic tales, was despised as a two-penny raconteur for female audiences. Yiddish literature as an institution was still nonexistent.

Driven by the inner logic of realism, Abramovitsh moved into the neglected domain of Yiddish writing. The launching in 1863 of Kol mevasser (The herald), a weekly Yiddish magazine with a maskilic orientation—an admission that Yiddish was required—served as an additional source of motivation, as did perhaps his personal acquaintance with Y. M. Lifshits, a fellow resident of Berdichev and a very rare bird among the maskilim in his authentic dedication and devotion to colloquial Yiddish. However, Abramovitsh knew that by succumbing to the Yiddish "itch" he was crossing a cultural boundary. He therefore took every precaution to hide his authorship and published The Little Man anonymously in Kol mevasser, presenting the narrative to the readers of the magazine as an authentic written confession and will of a real person who, before he died, had entrusted a real local book peddler, Mendele,
with the task of making the document publicly known. As he was to divulge later, Abramovitsh initially viewed his Yiddish writing as a kind of transgression, as if he had developed an illicit affair with a mistress whom he visited secretly and shamefully enjoyed; eventually, this "mistress" would become the mother of some of his literary offspring. Obviously, Hebrew was meant to remain the legitimate, acknowledged spouse and Abramovitsh's Hebrew publications were regarded as his own legitimate "progeny." The Yiddish "bastards" were to be tended by Mendele Moykher Sforim—a mask, a fiction, a spokesman, and a cover. Abramovitsh himself would deny paternity.

Clearly, Abramovitsh was increasingly "seduced" by his Yiddish mistress. For one thing, The Little Man as it appeared in the magazine in installments and also a short time later in book form (1865) scored a great hit and proved to be one of the few really popular successes that Abramovitsh was ever to enjoy. This warm reception contrasted favorably with the very limited response to his Hebrew works, even to his first completed Hebrew novel, Ha'aves vehabonim (The fathers and the sons, 1868). Then, too, working with the flowing, malleable, and lively spoken idiom released Abramovitsh's artistic passion. How difficult and frustrating it must have been to return from the lovely mistress to dour cohabitation with a stiff and stilted "spouse": the writing of fiction without real passion usually yields very poor results.

And then there was an additional consideration. Hebrew literature of the Haskalah had traditionally cast its lot with the Jewish mercantile middle class. While waiting for good tidings from enlightened emperors such as the Austro-Hungarian Joseph II or the Russian Alexander II, the Hebrew Enlighteners relied on the expanding class of Jewish large- and small-scale entrepreneurs participating in one way or another in the
development of capitalism in Eastern Europe. These people, in constant contact with non-Jews, had, in order to conduct their business affairs successfully, to think and behave rationally and realistically. Thus, they would form the sociocultural vanguard and the source from which rationality, good order, and liberal attitudes would spread and influence the Jewish population as a whole. Some maskilim genuinely empathized with the lot of the lower classes, the artisans, the servants, the pauperized hawkers and penny-merchants. They were fully aware that these people were not only poor, hungry, and ignorant but also brutalized, manipulated, and exploited in various ways. They blamed the Hasidic leaders for squeezing their last pennies from these people; they exposed a communal leadership which handed over the children of the poor into military service in place of the children of the rich. None of them, however, addressed the poor directly. No one considered that the poor were possessed of a presence of mind sufficient to "receive the light."

Abramovitsh shared these attitudes. For instance, when he became socially active around 1864, his mission was to help members of the Berdichev commercial middle class who had suffered financial losses as a result of the Polish rebellion of 1863. Abramovitsh maintained that cheap credit, if made available to these people, would prevent their proletarization. The truly destitute were beyond help and doomed anyhow. Characteristically, Abramovitsh's early Hebrew novel, The Fathers and The Sons, focuses on a family melodrama in which a middle-class merchant, a follower of Hasidism, learns through a crisis—both familial and financial—that the future belongs to the younger generation allied with the forces of the Enlightenment. However, Abramovitsh's view of the middle class was changing. He realized that when it came to protecting its own interests, the middle class cared little about
Introducing morality or even good sense and the “enlightened” among them glad[y cooperated with the “benighted” at the expense of the poor.

Thus, Abramovitsh gradually cut himself off from the socio-ideological moorings and the traditional attitudes of the Hebrew Enlightenment and this was undoubtedly connected with his switch to Yiddish; for as a popular Yiddish writer he was now bonding with the poorer people, who were among his most enthusiastic readers. By writing his fiction in Yiddish instead of Hebrew, he not only was replacing one language with another and one narrative order (authorial, all-knowing, objective) with another (colloquial, monologic, subjective), but was also discovering new issues and new protagonists. He turned his back on both the fathers, the middle-class merchants, and the children, the heroic young scholars and beautiful, long-suffering young women, who as followers of the Enlightenment clashed with their parents. Instead, he became interested in helpless and ignorant characters such as Hershele of Dos vintshfinge'lr (The magic ring, first version 1865), a poor shtetl kid left to fend for himself in a larger commercial town and all but lost when a benevolent and enlightened businessman with German connections takes pity on him; or Fishke of Fishke der krumen (Fishke the lame, first version 1869), an ignorant, simpleminded cripple who much more than his “betters” knows how to respond to the call of human emotion. In his first play, Di takse (The tax, 1869), Abramovitsh settled accounts with the Jewish middle class and with the communal leaders of Berdichev, whom he portrayed as bloodthirsty predators preying on the poor. The melodrama, which presents a divided community, one part haggard, pale, bloodless, and naive and the other red, padded with flesh, seething with cunning and malevolence, gave much offense. Abramovitsh often repeated the claim that it
triggered his departure from Berdichev because threats were made against his life and the well-being of his family.

We need not accept this as a historical truth; Abramovitsh actually left Berdichev and settled in Zhitomir a few months before the publication of *The Tax*. In fact, this move was occasioned by far more serious circumstances. His father-in-law, whose business had been deteriorating for some time, died in 1868, leaving his family very little. Suddenly, Abramovitsh found himself in a situation similar to the one he faced in the wake of his own father's death. But this time he was thirty-three years old and financially responsible for a large and growing family. The Volhynian town of Zhitomir housed one of the two government-sponsored rabbinical seminaries in czarist Russia, an institution that ordained crown rabbis to serve in an official administrative capacity within the Jewish community, rather than as experts in Jewish rabbinic law. Abramovitsh saw no reason why, with his erudition, knowledge of Russian, and long list of publications, he might not complete the required course of study, be ordained as a crown rabbi, and thus support his family. He was accepted and in a short time completed his studies. Despite his ordination, however, he was unable to find a position. He would remain in Zhitomir for the next twelve years (1869–81) in great financial straits.

The 1870s were the most trying years in Abramovitsh's life. Financially, he could never make ends meet; literature—Yiddish or Hebrew—could not put food on the table of a large household. He hoped for public assistance, in recognition of the publication of the third volume of his zoology textbook in
1872, but was disappointed. After the demise of *Kol mevasser*, he dreamed of editing his own Yiddish weekly. He scored one more hit with his brilliant allegorical novel *Di klyatshe* (The nag, 1873), popular particularly among the better-educated shtetl readership, who debated the meaning of the work and attempted to decipher its allegorical symbols. However, even this triumph could not save him from having to waste a great deal of time on hack jobs, such as publishing calendars (Jewish merchant counterparts of farmers’ almanacs). He stopped writing belles-lettres in any language but Yiddish, and despite the fact that he continued to publish important essays quite regularly in Hebrew periodicals, his career as a Hebrew writer seemed to have run aground. Toward the end of the decade he was hit by personal catastrophes—a death in the family and the conversion to Christianity of his son, in exile as a result of having been charged with revolutionary activity. These events paralyzed him as a writer for the next five years (1879–84).

Despite these hardships, it was in the 1870s that Abramovitsh developed as an original thinker and brilliant artist. As a thinker, he had finally wrenched himself out of the habitual concerns of the Haskalah, with its view of education as the panacea for all human and, particularly, for Jewish ills. He began to pay attention to the dynamics of the historical process and the development of historical legacies. He came to understand, for instance, that anti-Semitism was not merely a dying ember left over from the Middle Ages or a justified reaction to the refusal of the Jews to become “European.” Rather, it was an entrenched mental attitude nourished by religion, myth, irrational fear, and sheer brutality, which had to be acknowledged as an integral part of European society. As such, it showed no signs of petering out but rather changed its outward form and ideology, seeping into various
“modern” and even liberal views and attitudes. He also revised his understanding of the Jewish past, summarized in *The Nag* and in his long allegorical poem, *Yudl* (1875), as something that could not simply be wiped out by “education.” In fact, it served to foster an identity, a “character,” an essence which, for all its flaws, would remain at the core of the Jewish people. These new insights found their first fresh and exciting expression in *The Nag*, where a comic or a tragi-comic reversal of roles reflects the far-reaching changes in the author’s attitude. Isrolik, the *maskil* rationalist educator, loses his mental equilibrium in an unsuccessful attempt to matriculate in a Russian university as a medical student. Significantly, his stumbling blocks prove to be Russian history, literature, and folklore, that is, his inability to grasp the real historical identity and psychomythical legacy of the host nation with which he wants his own nation to fraternize. Thus, the rationalist unable to face the irrational loses his reason, and as a madman encounters what his mind had previously refused to recognize: the essence of his own historical identity and that of his people, personified by a miserable, hungry, and beleaguered nag. He approaches it patronizingly and offers the cure prescribed by the Enlightenment: self-improvement by means of education. But the nag is not convinced. Low-spirited and submissive as she is, she trusts her own long history of experience of persecution and subtly resists Isrolik’s exhortations. As the story unfolds, the nag, although far from accepting Isrolik’s “solutions,” gradually overcomes her suspicions and resistance and waxes more intimate and frank with him. How can a hungry and sick creature be expected to improve itself through education? she asks. Is the stipulation that help to the needy should depend on self-improvement through education realistic, fair, or morally tenable? Her negative answer—“No
dancing before feeding”—is devastatingly logical on both moral and practical levels.

