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**THE IMAGE OF NON-JEWS IN A TEXT BY ABRAMOVITCH: A CLOSE READING
OF *THE TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES OF BENJAMIN THE THIRD***

In the nineteenth-century European literary tradition the Jew is represented as “the Other”. The general image is a stereotypical description of the Jew as a parasite, a sorcerer or a villain. Even when one can specify and set down the linguistic, geographical and historical circumstances in which particular novels and stories were written, many of them incorporate the figure of “the Jew” as a construct that plays a particular role in the narrative.¹ Alongside the development of the European fiction, within the Jewish literary context, the new-Hebrew and Yiddish literatures are born and mature. The writers simultaneously bring in distinct features characteristic of the Jewish background, languages and context, while they also look towards European literary models and pattern their prose, to some extent, on the European style.

In this context, the desire to follow the model of the European style, in particular the construction of a fictitious character, becomes problematic. How should a Jewish author write about a Jew in the manner of the European novel? The problematic does not derive merely from that negative model’s (of the Jew as “Other”) offensive content, but also from the necessity to transform the *positive* heroes from their gentile “form” into the environment of the Jewish fiction. To put it simply, if in Europe the ideal protagonist is a gentile and the villain is a Jew, how does a Jewish writer create a positive hero? Where in his model is the Jew and where is the gentile? If, in the perspective turned on its head, the European gentile is now Jewish, what are the features of the Other that are now to appear in the Hebrew and Yiddish literatures? Is it a Jewish Other or a non-Jewish Other? The answer to this question is manifold and complex, and certainly goes beyond the scope of the present paper. Here I restrict myself to the image of the non-Jewish hero and an attempt to show, by example of Abramovitch’s novella, some aspects of the presentation of gentile characters in a Jewish story.

In the course of reading, I would like to put forward the questions of the function the gentile characters play in the narrative, the way they are portrayed, the language they use as well as the language with which they are presented. My questions are textual, not historical or sociological, even though I keep in mind the socio-historical context in which they were written.

The world portrayed in Hebrew and Yiddish fiction of the late nineteenth century is in great measure a Jewish one – Jews are the main characters, the Jewish tradition is what inspires them and the realia come from the world of the *cheder*, family, *bet-*

¹ Cf. Cheyette 1996a; 1996b; 1998; Page 2004, and many others.

hamidrash, and the rest of the immediate environment. What is true of Abramovitch in this respect is also true of many of his contemporaries. Dan Miron notes that the literary *shtetl* “was depicted as an exclusively Jewish enclave, an unalloyed entity”.²

He writes:

The *shtetl* was described, for better or for worse, as the Jewish “body politic”. It was corporeal, a physically Jewish piece of territory carved out and separated from the continuum of space in which it was embedded but to which, ostensibly, it did not belong. As a Jewish territory it had Jewish borders prescribed by Jewish law (*halakha*) and defined as *tehum shabat*. ... It was marked only by a cord tied to poles or to tree branches, but it was a barrier strong enough to hold back. ... Out there, beyond that line, non-Jewishness reigned. ... Mendele the Book Peddler, who sold and also read books written by the followers of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, called this open space “nature” and viewed it as an essentially non-Jewish feminine entity, beautiful, seductive, and subtly demonic.³

Thus, in the creation of Jewish writers, including Abramovitch, the world described is the image of the *shtetl*, written from the perspective of the Jewish hero and dealing with Jewish matters. The protagonists see the world according to their categories: legends and stories from rabbinic and biblical as well as other religious texts, Jewish popular belief and folklore. Nevertheless, the borders, although outlined precisely, are not entirely hermetic. Within the narrative, there appear several points of connection, and precisely those points are of interest to us here. It should be noted that to his description of Tunyeyadevke, Abramovitch adds a detail, as if only in passing, of the town’s policeman (*pristav*) who “ruled it with an iron hand”.

שוב היה מעשה בשוטר העיר, שבא מקרוב על משמרתו, והיה נוהג שררה על הצבור ביד רמה: הביט און ב“ירמולקת” של שני יהודים ופרע את ראשם; יהודי אחד נעשה על ידו קצוף-פאה; בני-אדם כשרים, שהמנוול משכם לאותם המבואות... בחצי הלילה, נלכדו בידו, בדקם ומצא את כתבי-תעודתם פסולים; עזו של יהודי אחר נתפסה בגורתו על שקפצה ואכלה גג של תבן חדש.

Thus, the presence of the gentile authority is mentioned, even if in passing, and gives a different tone to the ideals and visions of redemption that Benjamin nurtures. Hence, the main protagonists set out on a journey, urged by the legends of the Lost Tribes and the desire to reach *Eretz Israel*. In the course of their travel, they meet several non-Jewish characters and those encounters influence them – their thinking and behaviour. Interestingly, the world in which the Jews live is confined not only in geographical-topographical terms; it is also closed spiritually and intellectually. Before their present journey, Benjamin and Senderl had never left the *shtetl*, and their knowledge of the outside world is fairly limited. By nature, Benjamin is not one of the bravest.

