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The Creation of Mendele Moykher-Sforim

Selected Works of Mendele Moykher-Sforim
Edited by Marvin Zuckerman, Gerald Stillman, and Marion Herbst
Joseph Simon/Pangloss Press
430 pp., $34.50.

By KEN FRIEDEN

The editors of “The Three Great Classic Writers of Modern Yiddish Literature” have embarked upon the utopian project of publishing English translations of the major works by S.Y. Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher-Sforim), Sholem Rabinovitch (Sholem Aleichem), and I.L. Peretz. Until recently, only the fiction of Sholem Aleichem was widely known in the English-speaking world, while that of Abramovitsh and Peretz remained obscure. This situation began to change in 1990-91 with the appearance of anthologies devoted to both Abramovitsh and Peretz, the latter edited by Ruth Wisse and published by Schocken.

The Abramovitsh publication under review falls short of its utopian aspirations, but in spite of its flaws the volume makes an important contribution. It contains translations of the novels “The Little Man” and “Fishke the Lame” and two shorter prose works, as well as selections from the novels “The Mare,” “The Travels of Benjamin III” and “Of Bygone Days.” Astonishing as it may appear, this is the first comprehensive collection of Abramovitsh’s fiction ever made available in English.

Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836-1917) came to be known as “the grandfather of modern Yiddish literature,” primarily on the strength of five short novels he published while living in Borditchev and Zhitomir from 1864 to 1878. Thereafter, he underwent a period of creative hibernation and subsequently turned his forces to the revival of Hebrew literature in 1886-96. During the final two decades of his life, Abramovitsh obsessively revised and expanded his works while translating them from Yiddish into Hebrew and from Hebrew into Yiddish. His goals were both literary and didactic, and in fact he spent the latter half of his mature years, after 1981, serving as the principal editor and narrator in Abramovitsh’s works. Unlike the author, who arduously acquired a secular education, Mendele is a traditional Jew, well-versed in Bible and Talmud. The seeming naivete of Abramovitsh’s Mendele enables the author to exert sharp irony, social satire, and literary parody. To call Abramovitsh the author by the name “Mendele” is to elide the substantial discrepancies between the flesh-and-blood man and his fictional mouthpiece. (In contrast, the man Sholem Rabinovitch produced works that may be ascribed to the author Sholem Aleichem, which comes closer to being a persona or mask, a fiction.

An 1888 copy of ‘Mendele the Book Peddler’

name. The difference is that “Sholem Aleichem” essentially names Sholem Rabinovitch as author, or the author in the man.)

The works of S.Y. Abramovitsh pose serious problems for the translator. From a text-critical standpoint there is the problem of which edition to use. For example, the works “The Magic Ring” and “Fishke the Lame” began as short books roughly 40 pages long, and they ended decades later as full-blown novels. One is normally obliged to accept the author’s final version as authoritative, but what if an earlier edition is more successful, in literary terms? The editors of the current volume have opted to translate the late versions, leaving Abramovitsh’s original texts for a future translation project. A further obstacle that confronts translators of Abramovitsh is presented by his language, or rather languages. Often the humor and wit of his works derives from a play between Yiddish and Hebrew. For example, Mendele begins several stories with a mock-prayer that alternates between Yiddish and Hebrew words. This linguistic hybrid can scarcely be accomplished in an English translation. Moreover, some of Abramovitsh’s key texts were written in Hebrew, while the series at hand purports to cover the classic Yiddish works. The editors have had to compromise and include one story that was translated from the Hebrew.

The first volume in the series entitled “The Three Great Classic Writers of Modern Yiddish Literature” fills a terrible gap in Jewish literary history. What is disappointing about the present anthology of Abramovitsh’s fiction, however, is that it consists almost entirely of preexisting translations. The editors have taken the path of least resistance, gathering prior translations by Gerald Stillman, Joachim Neugroschel, Walter Lever and Bernard Sheindlin. This has the merit of making available several valuable, scattered editions that have gone out of print since their first publication as much as 35 years ago. Yet the editors might have done better had they retranslated the major works or newly translated works that have not yet appeared in English.