Isrolik the educator is reduced to a humble student and the ignorant nag becomes his teacher. Their encounter opens up a series of intellectual perspectives: the nature of sanity and insanity, the function of the irrational, the power of poetry and emotive language, the aridity of reason unless it is supported by sensibility and true emotion, the “truth” inherent in folklore and myth, even the dangers of industrial pollution, which metaphorically represents the moral threat and challenge of modern industrialism. In this masterpiece, which is the closest thing in the Jewish literary tradition to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Abramovitsh abandoned the threadbare Enlightenment triad—rationality, education, and optimistic faith in the liberal ideal—and grappled with issues of universal and national significance which the Haskalah had never faced before. He did not sever his ties with the Enlightenment, but gave it a new definition which vastly broadened and deepened the intellectual perspective and the sheer perceptiveness indicated by the term. Thus, when in 1878 Abramovitsh published his most caustic and devastating maskilic satire, *Kišer maso’es Binyomin hashlishi* (The brief travels of Benjamin the Third), he pushed his Haskalah critique of Jewish life virtually to the point where in a few years hence, under the impact of the 1881–82 pogroms, it would be replaced by Jewish nationalism in general and by Zionism in particular. Leaving aside the issues of ignorance, superstition, archaic educational methods, and so on, he focused on issues pertaining to the political identity of the Jews: issues of Jewish power and powerlessness, Jewish political passivity against the backdrop of a politically hyperactive modern Europe, Jewish yearning for political independence and sovereignty—all of these before
Zionism was officially born. The question posed by Abramovitsh was whether a Jewish political awakening was possible or whether it was bound to result in a mere caricature, as the genre of Masoes Binyomin, the mock-epic, indicated.

V

In 1881, in the midst of a harrowing familial and personal crisis, Abramovitsh was invited to serve as the principal or superintendent of a new school founded and maintained by the Jewish community of Odessa. The position ensured him the financial stability he had been seeking for years and he gladly accepted, moving with his family to the southern seaport where he was to remain for the rest of his long life (except for three years in the wake of the 1905 pogroms, which he spent in Geneva).

Like the city itself, the Odessa Jewish community was young, commercially active, affluent, unburdened by tradition, and relatively modern in its Jewish outlook. Having barely shaken off its frontier-town ambience, Odessa housed a Jewish community founded by adventurers—contractors, merchants, and entrepreneurs—who had left their Jewish families and their Jewish piety back home in the little towns dotting the Pale. Gradually, the community assumed the religious and cultural patterns of behavior imported by immigrant Galician merchants, Germanized and acculturated in their hometown of Brody, an Enlightenment outpost in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Soon, Odessa could boast of a Reform synagogue and a German, university-trained rabbi. On the other hand, the city never quite lost its slightly seedy, lowbrow, "Wild West" quality, which it imparted to its own unique brand of modern Jewish culture; in the infamous tav-
Introduction

Concerns of Odessa the foundations of Yiddish vaudeville were laid. Beginning in the 1870s, Odessa would become the crucible for the creation of a modern Jewish literary culture as well; in the 1880s it would become one of the organizational and spiritual centers for the emerging Zionist movement. Here a new Russian-Jewish *Wissenschaft des Judentums* was created by the historian Simon Dubnov, and a modern Hebrew humanism by the preeminent Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzberg). During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Odessa played host to a variety of Russian-Jewish thinkers, artists, publicists, and litterateurs, collectively known as *Khakhmey Odessa* (the sages of Odessa), and it was here that Abramovitch would find his intellectual and spiritual niche.

As the locus of cultural experimentation, Odessa quite naturally became the place where experiments in Jewish education were first tried—for example, attempts to modernize traditional biblical and Talmudic study and teaching very young children "Hebrew in Hebrew." Hence the appeal to a self-proclaimed modernist and innovator such as Abramovitch to assume the role of principal in the modernized communal *talmud toyre*. His new duties as both teacher and administrator were numerous and time-consuming. But the move successfully revived Abramovitch's literary talents. He was quickly absorbed into the nationalist intellectual circle of Jewish writers, scholars, and cultural activists. The invigorating atmosphere whetted his literary appetite and he soon began writing and publishing again, starting with his second melodrama, *Der priziv* (The military draft, 1884), and then moving on to the grand project of refashioning and completely rewriting all of his major works. Actually, he had already conceived of the project in the 1870s as the accelerated process of his artistic development made his earlier works seem
primitive and skeletal. In 1879 he published a greatly expanded, fleshed-out, and reworked version of *The Little Man*. Now, in the mid-1880s, he proceeded to rewrite *Fishke the Lame* and *The Magic Ring*. These new versions of the old stories were suddenly in great demand by the new literary editors of the day, such as Sholem Aleichem, and triggered an enthusiastic critical response from famous Odessa intellectuals such as Dubnov and M. Margulis. Indeed, within less than a decade an almost miraculous change in his professional and literary status took place.

The event that precipitated this change was the rise of the new Jewish nationalism, in the course of which the status of Yiddish underwent a transformation. Together with the realization that the hope for Jewish emancipation in a progressively liberalized czarist empire was a mere pipe dream and had to be replaced with a plan for “auto-emancipation,” a more comprehensive intellectual reorientation sent members of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia “back to the people,” to the Yiddish-speaking masses. Although still despised by committed Hebraists, Yiddish was suddenly given pride of place as a national asset. Just as suddenly, people began to discover a need for and the actual existence of a modern literature in Yiddish. Clearly, if such a literature existed, Abramovitsh would be one of its mainstays. His experiments in writing a new kind of modern Jewish narrative in colloquial Yiddish were now hailed as “classics,” cornerstones of a new cultural institution. *Fishke the Lame*, for example, was held up by Sholem Aleichem as a shining model for younger writers who were exploring the possibilities inherent in a “Jewish novel.”

On top of this new popularity as the “grandfather of Yiddish literature,” an appellation invented by Sholem Aleichem, Abramovitsh returned to writing Hebrew fiction in 1886, catching something of the Hebraic-Zionist mood then cur-
rent in Odessa. Throughout the late 1880s and early 1890s, he produced a series of brilliant short stories and novellas in Hebrew, in which the hot issues of the age of the new Jewish nationalism were shrewdly and sensitively scrutinized. Soon after, he expanded the project of rewriting his entire oeuvre to include the Hebrew versions of his works as well. Almost immediately he was hailed as the greatest contemporary writer of Hebrew prose fiction; for in reverting to Hebrew he would not relinquish the warmth, fluidity, and pungency to which he had become accustomed in his Yiddish writing. With consummate skill, he devised a new narrative Hebrew idiom in which various historical layers of the language—biblical, post-biblical, midrashic, and rabbinic—were dextrously blended, allowing for a syntactic freedom, richness of vocabulary, variety of nuance, idiomatic pungency, parodic wit, and sheer descriptive accuracy which had never before existed in modern Hebrew. This, in itself, was acknowledged—particularly by younger writers who readily availed themselves of the successful formula—as a contribution of historic import.

Abramovitsh never became a full-fledged Zionist, and indeed in his short stories of the late 1880s and early 1890s he often made Zionist activism the object of his satire. Nevertheless, he was now as fully acceptable to Zionists as he was to Yiddishists, Jewish socialists, and the prophets of a Jewish aesthetic renaissance. It was generally recognized that as early as the 1870s he had thoroughly grappled with the basic issues of the new Jewish nationalism. For that as well as for his artistic achievement he was viewed as a figure of national stature. Over time, his Odessa home became a literary court of sorts and was duly frequented by the local Jewish intellectuals and aspiring young writers who arrived in town and were quick to pay homage to "the grandfather." Abramovitsh developed a royal, sometimes despotic manner and thoroughly enjoyed a
prestige which in the 1890s was rivaled only by the charisma of Ahad Ha'am and in the first decade of the twentieth century by the magnetism of the young Hayim Nahman Bialik.

As a fabulist, Abramovitsh did not possess a very strong and fertile imaginative capacity, so from the second half of the 1890s he settled down to a regimen of daily toil which was increasingly channeled in the direction of rewriting, with less and less effort devoted to new creations. For many years he worked on his last major novel, the autobiographical *Shloyme reb khayims* (Shloyme, the son of Reb Khayim), which he composed in Yiddish and in Hebrew simultaneously; the title of the Hebrew version was *Bayamim hahem* (In days of old). The better part of his remarkable energy was invested in endless preparation of the definitive collected editions of his oeuvre in both languages. Finally, when he was seventy-five, both editions appeared, Hebrew in 1910 and Yiddish in 1911. The occasion was celebrated with great pomp and press coverage befitting a royal fete.

VI

Having thus far told the story of Abramovitsh's trial, struggle, and final triumph, we should now ponder once again the significance of his achievement. We more or less know how and why he eventually won universal recognition in his own lifetime during the quarter-century which preceded the first World War. The question now before us is what merit or merits of Abramovitsh's work served to ensure that he would continue to be held in high esteem throughout the twentieth century, to our own day. His ardent admirers hailed—in the 1920s and 1930s, for instance—from Jewish cultural circles as inimical to each other as the Yiddish Marxist establishment
in the U.S.S.R. and the Zionist centers of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. When an author is so highly respected by critics deeply entangled on all sides in ideological rivalry, he must surely possess an enduring appeal independent of ephemeral cultural circumstances. What is the essence or the nature of this appeal, and is it still operative in our own day?

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a rich and extensive corpus of critical writing in Yiddish, Hebrew, and other languages has accumulated around the work of Abramovitsh. While “Mendele literature” is by no means unanimous, it offers four major answers to our question, answers which represent not only shifts in emphasis but also genuine disagreements.

The first of these—by the early Mendele critics whose views and conceptions had crystallized before World War I—pertains to Abramovitsh’s artistic manner, particularly to his method of mimetic representation. Simply put, these critics believed that Abramovitsh’s great achievement inhered in his realistic rendering of objects, situations, and social settings. They called him the first modern Jewish writer both in Yiddish and in Hebrew who accurately and poignantly described what his eye saw and his ear heard. A face, a place, a landscape, the commotion of a fair, the dialogue and body language of vendors in the market, and so on—the vibrant realism of Abramovitsh’s descriptions supposedly “caught” all of these in their full bloom. We may take the ability to convey verisimilitude almost for granted in the work of a writer of realist fiction. We need to remember, however, that to the turn-of-the-century Hebrew and Yiddish critics, realist prose fiction in the manner of Turgenev or Tolstoy was the highest achievement to which a literature could aspire. Moreover, these critics attributed to mimetic realism a “national” significance. In extolling Abramovitsh’s descriptive realism, they
were not only praising an aesthetic virtue. After all, modern Jewish literature and culture as a whole were supposed to tear the Jews away from the world of ritual, mystical faith, and legal abstractions and make them face up to "reality"—particularly material and biological reality. Here was a writer who, instead of losing himself in wordy approximations, would awaken in the reader's soul the dormant sense of the concrete, the sense that the world actually existed. Was this not a feat worthy of the highest praise?