בטבעו היה בנימין, בעל-המסעות שלנו, פחדן משונה. היה מתירא לצאת יחידי בלילה ברחובה של עיר, ולישון יחידי בחדר לא היה רוצה בעד כל הון. יציאה כל-שהיא מחוץ לעיר היתה אצלו בחזקת סכנה, מי יודע מה יארע שם, חלילה. כלב קטן, הקל שבכלבים, היה מטיל עליו אימות-מות.

The going out, therefore, is a move which requires heroic conduct and extraordinary strength, even if in many stories it is driven by necessity or, as in the case of Benjamin,

² Miron 2000: 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

by dreams and ideals detached from the real world. Interestingly, it is a meeting with a non-Jew that opens up a series of adventures, right outside the boundaries of the *shtetl*; it is also the first fear Benjamin needs to overcome, namely, the fear of danger that awaits him beyond the familiar area of the village. Benjamin's reaction to this testing is far from satisfactory, even if not surprising. However, in the story this danger is described as more imagined than real. Before he manages to see who that might be, Benjamin thinks the stranger is a highwayman. A moment later he notices a peasant on a cart loaded with sacks of potatoes and pulled by a pair of oxen. The brief description strikes as one not being typical of a dangerous man in the forest. This incident constitutes in fact the first "adventure" in the novel, the first challenge Benjamin needs to face. It is a "test" of his courage, of his ability to face the world outside the confines of the village and to overcome the obstacles that might appear. He tries to face the challenge: he shouts a greeting in Ukrainian, but before the peasant has the time to reply, Benjamin faints. He then recovers, and attempts, with little success, to communicate with the man.

In Chapter Eleven, the two heroes travel on a boat. Even though the first time Senderl feels sick, they keep on coming back and in fact take several rides on the river. Benjamin calls the boat owner the "captain," which fits the convention of his quasi-mythical journey. If Benjamin and Senderl are the knights, of the quixotic type, the peasant on the boat must be a captain, that is, someone who by definition knows much about the seas and the countries, who fits the myth. The two heroes, however, do not listen to his explanations when *they* inquire about the sirens they apparently see in the water, and *he* points to the women on the shore. Abramovitch "uses" the lack of comprehension to explain what Fein calls "a leap from the ideal to the real".⁴ It is the gentile here who makes the reader aware of the absurdity of the heroes' images: the convention of the fable taken seriously. The truth is that Benjamin, while staring at the imagined sirens, leant over the boat and, had it not been for the boatman, he would have ended up overboard.

	Chapter Two – on the peasant's cart	Chapter Eleven – on the river
attitude before	Benjamin is terrified, expects to see a highwayman	Benjamin initiates the meeting, approaches the boat owner
during the event	Imagines he has been kidnapped	Enjoys the boat rides, respects the man, calls him "captain"
frequency	A single event	Several trips on the river, Benjamin seems to have made himself at home in Glupsk
narration	Reader follows the sequence of events together with the hero	Reader learns about several instances retrospectively
communication	Benjamin is unable to make a conversation, it is the peasant who initiates the exchange	Benjamin communicates via Senderl, the dialogue is difficult, but Benjamin encourages further questions

⁴ Fein 1987: 31.

A juxtaposition of two adventures – the above-mentioned first encounter with a peasant on a cart from Chapter Two and the last meeting with the owner of the boat from Chapter Eleven – shows the development of several elements in the narrative of the novel.

This last point is of great consequence since the problem of communication is present throughout the whole book. Every encounter involves, in one way or another, a linguistic obstacle: Jews and gentiles do not share a common language. In each of the conversations, the question of a common tongue appears, and the code the Jews try to use is a sort of a pidgin – an arbitrary mixture of Yiddish/Hebrew with elements of Ukrainian/Slavic. The concoction turns out in most cases to be incomprehensible to the interlocutor, and if they come to some understanding, it is either by chance or by context. Interestingly, the only option available is that the Jews would know the vernacular. When they are travelling together, Benjamin encourages Senderl to do the talking. It is he, after all, the argument goes, who used to go to the market with his wife.

One of those instances of a misunderstanding appears in Chapter Five, when Senderl, encouraged by Benjamin, asks a peasant the way to *Eretz Isroel*. For the Ukrainian, *Isroel* sounds like the proper name “Srul” and the two Jewish travellers are not able to get the information out of him. Besides, apart from the code itself, one cannot expect from the peasant even basic knowledge of European and Mediterranean geography, so we can assume that had there been a common language, the goal would not have been achieved in any case. In place of a farewell, the peasant curses them, spits and drives away.

I would like to mention two details which, although minor, contribute to the wider picture. One is a description of a *Shabbes-goy*, who is present at the market. He gets a piece of *chale* in exchange for performing house chores forbidden to the Jews on the Sabbath. The man eats his bread with great devotion; he makes sure no crumb is lost. The narrator compares the act of eating to the collection of leavened food before Passover; here a *goy* behaves like a Jew while eating becomes a sacred act. Yet, despite the similarity, there *is* a difference marked by the word, *lehavdil*. The man’s carefulness not to lose even a bit comes from poverty, from hunger, yet it is elevated to the level of a religious ritual. Besides, the man finds the Jewish bread very tasty. He stands amidst the crowd in the town; he is an obvious element of the wider picture, one that does not attract attention. It is because such types, as Israel Bartal points out, “live with their Jewish neighbours, who constitute the majority in the town or *shtetl*, in a well-defined form of co-existence where the meeting ground is demarcated by people’s occupations.”⁵

In the same market place, one can observe a madman running away from the hooligans who chase him around. The madman sings a sad song, half in Polish, and half in Yiddish. Indeed, it is madness to mix up languages: he does not know where he belongs. Do “normal” people not sing in their *own* language?

Interestingly, the knowledge and choice of language runs through the gender divide: it is women who speak (some) vernacular and are able to communicate at the market. This is why in the novel Senderl, who plays the feminine role, is the one who speaks on behalf of Benjamin, in a mixture of Yiddish and Ukrainian. However, throughout the novel the only non-Jews Benjamin and Senderl get to meet are men!

⁵ Bartal 1988: 314.

Finally, the second important group of non-Jewish protagonists are the army officials. Benjamin and Senderl are tricked by two Jewish *chappers* who, taking advantage of their naivety, turn them in to the tsarist conscription board. The situation differs from the previous ones in a few ways: the non-Jews are no longer peasants met accidentally, they are officials of an organized powerful system. Benjamin and Senderl appear before them naked and shaved, after they are fooled into thinking this is a bathhouse. Then they are turned into conscripts, however inadequate they are for the role.

The story comes to its climax with Benjamin's and Senderl's short military service. Benjamin is depressed that he cannot continue his expedition. They are humiliated and put into the army's routine. Even if they have run away from their wives, now they want to return to them, to the town, to the familiar life. Before this happens, however, the travellers must go through an embarrassing and degrading experience. They are inspected by well-dressed, polite people, who speak Russian with a proper accent. Here, the question of language appears again.

Senderl seems to accommodate himself to the new conditions, but Benjamin cannot bear it. His dream of the great pilgrimage does not abandon him and so Senderl's military exercise irritates him seriously.

– בחיך, סנדריל, אין אתה אלא תינוק שוטה! אתה משחק ועושה מעשה נערות כילד פרא. ואני שואל אותך, מה בצע לנו בדברי-שטות הללו ומה יהיה בסופנו? זכור, סנדריל, שבעל אשה אתה, ברוך-השם, ואל תשכח גם זאת – שיהודי אתה, ולמה זה אתה מפנה לבך למיני דברים האלו, עוסק בהם בהתמדה גדולה והוגה במ יומם ולילה? למאי נפקא מינה אם פינה זו שאתה פונה ברגל – שמאלית היא או ימנית, כמו שהם מדקדקים בה, וכי לא היינו הך?

Indeed, Abramovitch solves the puzzle of the plot abruptly and has Benjamin and Senderl released and returning to the *shtetl*. Miron and Norich⁶ assert that the two Jews travel in circles, that they never actually leave the area. The people they meet outside of their world in fact belong to this same *shtetl*/Ukrainian village more than the beginning of the story and the quixotic allusions would suggest. In the concluding chapter, Benjamin gives a speech in front of the board. This time he makes the effort himself to explain why he and Senderl do not fit the army discipline. For the first time, Benjamin does not use his companion to communicate, but launches his defence half in Yiddish, half in broken Russian. The speech is both exalted and pathetic, and Benjamin does not seem to be afraid anymore: his audience are generals and colonels who laugh behind his back, but who in the end set the Jews free.

The scene, like all of the novel, is grotesque. All the characters in the story, whether Jewish or gentile, are portrayed in an exaggerated and distorted manner. Thus – in spite of the expected change triggered by the meeting with the Other – within this grotesque world, any exaggeration and distortion of a non-Jew needs to be understood in context.

A closer look at the structure of the novel brings a rather surprising result; it appears that the presence of *goy* is not only episodic. Rather, throughout their journey, Benjamin and Senderl come across several non-Jewish heroes. In a way, their meeting with the outside world *is* the meeting with a gentile. Many of the questions, nevertheless, are not answered. The reversal of perspectives, when the majority in social and political

⁶ Miron & Norich 1980: 24.

life becomes a minority in the course of the narrative, does not explain the full picture. The open ending of the novella leaves the problems unresolved.

Goyim in the narrative stand for symbols of the outside world, which in the minds of Benjamin and Senderl is dangerous and threatening, and in the course of the narrative, turn out to be somewhat brute and primitive, but goodhearted. What's more, a few times they save the heroes out of oppression. The experience derived from the meetings with peasants does not seem to be helpful in Benjamin and Senderl's "adventure" with the Russian army. Nevertheless, the real villains in the story are the two *chappers*, who turn their fellow Jews in to the hands of the Russians.

The following question, therefore, brought up by the series of encounters, could be posed: is not the non-Jew, by way of a paradox, he who the Jew is not? In this way, the image of the gentile becomes the continuation of the portrayal of the Jews – by means of a black-and-white negative, and by magnifying the grotesque portrayal of the Jewish reality from the Russian Pale.

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