The second answer, an extension of the first and likewise formulated and asserted by the earliest Hebrew and Yiddish critics, pertained not to Abramovitsh's mimetic technique but to the subjects which this technique helped to re-create. Abramovitsh was not merely a great realist technician; he also deserved high praise for what he chose to describe—namely, the physical and social totality of traditional pre-urban Jewish life in the nineteenth-century czarist empire. In his five or six short novels and a dozen short stories and novellas, he was said to have captured every aspect of the shtetl: economic circumstances, social stratification, every ethnographic detail, specification of habitat, garments and accessories, rituals, holidays, intellectual pursuits, matrimonial relationships, the experience of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age, and much more. Moreover, although Abramovitsh was not credited with a firm grasp of psychological realism and was not deemed able to convey the nuances of an individual psychic life, he was said to have populated his work with a vast array of Jewish "types" and "characters"—men, women, children, representatives of the various classes and professions, and so on. Thus, his work was celebrated by David Frishman, the most important Hebrew-Yiddish critic of his day, as the best "panoramic" representation of the historical reality of the shtetl:
He [Abramovitsh] encompassed the entire spectrum of Jewish life in the alleys of the small towns of Russia in the first half of the preceding century, developing it into a fully detailed picture... If, let us assume, a deluge comes inundating and washing away from the face of the earth the Jewish ghetto and the life which it contains, not leaving behind so much as a trace, a sign, except by sheer luck, Mendele's [Abramovitsh's] four major works, *Fishke the Lame, The [Brief] Travels of Benjamin the Third, The Magic Ring* and *Shloyme, the Son of Reb Khayim*, as well as two or three shorter works—then I doubt not that with these spared, the future scholar would be able to reconstruct the entire map of Jewish *shtetl* life in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century in such a manner that not even one iota would be left out.²

Abramovitsh was thus "the painter of the convocation of Israel," warts and all. The Jewish people were in the throes of an alarmingly quick metamorphosis. If the past was not to be lost and the continuity of the national self-image was to be maintained, a vast task of artistic preservation was called for; Abramovitsh was seen as the true custodian of national memory and the authority on shtetl civilization. True, he was often bitterly critical of this civilization, but contemporary readers and critics, themselves modern Jews, had more or less distanced themselves from their traditional origins and needed both a justification for this and the nostalgic reassurance that the past was still available to them—at least in the form of a literary reconstruction. Abramovitsh's lifework satisfied both of these needs and was therefore canonized as the very core of a new Jewish literature, the most "Jewish" prose fiction in existence. It was deemed essentially "Jewish" because of its strict focus on one subject—Jewish communal life—and something supposedly "Jewish" about its narrative manner. By
the latter claim, the critics meant to justify Abramovitsh's digressive and sometimes quite arbitrary fabulae or compositional patterns, which did not follow the structural norms of the contemporary psychological novel. As the quintessential Jewish artist, Abramovitsh was to be allowed his digressive, meandering plot lines in the name of Jewish authenticity.

VII

With the third answer our attention shifts from representational art to the realm of ideas. Critics of a somewhat later period, themselves often committed to complex and demanding ideologies, turned their attention toward Abramovitsh's contribution to what Yosef Hayim Brenner called ha'arakhat atsmanu, or national self-criticism. What was of crucial importance was not the mere "description" of the traditional Jewish way of life in the works of Abramovitsh but the moral evaluation of that way of life as it reverberated through the description.

The Hebrew novelist and essayist Y. H. Brenner, the intellectual leader of the second aliyah, who wrote his essay on Abramovitsh in Palestine while it was cut off from the rest of the Jewish world by World War I, admired his predecessor not because he had overcome Haskalah ideology to become "the painter of the convocation of Israel" but rather because he saw through its limitations and broadened it in a way which placed its essential liberating truth at the core of real national self-criticism. Like his contemporary the poet Y. L. Gordon, Abramovitsh went beyond the favorite butts of maskilic satire: the ignorance of the Jewish masses, their inability or unwillingness to communicate with the non-Jewish environment, and their archaic, irrelevant educational system. Both writers
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understood that these superficial deformities were not at the root of the inability of the Jewish people to come to grips with the challenges of modern times. Other, more inherent and fundamental realities, with deep roots in Jewish history, were to blame. Gordon identified these with the Jewish inherent tendency, already in evidence even before the destruction of the independent Jewish commonwealth, to embrace a heightened spirituality as a way of evading the responsibilities of real life. Abramovitsh pointed to a similar, although not entirely identical, fatal flaw in the traditional role of the Jew as mediator and purveyor rather than as true creator. Instead of producing the necessities of human survival, the Jews sold them. The fact that this role had been forced upon them by others and that their survival as a nation depended on their acceptance of this role and their success in living up to it was, to Brenner, irrelevant because he did not attribute any moral value to survival per se. Whether the Jews willed this historical role for themselves or simply learned to live with it, it vitiated their existence. The corruption triggered by the loss of direct contact with the primary “labor of life” penetrated everywhere, contaminating not only the Jewish economy but also other areas presumably detached from the economy, such as sexuality (which waxed “mercantile,” as a series of business transactions), as well as spiritual and religious life. The unique intellectual and artistic contribution of Abramovitsh lay in his keen sensitivity to the processes and routes of this subtle seepage. He was able to detect signs of this contamination everywhere, no matter how faint and imperceptible to others. Hence, he was to be considered the actual founding father of modern Jewish moral self-consciousness. His great contribution consisted not of a quantitatively maximized, objective-descriptive “coverage” of traditional Jewish life, but rather of a qualitative analytical-subjective exposure of Jew-
ish life, both traditional and modern. Of course, to Brenner, the Europeanization of the Jews, even their complete assimilation into the non-Jewish national society, would not serve to rectify that which was originally problematic. Only a revolutionary reversal of roles, a return to primal productivity attempted in Palestine by a small group of Zionist pioneers, could achieve this.³

From an altogether different angle, Marxist and socialist critics, active in the Soviet Union up to the 1940s, when Soviet-Jewish cultural life was brutally destroyed, arrived at conclusions parallel to those of Brenner. The role of “their” Abramovitsh in the development of modern Jewish self-consciousness was based upon his pioneering insights into the real meaning of class struggle within the traditional Jewish community. Exploitation, brutalization, and manipulation of the Jewish poor by their rich “brethren” had been exposed earlier by the “democratic” exponents of the Haskalah. According to them, only Abramovitsh, through his brilliant satirical representations, had shown how Jewish medievalism as a whole, and the mentality and behavioral patterns that went with it, not only depended on this exploitation but also confirmed and justified it. This medievalism of the shtetl was seen not as a mere antiquated remnant of tradition with which the Jews refused to part; on the contrary, it represented a dynamic social force necessitated by the course of the class struggle: the Jewish masses had to be kept ignorant and superstitious, cut off from any kind of comprehension of the reality which rendered them its victims, immersed in mystical faith and controlled by rabbis and tsaddikim in order to maintain the social hierarchy. Above all else, the Jews had to be kept in complete ignorance of the meaning of history and historical change; this preemptive task was successfully accomplished by promoting the concept of a separate Jewish
"sacred history" which reduced all historical processes and vicissitudes to a single repeating pattern: sin, punishment by exile, persecutions, *gezerot* (evil decrees), brief temporary moments of reprieve bestowed by a merciful God due to the intercession of saintly religious leaders and miracle workers, and, of course, the ever-present but always deferred expectation of imminent messianic redemption. From the perspective of these critics, Abramovitsh saw through the lie of Jewish spirituality; Jewish "sacred history" was a myth, upheld and sanctified for dubious "unholy" purposes. His main contribution was thus located in his "radical" phase, in the 1870s. In the 1880s, he suffered a certain diminution of insight because of the pernicious influence of "reactionary" Jewish nationalism in general and the even more reactionary Hebraism of his Odessa friends. However, even in the 1880s and 1890s Abramovitsh remained the keen social observer par excellence, always going beyond the facade of position and attitude to read the secret text containing the real agenda of those who sported attitudes as pretexts for their self-serving rationalizations.4

Marxist critics, often marshaling an impressive body of literary evidence in support of their position, also insisted upon presenting Abramovitsh outside the confines of his image as an exclusively "Jewish" artist. Naturally, an artist who understood the cultural and psychological dynamics of class struggle so well had to realize the universal, supranational implications of the conflicts which he studied and portrayed. Thus, these critics presented him as a typical European "bourgeois intellectual" who, while not of the working class, understood its historical role very well and even identified with it. They compared Abramovitsh's work to that of bourgeois writers who were active when their societies were undergoing the early and more "progressive" phases of capitalism,
such as English and French novelists of the eighteenth century. With these critics, Mendele scholarship began to be conducted along comparative lines for the first time, integrating his achievement within a comprehensive view of the development of the European novel.

VIII

The fourth answer is essentially linguistic; however, it was put forward throughout the development of Mendele literature not only by linguists or by people who were professionally trained to deal with issues of language but also by literary critics, ideologues, and cultural activists. In modern Jewish literature, language has hardly ever been regarded solely as a means of articulation, a communicative system only. It was seen also, and perhaps primarily, as the declaration of a cultural credo and an ideological commitment. The writer’s choice of language or languages as well as his handling of language were examined and judged as acts of faith. Both Yiddish and Hebrew critics and scholars insisted on designating Abramovitsh the “inventor” or one of the founders of the normative literary idiom in both languages. This characterization served to underscore not only the author’s stylistic gifts but also his prominence as a national cultural figure, a trailblazer who explored and cultivated the ground upon which the bastions of a new Jewish civilization would be erected.

As far as Abramovitsh’s Yiddish works are concerned, this Herculean task was allegedly carried out by means of a conscious process of fashioning out of a spoken idiom an elegant and disciplined literary language. To do this, he had to overcome a crippling dichotomy faced by every contemporary writer of Yiddish. On the one hand, a writer who meant to
convey to his readers modern ideas and concepts could resort to a “high” literary Yiddish based on a thorough Germanization of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of the Eastern European spoken dialects. This was deemed as the only possible way of rendering Yiddish grammatical and salonfähig and of equipping it with a modern vocabulary. This option, however, while it was taken up by the majority of Yiddish writers, particularly by those in the better-educated north, demanded a high price of artificiality, pompousness, and the loss of idiomatic vigor. On the other hand, the writer could reproduce by strict imitation actual Yiddish speech—as was done by a minority of writers, particularly of southern origin, most notably by Isroel Aksenfeld. However, the price involved in this choice was also prohibitive, limiting the writer to one specific dialect, the idiosyncrasies and localisms of which were often hardly comprehensible two hundred miles away, and to dialogue spoken by folksy “simple” people about mundane matters. It could hardly serve the writer if and when he wanted to enable his characters to think, imagine, or indulge in subtle thoughts or emotions. Imitation almost invariably produced a text which was essentially parodic. Liveliness and idiomatic pungency were purchased at the price of depth, subtlety, and interiority. Abramovitsh was successful in transcending the schism between “high” and “low” Yiddish; as a litvak who emigrated to the Ukrainian south he decided to straddle both. He would abide by the southern norm of colloquial and idiomatic language while at the same time he would search for ways to overcome motley dialecticism and to broaden the expressional scope of imitated speech. He accomplished the former by systematically weeding out localisms as well as strengthening common linguistic features, such as the Hebrew component of the Yiddish language, and blending a variety of dialects. The latter he achieved through a most skillful
creation of a style which was "ideally" colloquial but which was actually more complex, subtle, and disciplined than any version of spoken Yiddish.

From the 1880s on, as we have noted, Abramovitsh performed a similarly heroic feat in Hebrew. He was in many ways not only the "inventor" of modern pre-Israeli Hebrew prose but also the bridge builder who helped modern Hebrew to overcome its initial aphasic biblical regression. Under his tutelage, the language, acknowledging all of its various historical layers, became a Hebrew of the Jewish present.

Each of the four answers we have summarized represents an authentic and significant response to Abramovitsh and an important legitimation of the greatness of his achievement. All of them reflect both the specific concerns and biases of various critics working in different times and places and important aspects of Abramovitsh's work. In the history of modern Jewish culture the perfection of a mimetic-realistic representational technique in Yiddish and Hebrew is certainly an artistic triumph, and the "invention" of modern Hebrew and Yiddish prose is a feat of tremendous significance. But are these historical reasons sufficient for us today, to compel us once again to immerse ourselves in the works of Abramovitsh and enable us to enjoy them for their literary qualities? As for Abramovitsh's contribution to the development of modern Jewish self-criticism, we cannot help but wonder if such self-criticism is still either valid or relevant even in its historical context; can this devastating evaluation of the shtetl civilization withstand close historical scrutiny? Can it be upheld as ideologically and emotionally tenable after this civilization was so horribly and unspeakably annihilated? Do we still dare to take seriously the messages that were so close to the hearts of Brenner and the Soviet Marxist critics, particularly since the latter supported a brutal totalitarian regime which played
an important role in wiping out traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the very thing that was the subject of their scathing critique?

Other aspects of the four answers strike us now as somewhat off the mark or simply wrong. For example, Abramovitsh certainly created very lively descriptions which, in part, were strikingly "lifelike." However, these descriptions were also informed by blatantly antirealistic principles, such as caricature, extreme synecdochic reduction—people being identified with their noses, for instance—as well as figurative bestialization of human beings, a strong penchant for the grotesque and the bizarre. A passionate moralist and satirist above all else, Abramovitsh did not indulge in "pure" mimetic descriptivism—description for description's sake—as he was said to have done. Also as a wit, an eiron, an artist committed to subversion, he did not invest all of his creative energies in sheer duplication of the surface of "things as they were."

As a matter of fact, all of the "classical" answers that we have delineated above—with the exception of the linguistic one—are the source of serious and harmful misunderstandings in the development of the Mendele literature. After World War II and the Holocaust, critics expecting Abramovitsh to fulfill a national agenda found themselves bitterly disappointed. Was the image preserved in his work really the full, definitive historical summation of a world now lost but continually mourned and idealized? The Yiddish poet and critic Yankev Glatshteyn wondered, as he browsed through Fishke the Lame: How could this story about beggars, cripples, criminals, lost children, "cholera weddings" conducted in cemeteries, petty cunning, fraud, and sweaty, brutal sexuality represent the totality of the essence of traditional Jewish life? Where was the spirituality, the learning, the creativity, the intimacy, the sense of mutual responsibility, even common de-
cency which made the shtetl experience what it had been?  
The Hebrew critic Avraham Kariv made lists of Mendele lacunae, that is, he listed institutions and phenomena which were not covered by Abramovitsh, and concluded that “the painter of the convocation of Israel” had “forgotten” to include in his densely populated canvas anything which might have redeemed the ugly picture. He did this, Kariv charged, because, like Brenner, his admirer, he had been infected with Selbsthass, the modern Jewish neurosis par excellence. Obviously, these charges represent an overreaction to false critical notions rather than to Abramovitsh’s works per se. Abramovitsh had never promised or even intended to incorporate in his Fishke the reified essence of Jewish life. This does not mean that the chaotic world he created in this work was not informed by significant and original insights into the dynamics of human behavior in general and of Jewish behavior in particular. The fact that Abramovitsh did not pay close attention to the institutions and the theology of the Hasidic movement or to those of the Lithuanian musar movement does not mean that he had nothing important to say about a life conditioned and guided by religious faith.

In short, some of the classical arguments with which the Mendele criticism justified and rationalized its admiration of Abramovitsh and its evaluation of his major works need to be altogether replaced, or at least to be subjected to a thorough reassessment. At least two major components of the Mendele world—the Jewish space created in it and the figure of Mendele the Book Peddler himself—clearly need to be redefined and reinterpreted. The balance of this introduction is devoted to such an interpretation.
Let us first pose the question that still concerns contemporary readers who might turn to Abramovitsh, as they turn to other classic Yiddish and Hebrew writers, such as Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, or S. Y. Agnon, with the hope of communicating through them with their shtetl roots. Such use of literature is not only possible and legitimate but actually unavoidable. We certainly read literature in order to immerse ourselves in a world to which we might be drawn. The question remains, however: How can we do this without losing sight of the literary, imaginary, suprahistorical, and idiosyncratic nature of the world that literature creates, rather than "preserves," for us? It centers on the real nature and dimensions of the shtetl world created by these great writers. Does this world correspond to the historical shtetl? Are they preserving it for us in all its complexity? The answer to these questions cannot be a simple yes or no. The Jewish classics did, of course, draw upon a historical reality of nineteenth-century shtetl society, although necessarily only partial views of it, in different places and times. Some of their authors may have occasionally entertained the idea that they would "preserve" in the artistic images they created a panoramic portrait of this society as they knew it. This is particularly true of Sholem Aleichem, who told his brother Vevik of his intention to create "a Jewish comedy" as comprehensive as Balzac's Comédie humaine. It is not as true of Abramovitsh, who might have thought in these terms only from the late 1880s on, when he promised Sholem Aleichem that his revised and enlarged version of The Magic Ring would constitute a veritable "history" of Jewish life in Russia, from the 1840s to the present. Actually, only one of Abramovitsh's major works, the
very late *Shloyme, the Son of Reb Khayim*, was thoroughly devised and composed along the lines of such an ideology of literary "perpetuation." Peretz never intended to preserve or perpetuate any panoramic view of a given society. To him, the essence of "reality" consisted of ideas, emotions, and psychic drives and not of social interactions and institutions. However, even where the intention of perpetuating through art the rapidly changing historical experience of Jewish life was present and could influence artistic practices, this intention represented part of an imaginative aesthetic project and needs to be understood within the imaginative aesthetic context.

Abramovitsh created an imaginary Jewish space which internalized and fictionalized some of the salient characteristics of Jewish life in Lithuania and in the Ukraine during the 1840s and 1850s. However, this space was not modeled after any historical reality, nor was it "true" to any such reality. It was true only to itself, that is, to the idiosyncratic vision that was articulated through it. The image of this Jewish space was complete only in terms of its own aesthetic syntax and grammar. In these terms, it amounted to a full comprehensive statement. However, in sheer referential terms, that is, in terms of its correspondence to a complex extrinsic reality, it was anything but full or complete. Indeed, in those terms, what it had left out outweighed by far what it included. Its autonomous, intrinsic wholeness might have duped readers who, driven by various cultural needs, understood it in referential extrinsic terms. Abramovitsh is the first great modern poet of premodern Eastern European Jewry—as viewed by modern eyes, of course—not because he replicated its historical reality, which he could not do, but because he projected it as an aesthetically organized, self-contained image. It is a conceptual image, fleshed out through carefully selected meton-
ymines. The selection of these, however, was determined not by the “validity” of the metonymies as true representations of various historical aspects of reality, but rather by their usefulness as illustrations or realizations of a set of abstract categories around which the author organized his vision.

The best example of this is the structure and organization of the Jewish geography or space in Abramovitsh's works, which was said to have encompassed the entire expanse of the Russian-Jewish pale, at least during the first half of the nineteenth century. Fidelity to an actual geography played a very minor part in the cultural framing of this space. For instance, places embedded in what is supposedly the heart of the Volhynian plain, such as the shtetl Kabtsansk, actually reproduced some of the features of Abramovitsh's own Belorussian-Lithuanian hometown, Kapulye. Essentially, the Jewish space of Abramovitsh's works is structured along schematic lines rather than in reference to “real” space. Thus, instead of dozens of cities, provincial towns, townlets, hamlets, villages, estates, and so on, Abramovitsh focuses on fewer than half a dozen symbolic places, primarily on the three towns Glupsk (Kesalon in Hebrew), Tuneyadevka (Betalon), and Kabtsansk (Kabtsiel). The names themselves clearly indicate the satirical schematization and abstraction we have been describing, for instead of pointing to any geographic, ethnic, or social specifications of these three towns, they designate them as centers or enclaves in which a certain attitude or mental disposition finds its quintessential expression. Glupsk, the home of Fishke, is an enclave of a certain kind of foolishness; Benjamin the Third’s Tuneyadevka is a place where idleness reigns supreme; Kabtsansk—Paupersville—immortalized in The Magic Ring, is not just a town of paupers, since poverty is characteristic of all of Abramovitsh’s shtetlekh, but a place where poverty has become a mentality, raised to the “sub-
The "Jewishness" status of a religion complemented by faith in the miraculous attainment of riches as a result of celestial intervention without any connection whatsoever to human effort and intelligence.

The space created around these three towns—one (Glupsk) a larger commercial center and the other two tiny backwater shtetlekh—is unified on the abstract level by the psychosatirical overall design that manifests itself in the three names, and on the narrative plot-line level by the mobility of the protagonists, such as Fishke in Fishke the Lame and Benjamin and Sendrel in The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third. Just as important, if not more so, is the mobility of Mendele the Book Peddler, who regularly visits these places and knits them together into one living space. Thus, embedded within a unified continuum, which is only marginally envisioned in terms of geographical contiguity and continuity, the three towns as well as some less important places are juxtaposed, played one against the other in a way which allows them to function like pieces of colored glass in a kaleidoscope. With each motion of the artist's dextrous hand the pieces settle in a new and exciting pattern. They relate to each other not in terms of proximity and distance, but rather in terms of attraction and repulsion, contraction and expansion.

The towns and villages of Abramovitsh, like the stars on an astrolabe, rotate around each other to form spheres. The overall pattern formed by this rotation has a focal point, a pulsating core, which is encircled centrifugally by expanding spheres, from the center to the outward periphery. The spaces between the spheres are not completely empty. They are only empty of "Jewishness" and they are designated as "Nature"—although Abramovitsh wrote zoology textbooks and as a writer is justly famous for his sensitive descriptions of nature, nature in his Jewish space remained a concept, a spiri-
tual condition, rather than a commonplace reality. The protagonists of the stories live in its very midst, and Mendele the Book Peddler spends more time in the open spaces of the Ukrainian countryside than in his shtetlakh, and yet to them and to him nature remains an alien entity. It is often projected in their minds as “she,” a seductress. It can be experienced as sweet, sensual, and beautiful, but also as frightening and even monstrous. On some occasions it allows itself to become familiar, Judaized, as it is in the sunset episode in *Fishke the Lame* where the field and the forest form one large roofless synagogue. But more often it is uncannily “empty” as far as the Jewish sense of space is concerned. It is contrasted with another feminine presence—that of the Jewish habitat, the town, which can be *ir va’em* (a city and a mother). There Jews are intimately huddled together like children in the lap of their mother. Leaving this habitat the Jews encounter a presence with which they are unfamiliar, that of the foreign woman of the Book of Proverbs. While the mother-town is Jewish and asexual, this woman is erotic and Gentile. Above all else, she is “empty” in the sense that one cannot orient oneself within her expanses, no matter how beautiful and alluring she might be.

The pulsating center, where space is completely domesticated and Judaized, is the bustling town of Glupsk. The centrality of Glupsk, a relatively large place, should be emphasized because in our sentimentality we tend to identify authentic shtetl civilization exclusively with cozy, tiny places where “life is with people” and where all the members of the community know each other personally. Although Abramovitch did portray such places in his *Tuneyadevka* and *Kabtsansk*, he insisted on exploring the shtetl mentality as it manifested itself in a larger, less intimate, and even deceptively semimodern place such as his Glupsk. He was not in-
interested in a sentimental, idealized, ethnographic, or anthropological anatomy of the Jewish "pueblo," as some American readers might imagine. Rather, he was interested in the historical dynamics of premodern Jewish society, which in the middle decades of the nineteenth century found its best expression not in pauperized, lethargic villages but in busy commercial towns like Berdichev, which the Jewish sociologist Yankev Leshtshinsky described as "not typical but very characteristic." By this he meant that the town did not represent the statistically average Jewish locale in the Ukraine or in the Pale, but was nevertheless historically "characteristic" because its growth reflected the dynamic development of the Russian-Jewish city.

Glupsk is characteristic in this sense because it is dynamic. This is also why Abramovitch made it the center, the heart of his "world." Tuneyadevka and Kabtsansk, genuine shtetlekh though they may be, are characterized by their relationship with Glupsk; they are either closely related to it (Kabtsansk) or separated from it (Tuneyadevka). In the final analysis, all of the shtetlekh depend on Glupsk and are drawn to it. The protagonists, born in the shtetlekh, are bound in one way or another to leave their hometowns to flock to Glupsk, swelling its rapidly growing Jewish population. Thus, the "real" shtetlekh, Tuneyadevka, Kabtsansk, Tsviy'achich (town of hypocrites in The Little Man), and Teterevke (named after the river Teterev, an estuary of the Dnieper), hover around Glupsk, vibrating and quivering under its magnetic influence. They form the first sphere which encircles the center of the astrolabe. Their presence vis-à-vis the center is conveyed by binary oppositions such as passivity versus activity, thinness versus density, as well as point of origin versus destination.

The second sphere combines widely separated and socially distinct places such as the cities of Odessa and Warsaw, and
also perhaps the city of Dnieperovits, or Dnieperovna (the name stands for the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, in The Nag), large urban centers where relatively modern Jewish communities had formed. This does not apply to “Dnieperovna,” which in the 1860s and 1870s still contained only a small Jewish population. The presence of all of these places in the stories is necessary not because Abramovitsh really wanted to integrate them within the Jewish space of his works but because they offer an important perspective—basically, that of the modern reader at whom the stories are targeted—on Glupsk and its shtetldik satellites. Even the relatively detailed description of Odessa in Fishke the Lame is focused in such a way that the cityscape functions as a mere foil or as a distorting mirror of the image of Glupsk. There is not much that Abramovitsh wants to tell us about the modern world or even the modern Jewish world per se. His target is the premodern world, and modernity is presented only insofar as it relates to it.

Sometimes places even more distant and foreign than Warsaw or Odessa appear on the horizon of the Mendele world, such as the German commercial town of Leipzig, or even Queen Victoria’s London and the Rothschilds’ Paris. However, these places exist in the stories only to the extent that they excite the imagination of the inhabitants of Glupsk, Tuneyadevka, and Kabtsansk. In the midst of the busy marketplace of Glupsk stands a young man holding a box with a peephole, through which the Jewish passersby can for a kopek see London—the Pope riding in his red hose—Napoleon battling with the Prussians—a woman riding with the Sultan in a carriage, the Grand Vizier holding the whip and driving the horses. In the synagogues and Turkish baths of Tuneyadevka and Kabtsansk, Rothschild counts his millions and the Queen of England dispatches a fleet of ships to the high seas. All of these are, of course, shtetl fantasies, or rather
the reality of Europe in the heyday of colonialism translated into medieval Jewish myth and legend. Thus, the third sphere, a semimythological one, is very close to the fourth, which is completely mythological, or medieval-midrashic. This is the sphere which encircles the Mendele geography with the legendary landscape of India, over which Alexander of Macedon still soars on a huge vulture which he feeds with the pieces of flesh he cuts from his own body; with African and Asian deserts full of dragons; with the frenetic mythological river Sambatyon, beyond which the Ten Lost Tribes of biblical Israel still thrive—but the river, always stormy and throwing big rocks high into the sky, resting only on the Sabbath as God has decreed, renders them inaccessible; with the great oceans of medieval Hebrew travelogues, studded with green fertile islands which are really the backs of dormant but treacherous whales. Obviously to this sphere also belong the Holy Land and the heavenly Jerusalem where the dead, ready for the Last Judgment, do not suffer bodily corruption. This fourth circle represents not the faraway places of which it supposedly consists, but rather the mythological dimensions of the minds of the people of Glupsk and Tuneyadevka. It indicates that the Mendele geography of which it is the outer fringe is essentially a psychic geography; the space it encompasses is metaphorical and mental, psychic and cultural, rather than social and geographic.

We have then to accept the Mendele geography, in spite of its powerful effect of mimetic verisimilitude, as more of a concept than a described object—even in those cases where the correspondence between the spatial image and the historical
fact is abundantly clear. For instance, Glupsk, the epicenter of this geography, is said to have been modeled after the town of Berdichev, the Ukrainian “Jerusalem.” In a certain way and to a considerable extent Glupsk may be read as a pertinent commentary on the development of Berdichev, which, starting around the turn of the nineteenth century as a shtetl of a few thousand people huddled around the Polish cathedral and the nearby market square, rapidly grew until it had become in the 1850s, when Abramovitsh first saw it, the commercial center of the Ukraine, where the agricultural products of Russia’s “breadbasket” were distributed throughout the empire. Berdichev’s quick decline, starting in the 1860s, eventually reduced it to relative unimportance by the end of the century. This is not the place to inquire what triggered these developments: it is enough to imagine the impression Berdichev must have made on the mind of young Abramovitsh, who until 1858 had lived only in small backwater places such as Kapulye or Kamieniec-Podolsk. By the end of the 1850s the Jewish community of Berdichev, the second largest in Eastern Europe after Warsaw, numbered more than sixty thousand people and was growing daily. The influx of immigrants from shtetlekh near and far inundated the city. The newcomers faced a scarcity in housing and an even greater scarcity in jobs. They thronged the synagogues, shtiblekh (small prayerhouses), inns, and marketplaces, and lived in shacks and hovels. Many sold their time and labor as servants for a piece of bread and a roof over their heads. Others were pushed toward the fringes of society and the underworld. Quite a few young Jewish women ended up as prostitutes in Berdichev’s own brothels or those of distant places. Commercial enterprise loomed behind it all, with its promise of affluence on the one hand and alienation and corruption on the other. Abramovitsh took all of this in and re-created the hectic atmosphere of the place in
his descriptions of Glupsk, which appear throughout his oeuvre. However, the longer he observed his new surroundings, the more inclined he was to reify his impressions. What this place, like every other but more than most, demanded from his fertile imagination was distillation and abstraction. He had to identify its literary nature or its essence. He had to develop in his mind an image which would essentialize it into a symbol of universal human proclivity, an archetypal state of mind.

This was not easy. Superficially, Berdichev-Glupsk stood for business and commerce: following the line of least resistance, Abramovitsh could have developed its image as that of a place where only money and profit matter and where the "average" inhabitant would be the proverbial Homo economicus. In some of his early works, such as The Tax, he did this, more or less. However, even in these works he also expressed a different sense, indicated by the very name Glupsk, which he adapted from Saltykov-Shchedrin's satire "A History of a Town," where Russia was projected as Golupov, a town of fools. Now, foolishness and commercial activity are hardly synonymous. We tend to equate the latter with cunning and to associate it not with a lack of brainpower but rather with a lack of charity, friendliness, and perhaps honesty. But Abramovitsh saw through the cunning of Berdichev, and found a quality which he identified as foolishness. The "Glupsker," he thought, acted only als ob, as if they were motivated by truly mercantile motives. In reality, they were only playing a role, and their activity was aimless, or, rather, had become an aim unto itself, an exciting way of life rather than a means for achieving some goal. Thus, fortunes were purportedly made but also immediately lost. New business ventures were initiated everywhere but bankruptcy was the order of the day. Credit was easily available but could also be suddenly with-
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drawn. The merchants of Glupsk, Abramovitsh mused, were “running like poisoned mice” but getting nowhere.

If in the early works Glupsk was projected as a commercial jungle and its foolishness was identified with the helplessness and naïveté of its exploited artisans and servants, in the more mature compositions the focus of the projected image changed. Glupsk could still be a jungle where the male children of the poor could be impressed into the army and the females sexually exploited; yet now it was essentially a mega-shtetl where the naïveté of the Kabtsansker and the foolish passivity of the Tuneyadevker were replaced by the clever stupidity of the dumb manipulator. The idleness and helplessness of the shtetlekh people were camouflaged beneath the semblance of fierce and aimless activity pursued by people who were too busy to rationalize their efforts. These people were not really examples of Homo economicus, since they based their adventurous commercialism on conjecture and make-believe rather than on rational considerations such as the profit motive.

Thus, Glupsk became a satirical symbol of a special kind of stupidity, and its description belongs in the long tradition of satire which, since the days of classical antiquity, had focused on that most multifaceted of all human shortcomings—intellectual insufficiency. Indeed, Abramovitsh was eager to endow his symbol with something of sublime antiquity. He portrayed his ultramundane Glupsk as a town with legendary or even mythological origins. Arriving in its active marketplace, Benjamin—characteristically, Glupsk is often viewed through the eyes of a newcomer—while he sees the ongoing give-and-take of commerce, the crowds of vendors, the grotesque and tragic beggars, the thieves, the performing gypsies, and the riffraff, also senses the presence of an entity
which transcends the mundane. Glupsk, he reports, is an ancient capital of sorts. Its strange houses point to a connection with distant ancient cities. It possesses an *alter krepost* (an old fort) and a watchtower supported by *hinershe fislekh* (chicken legs) like the legendary hut of the witch Baba-Yaga. The town as a whole, he says, has an actual body, because it is “a body politic” in the original sense of the term, that is, a “kingdom.” This is indicated by its topography, which is like that of a body with bodily orifices (through which it may be entered: Benjamin and Sendrel enter Glupsk through its anus). It is also confirmed by a pseudobiblical and pseudo-Virgilian myth of origins which Benjamin repeats in high style and with great solemnity: the town was founded in biblical times by the Jews sent by King Solomon to Ophir for its famous gold. They went to India, where they opened expensive stores and business offices, but then they went bankrupt, fled their creditors, and many perished in the desert. Those who reached the coast boarded ships and sailed across the ocean. Through the river Pyatignilevke, a muddy stream in Glupsk, which in those days flowed directly into the sea, they traveled inland until, shipwrecked by a terrible storm, they were tossed onto an unknown shore. Here they built Glupsk. This mock-epic presents the town as a locus which originated in bad business decisions, bankruptcy, and shipwreck. At the same time, it projects the town as a new Jerusalem *manqué*, or as a travesty of Rome, which was also built by exiles and shipwreck survivors. Glupsk is the town of ancient Hebrew argonauts, the capital of precarious commercialism. In *The Magic Ring*, this “fantastic” view of Glupsk is reasserted through another myth of origins, according to which the town was from the very beginning a divine practical joke, played by its founder, the god Mercury, the god of merchants and thieves. Planting a reed in the midst of the smelly river Pyatignilevke (in He-
brew, Sirkhon, meaning stench), he allowed it to collect dirt until a precarious shoal was formed around it. Many Jews, looking for a haven under the sun, descended upon the shoal and so quickly and actively treaded its slippery mass that they actually managed to harden it. Then they settled it, multiplied, opened stores, gave and received credit, bought, sold, and went bankrupt. Again the mock-myth indicates the clever silliness of a people who live forever on a floating piece of scum which must eventually founder. Glupsk is, in a way, a version of the eternal ship of fools.

However, it is a Jewish ship of fools, and one can clearly see how it functions within the conceptual context of Abramovitsh’s Jewish space. It points to the unifying abstract characteristics of the Jewish fictional “world,” to its reified “essence,” which is not the brand of foolishness specific to Glupsk, but rather the abstract principle that it incorporates. This principle reveals itself if we compare the foolishness of Glupsk with the miserable poverty of Kabtsansk and the docile idleness of Tuneyadevka.

Kabtsansk is the quintessentially poor, helpless Jewish community. Historically, it underlines the impoverishment of the Jewish shtetl as a result of the modernization of the Russian economy. Economically functional within the feudal system as the tiny local-commercial spot which serviced its immediate agricultural vicinity, the shtetl became increasingly irrelevant and economically untenable as steam transportation and the development of wholesale purchase and distribution of agricultural products enabled the Ukrainian or Belorussian peasants to circumvent the mediation of their Jewish neighbors. Now, the people of Kabtsansk, as Abramovitsh says, had no economic resource but themselves. Kabtsansk took this turning upon itself, the commodification of its own inhabitants, very seriously. The only productive activ-
ity in which the members of the community excelled was reproductive, or sexual. They could produce children and did so with both pleasure and pride. The men of Kabtsansk particularly are presented as oversexed and as people whose pride and authority depends on their virility. However, these men do not know how to feed, clothe, and take proper care of the children they sire, so they end up selling them to the merchants of Glupsk. Every year when autumn comes, presaging the hardships and hunger of the coming winter, a “quarter” of the inhabitants of Kabtsansk squeezes itself into a few wagons in order to “emigrate” to Glupsk. Many of the emigrants, particularly the young ones like The Magic Ring’s protagonist, Hershele, never come back.

While all this corresponds, in a symbolic way, to significant historical processes, the actual description of the shtetl must be regarded as a fantasy attained through the well-known satirical stratagem of reductio ad absurdum. Of course the projection of Jewish existence in Kabtsansk in sheer sexual-mercantile terms—the town as a sexual factory which produces children for export—is as absurd and as fantastic as Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” which recommended the rearing of Irish children as gourmet delicacies for the English. The absurd quality of this projection is enhanced by the Kabtsansk myth, which encapsulates its special brand of religious faith. The myth entails a visit to town by the biblical ushpizin (guests)—the patriarchs King David and King Solomon, the prophet Elijah, and others. Since the visit takes place during the holiday of Purim rather than on the more solemn occasion of the Feast of Tabernacles, when the ushpizin are normally expected, the hallowed group this time includes Mordecai, Queen Esther’s uncle, and the biblical drunkard Lot, a relative of Abraham. However, the guests find Kabtsansk empty. Everybody, with the exception of one Reb
Yudl, who, being the only infertile male in town has no children to worry about, has left for Glupsk to earn some extra money as deliverers of Purim gift packages (*mishloakh manot*). Yudl invites the guests to the Purim feast and entertains them. They bless him with progeny—the innuendo hinting at an extramarital pregnancy lurks beneath the high hagiographic style—and also put at his disposal a miraculous purse which contains a coin every time it is opened. Thus Reb Yudl’s family becomes the only one in town which is not in dire financial straits. The mock-myth of the visit-of-the-god and the birth-of-the-hero type encapsulates the realities of Kabtsansk: fecundity, systematic emigration, and an “economic” messianism, that is, the dream of miraculous riches which through supernatural intervention would put an end to all “Jewish” miseries.

Tuneyadevka is as destitute as Kabtsansk, but unlike the latter, it is docile and even happy. It represents Abramovitsh’s sardonic version of the shtetl idyll, a secluded, slow-paced, good-natured, intimate community whose poverty is experienced as being quite bearable. Abramovitsh took care never to describe its plight in the wintertime. Here, frazzled caftans and worn-out socks suggest openness and *hev mishkeyt* rather than penury and slovenliness. There is enough optimism and *bitokhn* (faith, confidence) to go around for all and sundry. Tuneyadevka does not convey an immediate experience of shtetl life but rather a sentimentalized impression protected from reality by selective memory. It is Egypt—the exodus from which serves as the central myth around which the narrative of Benjamin the Third’s departure from the shtetl is structured—as remembered by those who could still savor the pungency of the onions and garlic but had somehow managed to erase the memory of slavery, brutality, and hard labor. Abramovitsh created it for the purpose of attacking a sweet-
ened version of shtetl existence and for analyzing the subtler nuances of shtetl bondage. It was necessary for a major work, *The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third*, in which he wanted to explore the idea that the situation of Eastern European Jewry called for revolutionary change not because of its self-evident flaws, such as dire poverty, wasted young lives, and ignorance, but because of other, less obvious ones: the hopeless provinciality and immobility of people for whom the outskirts of their hamlets constitute the end of the habitable world, their fantastic-medieval concept of reality, and also—this has not been sufficiently understood—their subverted sexuality. For as much as the men of Kabtsansk are virile, the men of Tuneyadevka, particularly as represented by Sendrel, the best among them, are *yidenes* (housewives). In their passivity and docile acquiescence they allow themselves to be mentally castrated. Their stolen masculinity is then forced upon their women, disfiguring them not only by making them masculine, but also by making them bitter, gruff, domineering, and strident.

Benjamin, who yearns to leave Tuneyadevka—not because of any physical discomfort, but because of his deep need for power and self-aggrandizement—is therefore the only real man in town. But even he, as a Tuneyadevkar, is only half a man. Hence, his “elopement” with “Sendrel, the *yidene,*” his mate who is his man-woman. This “marriage” of the two—the matching of two males is a recurrent motif in Abramovitsh’s œuvre—by which the Quixote–Sancho Panza–Dulcinea triad has been shrunk to a pseudohomosexual dyad—represents, perhaps better than any other symbol, the “legacy” of Tuneyadevka. It is a legacy of inadequacy and impotence, which presages the inevitable failure of Benjamin’s “exodus.” In any case, Tuneyadevka, we realize, is more “unreal” by far than Glupsk and Kabtsansk. It is a psychological projection rather than a historical and social real-
ity, and because of this quality, it plays an important role in the Mendele world, despite the fact that it appears only once, in the first four chapters of *The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third*.

Now, it is not difficult to put the three towns together and get at their common denominator. Superficially, they represent opposites: the busy and alienated Glupsk versus the intimate, slow-paced *shetlekh*, the misery of Kabtsansk versus the "happiness" of Tuneyadevka, the virility of the Kabtsansker versus the effeminacy of the Tuneyadevkar and the commercialized, stunted sexuality of the Glupsker, who mate for money and status, and sometimes have to buy illicit sex as a commodity. The list can be extended; however, the opposites are exposed only to be undermined. Abramovitsh knows that they are not genuine. The commercialism of Glupsk is bogus; the cunning of the Glupsk merchants is a form of stupidity. Their fierce activity is dialectically connected to the idleness of the shtetl people. Glupsk parades itself about as a city but it is actually an overgrown shtetl. In Glupsk, the connection between cause and effect, effort and product, gesture and response, has been severed. People run but they do not get anywhere; they buy and sell but they do not prosper; they act but they do nothing.

The same may be said of Kabtsansk. In its own way, the community has severed the connection between cause and effect. The Kabtsansker procreate but they are not real parents. They beget children, but they do not assume responsibility for them. Their sexual activity directly parallels the commercial activity of Glupsk. It is solipsistic, it perpetuates itself without a view toward the results. Thus, in Kabtsansk, fatherhood is as hollow as commercialism is in Glupsk. In Tuneyadevka, the idyllic mood is achieved through mental evasion of reality, or by forcing reality upon one's wife in order to enjoy an end-
less vacation from responsibility and manhood. Here too, dysfunctional economy parallels dysfunctional sexuality, while excess and deficiency present two sides of the same coin. Too much sex is equated with no sex at all; too much commercial activity is the other side of total idleness. Because of this dialectical similarity, the Mendele world always remains the same, deeply flawed and inherently chaotic. Yet for all that, it makes for an image which is almost mathematical in its precision and neat logical structure. Aesthetically, Mendele's world is perfect. Historically and psychologically, it is a mess. A good reader of Abramovitsh's works is equally sensitive to the perfection and to its dismal opposite. While savoring the first, one remains morally vulnerable to the second. Horrified and intensely pleased at the same time, one goes on reading.

XI

We must shift our attention from the "geography" to the consciousness through which we become acquainted with it, from the image to the eye in which it glints, from the Mendele world to Mendele himself. As the second major component in the complex artistic entity under investigation he is as important as everything we have encountered so far. We must ask: Who is this Mendele? What role does he play in the work of Abramovitsh? We should be sure that any answer to that question does not shortchange either the character or the reader. The answer, whatever it is, cannot be merely nominal or purely technical, for Mendele transcends nominality and technicalities. Of course he is not just a pen name of Abramovitsh, as readers and critics in more naïve periods have believed, probably because Abramovitsh himself, for his own literary purposes, wanted them to do so. One trusts
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that this popular error has been laid to rest now for more than a quarter of a century. Mendele is a fictional character, as fictional and as "imagined" as any literary protagonist in the annals of fiction. Moreover, he is a complex character, shifty and tricky; a character fashioned with skill and subtlety that clearly belie the allegation that Abramovitsh, as much as he could describe the material and social world realistically, could not penetrate individual psychology. He definitely could do so when it was necessary—as in the case of Mendele, his chief psychological creation—but he would not allow himself to indulge in overt psychological analysis because he felt that it would undermine the authenticity of his narrative as a "folksy" and "Jewish" discourse. Thus, psychological insight into his work, as into that of so many other masters, had to enter the narrative through the back door of an occasional remark, a slip of the tongue, "faulty" cognitive sequences, "unnecessary" and "uncontrollable" repetitions, and other little "psychopathologies" of everyday life and everyday use of language.

True, unlike any other character, Mendele is also a technical "device." At the beginning, he was not even a "dramatized narrator," to use the rhetorical terminology of Wayne C. Booth. He was a mere technician, entrusted with the task of making a "true," bona fide document public. As such, he was invented in Abramovitsh's first Yiddish story, The Little Man (1864), and he remained tied to similar ancillary services throughout his fictional existence, which ended only with Abramovitsh's very late productions, such as Shloyme Reb Khayims (1894–1912) and Seyfer habeheymes (The book of cattle, 1902). At the same time, Mendele also grew rapidly, developing new dimensions and enlarging his presence. Throughout, he managed to retain a cohesive and unified personality, a distinct and immediately recognizable voice, tonal-
ity, and manner of speech. For Mendele, although he can by no means be identified with Abramovitsh the author, was conceived from the start as a raconteur, wit, and serious commentator in his own right.

Already in the first version of *The Little Man*, where he was not meant to serve as much more than a cover for Abramovitsh (who, as we remember, did not want to be known as the author of a Yiddish tale), Mendele’s unique personality emerges. He is allowed to control only the short introduction preceding the “document,” Yitskhok Avrum’s confession and will. However, even this minimal introduction sufficiently revealed some of his salient characteristics: his caustic wit, his natural suspiciousness, his need to go beneath the surface to see through any facade no matter how innocent, and to discover the little lie, to expose the self-serving rationalization. Also his specific mannerisms as a talker and raconteur come to the fore, albeit in a very rudimentary form: his garrulousness, his tendency to digress, to tell a story in a meandering fashion, and above all else his penchant for sharp, biting asides. Mendele was an immediate success. The readers of *Kol mevasser* enjoyed his introduction as they enjoyed the juicier episodes of the protagonist’s shocking life story. Abramovitsh responded by allowing Mendele to occupy a much larger space in his next Yiddish publication, the first version of *The Magic Ring* (1865), where Mendele’s introduction, a long conversational essay, occupies about a third of the slim volume. Abramovitsh’s readers now expected every one of his new Yiddish publications to include an extra bonus: a witty, satirical “Omar Mendele” (Thus spake Mendele) introduction. The writer soon learned how to develop such introductions as “a story about the story” which precedes “the story itself.” He also made the introduction follow a certain routine, to parody a particular high, somewhat antiquated Yiddish style,
studded with Hebraisms—a technique which enabled him to
develop the introduction as an autonomous exercise in self-
investigation, with Mendele tearing into his own sanctimon-
ious declarations, qua book peddler and occasional publisher
for “kosher” religious and educational purposes only, exposing
the stark truth that he does what he does in expectation of
profit, and precipitating every sublime and pathetic gesture
into the depth of intentional bathos.

Eventually, Abramovitsh allowed Mendele to assume liter-
ary functions which went far beyond his initial ancillary role,
such as editing or even rewriting the manuscripts he pub-
lished. This was explained either as a result of the original
manuscript’s needing to be shortened (as in The Brief Travels of
Benjamin the Third) or as a result of the author’s unfamiliarity
with the tastes and expectations of Jewish readership; hence
the need to add Jewish “spice” to his writing (as in The Magic
Ring). In Fishke the Lame, Mendele was supposedly retelling
the story told by an ignorant and inarticulate beggar. He
therefore had to assume a role very close to that of a full-
fledged author. Thus, Mendele’s presence became more and
more conspicuous in Abramovitsh’s work, until in the short
stories and novellas of the late 1880s and early 1890s Mendele
became a protagonist-narrator recounting his own adven-
tures, rather than publishing written accounts of other peo-
ple. Only in Abramovitsh’s last major novel, Shloyme Reb
Khayims, did Mendele humbly retreat to his original role as
publisher and prologue-author, leaving center stage for the
“real” author, who was none other than S. Y. Abramovitsh
himself. The border separating Mendele from Abramovitsh
was clearly marked for those who wanted to notice it. True,
in compensation for this “decline,” Mendele was presented
with a particularly brilliant and well-developed Petikhta (In-
troduction, 1894) which, even though it belonged within the
novel as a whole, also formed an autonomous short story, one of the best Abramovitsh ever wrote.

With all that said, we still have hardly touched upon the crucial significance of Mendele. This has little to do with his usefulness as a literary master of ceremonies. As such, Mendele could have well remained the humble provincial literary entrepreneur he had been when he was originally invented, and one of the many fictional collectors and publishers of stories and documents which fill eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European fiction, particularly when this fiction is presented as "regional." For example, in Gogol’s "Evenings on a Farm Near Dikan’ka," colorful Ukrainian tales are supposedly gathered and introduced by a certain Rudyi Pan’ko. Walter Scott’s allegedly genuine Scottish novels and tales are collected and introduced by a local schoolteacher and parish clerk, Jedediah Cleishbotham. But Mendele assumed greater importance than any of these publishers, editors, and amateur litterateurs, an importance owing little to his technical tasks and therefore not to be explained as an aspect of narrative technique; or, rather, his importance depends on such techniques only insofar as does everything else in the story—content, ideas, emotions—and insofar as narrative technique cannot be unrelated to whatever is significant in the story.

Nor is Mendele’s significance directly connected with the little that we are told about the circumstances of his life. We know he is middle-aged or elderly, but never really old. This is how he appears in 1863, and how he takes his leave at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. His physical appearance is common, quite indistinct, and his physiognomy characteristically "Jewish." He himself hails from a small shtetl, Tsvi’y’achich in some stories, Kabtsansk in others. Naturally, he is married and a paterfamilias, a father of grown
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children (how many we never know) of marriageable age. However, he is hardly a family man, for he sees little of his hometown or of his family, since throughout the better part of the year he plies his trade as an itinerant book peddler doing his “rounds” throughout the shtetlekh of western Ukraine. Significantly he never cares to tell us about his short stays at home, during Passover, for instance. We hear nothing in particular about his wife, whom he does not seem to miss, and who is less close to him by far than his horse, his constant companion. He is extremely loyal to his trade, which he took up long ago, after his years of “bed and board” with his in-laws had terminated. Having then lost money in other trades, which were alien to his nature, he finally “found” himself as a book peddler, which is what he is the whole time we know him. Only once, swept along by Zionist enthusiasm, does he dream of getting rid of his books and wagon to become a farmer in the fields and vineyards of Judea (in the short story “Bymey hara’ash” [In days of tumult], 1894). He is easily dissuaded by a wise elderly Zionist leader who makes him realize how unfit he is for such a step and how frivolous his “dream” really is. Mendele is quickly convinced because he is by nature perspicacious, cool-headed, and not given to wishful thinking. Another time, when he is robbed of his horse by the pogromists of 1881–82, he is forced to stay at home for a longer time (“Beseter ra’am” [In the secret place of thunder], 1886–87). He is quite impatient to resume his itinerant regimen, not just because he has to make a living but also because roaming throughout Ukraine with his books has become his real life. His stock is the conventional Jewish one: Talmud tractates, sets of the Mishna, and the Shulhan arukh, ethical treatises, Hasidic publications, popular Yiddish chapbooks, women’s prayers, as well as ritual articles and even protective magical amulets and cameos. Secretly, he might also carry
riskier stuff, that is, books and magazines of the Haskalah—if he thinks they might bring in a profit. Far be it from him to sympathize openly with this “forbidden” literature, but we have the sense that he is acquainted with it, at least superficially.

Of all these rather stereotypical features, only three characteristics are of real importance to us: (1) Mendele completely “belongs,” at least outwardly, within the traditional Jewish milieu and can hardly be distinguished from thousands of similar yidn fun a gants yor (common Jews). This, on the one hand, gives him access to the innermost recesses of traditional society (while the European-looking Abramovitsh immediately arouses suspicion) and renders him an ideal “spy.” On the other hand, it also entails a real intimacy on his part with the cultural codes of that society. Thus, he can serve us not only as one who spies but, more important, as an interpreter, a translator, and a guide in our passage through what is to us an almost foreign cultural territory. (2) Mendele, when all is said and done, is nevertheless an “uprooted” person. He has more or less already wrenched himself out of the cultural and social world he is describing and is now more of an observer than a participant. This has little to do with overt ideological heresy and much more with a sense of individual freedom which he has developed during his life as a lonely itinerant. Mendele is a free agent. He is a person aware of his individuality. He does not depend on a supportive environment and does not trust collectives. As befits a lonely and free person, he is inquisitive, suspicious, and takes nothing for granted. His itinerant lifestyle frees him from the provincialism and parochialism of his society. As a man who travels as far as Odessa and Warsaw, he can make comparisons, draw conclusions, notice differences, but also detect characteristic infrastructures. He can compare the different towns; he can “Judaize” nature and “naturalize” Judaism, that is, demystify
Jewish codes of behavior and point to their biological origins. In a way he is a genuine intellectual, but his intellectualism is completely different from that of the traditional Talmud scholar or the bookish modern university professor. He is a "natural" and conversational philosopher. He observes, muses, plays with ideas, engages in dialogue, and talks, talks, talks. His thinking and talking are not structured. They are always tentative, digressive, associative, and open-ended.

(3) Mendele's attachment to the book trade does not render him bookish. He is relatively erudite on demand. Particularly in Abramovitch's Hebrew renderings of his works, Mendele must indulge in games of quotation, allusion, and parody, through which he compensates for the racier wit of the Yiddish version. However, he never allows books and sacred texts to control him. At the same time, his "professional" literacy gives him the benefit of familiarity with a disciplined use of language. Mendele knows as well as anyone how to make a point, and also how to conceal a point he does not want to make openly. He is, in fact, a master of the linguistic sleight of hand which allows him to say and unsay something almost in a single phrase. He is precisely the professional stylist, the expert he proclaims himself to be. He is also an ironist, a philosopher who knows how to use language for subversive purposes. Indeed, irony—saying something while meaning its opposite—is his lifeblood, even when he is not trying to be funny or clever. As we have seen, his very existence is double-tiered. He is a shtetl person as well as one who has cut himself loose from the shtetl and its loyalties; he is married and also single; he is gregarious but essentially lonely; he is a "simple" person, who is also an intellectual; he is a traditional Jew, but also the very personification of a Jewish esprit critique. How can he function rhetorically if not as an ironist?
Putting together all that we know about Mendele, we can see Abramovitsh’s tremendous literary and cultural breakthrough involved in this invention. We can also see why the inventor became so thoroughly enamored of his creation, to the extent that he almost allowed it to suck him dry of his own identity and virtually strip him of his very name. In Mendele, modern Jewish literature could speak in two voices without lapsing into schizophrenia. With him, the mental chasm separating modernity from tradition, as well as the arrogant rational ego from the less articulate and the less articulated layers of the human personality, could be bridged or at least viewed from both sides. Modern Jews experienced the gap between themselves and those whom they had left behind in the traditional milieu as a gap separating the subject—we, the moderns—from the object—them, the people of the shtetl. If the shtetl civilization was ever to become relevant to the modern experience, even if the relevance was expressed as a serious critique, that mental separation had to be overcome, if only for an illusory moment of suspension of disunity through aesthetic meditation. The “we” had to develop the ability to envision themselves as “them” or, better yet, to discover in “ourselves” the vestiges of “them.” A mental enlargement of the modern Jewish identity was absolutely necessary, but not for the purpose of harmonizing the disharmonious or finding the compromise where, perhaps, no compromise was possible. It was necessary for the purpose of buttressing the modern Jewish identity as such. If it was to be not simply “modern” but also Jewish, it had to redefine its attitude to the Jewish “past,” and for that some kind of an interior dialogue with that
past was needed. Mendele supplied the aesthetic literary arena where such a dialogue could take place. His unique voice, as unified and recognizable as it was, created the tonality of dialogue. His meandering narrative followed the convoluted line of the question-answer or charge-countercharge sequence. Mendele’s discourse was inherently dialogic, as much as Talmudic discourse is by definition dialogic.

Modern Jewish literature assumed the prophetic role of a “watchman unto the House of Israel.” It was meant to replace the rabbis, the Talmudists, the Hasidic leaders, the mystics, and even the biblical prophet himself as a guide of the Jewish people in modern times. That is why it would allow itself to talk through its modern cultural heroes, such as Bialik and Peretz, with the authority of (Godless) Isaiah or Ezekiel. However, without God, from where could this pseudo-prophetic literature draw its authority, its Jewish legitimacy, if not from “the people,” from their historical experience? And how could it speak in their name—and thus talk not only at them but also to them—if it alienated itself from “them”? Thus, without a Mendele of sorts, and his followers (the “Sholem Aleichem” of Sholem Aleichem or the narrator of Agnon’s Bridal Canopy, for example), the prophetic Bialik and Peretz would be unacceptable and impossible.

The linguistic schism that Abramovitsh transcended by writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish, and also by overcoming the dichotomy between “high” Germanized Yiddish and “low” colloquial Yiddish, as well as that between “high” biblical Hebrew and “low” Talmudic-midrashic-rabbinic Hebrew, was, then, a cultural schism that had to be transcended on many levels. The language issue represented a cleavage at the heart of Jewish cultural identity. Abramovitsh was able to transcend it not only, not even mainly, because he was a super-
latively sensitive and creative stylist, but because he fully grasped its cultural and psychological supralinguistic significance, and, most important, because he had with him Mendele, his Janus-faced creation, to show him the way out of the labyrinth. Simply by following Mendele’s causerie, paying attention to his ironic remarks, he would see the way toward his destination.

In a way, the Janus-faced Mendele became the ultimate “watchman unto the House of Israel.” His critique of traditional Jewish life was bitter, withering, but it did not issue from beyond the confines of the House of Israel. Mendele’s GT criticism indirectly reflected Abramovitsh’s European humanism, but in his voice it was internalized and Judaized, and struck roots inherent in Jewish moralism. Mendele did not try to imitate “their” voice and speech, that is, those of Abramovitsh’s shtetl protagonists. There is very little mimicry of this kind in his causerie, for Mendele never betrayed his own tonality and timbre. But Mendele could, at least occasionally, discover in himself other voices, or the voices of the “other.” He could bring up to the surface the shadows of the half-forgotten “us” who were still not separated from “them.”

Nowhere does this act of tonal resurrection occur more openly than in Fishke the Lame, which in more than one way is Abramovitsh’s quintessential novel, where Mendele gives his quintessential “performance.” The novel begins with Mendele’s triumphantly parading his caustic wit and his fluency as a critic and a rationalist. Metaphorically, he is like the summer sun, the blazing light of which radiates through the first episodes of the novel, penetrating cranny and crevice, shedding light on every dark little indecent secret. Thus, Mendele blows to pieces all Jewish “spiritual” pretensions. The Jews pretend to have transcended, or at least sublimated,
all bodily needs—the need for food, sex, shelter, etc.—but actually they have only suppressed and vitiating them. The hairy, heavyset, virile Alter Yaknehoz pretends that he has remarried because he needs a woman to look after his household, but actually he had divorced his first wife, lost track of their children, and remarried because he craved sex with a young and attractive woman. Mendele knows this ugly and potentially disastrous secret of his colleague (Alter is also a book peddler) and he makes it clear to the browbeaten man, as he pushes him against the wall with his bright, scorching, inquisitorial retorts. Mendele is even wise enough to know and point out the historical significance of this terrible insight into the sweaty physicality of Jewish “spiritualism” (for the Jews do not “conquer” the body, they only cripple it), as indicated by the date on which the novel starts, the seventeenth of the month of Tammuz, the day on which the army of Nebuchadnezzar broke through the walls of besieged Jerusalem. The downfall of the Jewish commonwealth, the Jewish body politic, brought about the crippling of the Jewish body.

This bright, almost insufferable omniscience of Mendele, however, attains an altogether new dimension when night comes and Mendele finds himself alone in the forest, without his horse, which, along with Alter’s, has been stolen. Alter goes to look for them and, ominously, does not return. Suddenly, Mendele’s esprit critique collapses and the wise commentator on the national character is revealed—to himself and to us—as a frightened child. Mendele’s “wild” imagination, folksy and demonic, overpowers his rational capacity. Mendele experiences a frightening entropy of his entire personality. Everything in him falls apart under the overwhelming impact of the realization of how weak, helpless, and lost he is. Now the weak Jewish body is Mendele’s body. The
hairy, virile Alters are looked to as possible protectors and saviors. Indeed, it will be Alter who will bravely fight with the thieves to retrieve the lost horses. It will be Alter who will save Fishke from death. Mendele will only lose his way, his earlock, and his dignity. Once he reaches the safe haven of a Jewish inn, he gives vent to his childish emotions of hurt, pain, and loneliness, sheds hot tears, addresses the moon, which he identifies with his dead mother, and pours out his bitter complaints about a wasted life.

We understand that as much as the Glupsker have lost the connective link which could have tied their commercial activity to the desire for profit, and as much as the Kabtsansker have lost the emotional link which should have bound their sexuality to parental responsibility, Mendele has also lost some important connection which might have linked his oversized critical capacity to a sufficiently developed emotional and instinctive identity; for emotionally Mendele is still a child. The only woman to whom he can relate is his dead mother. In order to survive in an adult world, one in which the legendary "Green Mountain" of Glupsk is only a muddy, dirty heap of rubble infested by thieves and robbers, he has to suppress his emotional being and leave it stunted and weakened. Of all the people in the world, it is from Fishke the Lame, the grotesque cripple of whose wedding Mendele speaks with such frightening sarcasm, that he must learn true emotional maturity. Not in vain does he try to tear Fishke's tale of love and loyalty to pieces with his snide remarks, or better, by generalizing and abstracting it into an anatomy of Jewish begging. The story threatens him directly. It exposes the ugly secrets of his life without love, just as he had exposed the dirty secrets of Alter's life of sex without responsibility. Thus, Mendele's ironic duality is revealed as yet another va-
Introduction

I'm not sure how to interpret this sentence: "lence of the national flaw of a disjointed sensibility. Only now, the flaw is experienced from within and not from without." It seems like there might be a typo or a missing word. In any case, the rest of the text reads:

"It is an internal bleeding wound, a terrible gash crying for healing and not for sarcastic exposure. Mendele has become one with the Mendele world, and through him we can also integrate ourselves within it or integrate it within ourselves.

Dan Miron
Jerusalem and New York City
May 1995

NOTES

1See “Reshimot letoldotay” (Sketches to my biography, 1889), Kol kitvei Mendele Mokher Sefarim (Tel Aviv: 1947), p. 5.


8See Volf (Vevik) Rabinovits, Mayn bruder Sholem Aleichem—zikhroyanes (Kiev: 1939), pp. 140–44.

9See Abramovitch’s letter to Sholem Aleichem of June 10, 1888, in Shriftn (1928), vol. 1, p. 251.
Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler


12 Abramovitsh often appealed to critics who mentioned him by his real name not to divulge his “secret” and to refer to him as Mendele. He was trying to protect the sense of intimacy that many readers developed with regard to Mendele as a friendly living being.