

eign. Therefore, when one introduces the people through a story to these lofty ideas, one must make them familiar—little by little—with all the rungs of the ladder which leads up to that world referred to as “poetry.”

And again in the same article:

With the common reader . . . we should not soar high all at once. . . . The people will not understand us, and our writing will be wasted. With the people one must proceed gradually, not hurriedly, step by step. . . .

And with the emphasis somewhat shifted:

Writing for the common people and talking to them in their language, one must present them with images and introduce them to characters with which they are familiar; that is, the heroes must come from their [the people's] own world and of their own class; indeed, they must be found among themselves.<sup>8</sup>

These passages, often quoted by critics with socialist and Marxist tendencies as indicative of Sholem Aleichem's essential “progressiveness,” “democratism,” and affiliation with “the masses,” actually indicate how far, at least in his literary theory, he was from identifying his own literary personality with the masses and with their language. As much as his arguments were meant to present a method of elevating “the people” to the world of poetry, and as much as they implied that such elevation could be attained in Yiddish—though slowly and gradually—they bear the unmistakable stamp of the traditional concept of Yiddish as “their” language (notice the double emphasis: “writing for the common people and talking to them in their language”). It was a medium fit for the description of the familiar (“their own world”), of immediate, well-known social reality (“their own class”), and not of the intellectually or emotionally new (“lofty ideas”). Above all else, it was, for the present, a language adapted to “low” literature, written with constant reference to the limitations of its readers and thus not a literature meant to absorb the full individuality of the writer. It is when we read statements like these that we realize how really revolutionary Perets was in his argument that the writer's main obligation was to himself, to his individuality. He was suggesting that the materials of Yiddish literature should be sought not only in the external, social world but also in the inner world of the individual consciousness or, as he put it, in “all the worlds together.”

## ii

If until the 1890s, or even until the very end of the century, Yiddish was regarded as unaesthetic, incapable of expressing the individual consciousness, a communal language to be employed only in direct reference to the immediate reality of Jewish life, what then could have been the criteria by which artists such as Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem directed their stylistic efforts? This question has particular relevance in the case of Abramovitsh, since it is quite clear that he was searching for some kind of stylistic perfection; but what kind of stylistic perfection could be pursued in the vulgar idiom of a community allegedly devoid of any sense of formal beauty? In the introduction (in the form of a dedication) to *Stempenyu*, Sholem Aleichem quoted Abramovitsh as having addressed to him in a letter this admonitory advice: “On a work of art, dear grandson, one must work, sweat, polish every word. Remember what I tell you—polish! Polish!”<sup>9</sup> It is possible that Abramovitsh never wrote these neatly phrased and quotable sentences (for they are not to be found in the carefully preserved collection of his letters to Sholem Aleichem). It is also possible that the “grandson,” in his impetuous myth making, thought he was merely rendering in a more memorable form, statements the “grandfather” had really made; statements that actually differed in tenor and emphasis from the artistic credo into which they might have been refashioned. Even so, the plea for conscientious artistic labor certainly corresponded to a principle inherent in Abramovitsh's literary practice. By 1888, it should be remembered, Abramovitsh had already twice rewritten his *Fishke the Lame* (originally published in 1869, this story was rewritten, but not republished, in 1876 and then completely reworked for publication in 1888). He rewrote once, and perhaps more than once, his *Little Man* (1864, 1879). He was at the time hard at work on a new version of his early *Magic Ring* (1865). Surely all this indefatigable revision must have been informed by some ideal of literary and stylistic perfection. Surely Abramovitsh and many other writers were motivated by a positive aesthetic principle of sorts. They could not conceive of this principle in clearly defined terms. The very nature of the ideological situation made this impossible. No Yiddish writer before Perets had been able to conceptualize his aesthetic impulses into a positive aesthetic rationale, and even Perets, as we have seen, was hampered by grave theoretical difficulties in his efforts to as-

sert himself as a Yiddish artist. Yet, if the way to a positive aesthetic theory was blocked, other outlets could have been found for a strong sense of artistic mission. Abstract concepts were most vulnerable to the negation of the prevailing aesthetics of ugliness, but concrete images, for instance, were much less so. It was all but impossible for a Yiddish writer to announce himself as a creator of beauty, but it was quite possible for him to project himself in an image implying the creation of beauty, such as a nightingale, a musician, a violin (a symbol much in use). Sholem Aleichem, we must realize, revolutionized, perhaps even created, the historical consciousness of modern Yiddish literature not by his critical concepts but by the image of the grand-father-artist.

It is necessary for our argument that we investigate some of the possibilities which may emerge once we begin to reconstruct the conceptual implications of such images, and add them to something like a subterranean artistic self-awareness. At this point, an observation made by the Hebrew writer M. Y. Berditshevski (1865-1921) may offer some help. As a Hebraist who wrote Yiddish ably and quite extensively, Berditshevski enjoyed in his observations on Yiddish and its literature the double advantage of a practitioner's firsthand knowledge and of an outsider's distance, a perspective which the more deeply committed could not have. This may explain in part the extraordinary lucidity and straightforwardness of the following comment on the difficulties which the literary use of Yiddish involved. It is taken from a Yiddish article titled "Far dem tararam" ("Before the Tumult Began"):

If you want to know the whole truth, then I must own that it is not at all simple to publish a newspaper in Yiddish. Indeed, it is a task difficult enough to intimidate any man. You must understand: Newspapers are published in Yiddish for the benefit of the common people, to serve them as guides; however, as of now we still are not in possession of a language adequate for this task. By no means can we get along with what we have. In Yiddish one can easily talk about the Jew or discuss him, but one cannot tell the Jew about ourselves or discuss with him our thoughts. The language is still so indivisible from the Jew, so thickly rooted in his soul, that all we can say about it is, this is how a Jew talks; this is the means by which he portrays to himself the world and explains to himself the problems of the Jewish people. However, to make the Jew understand through his own language a foreign idea: to cope with

this task one must be a master; one must absorb oneself in it, lose oneself and whatever one possesses in it. One must know how to put every idea in the Jew's own mouth; how to let him understand it as if he himself said it and in the way he himself would have explained it. Very few people are up to such a feat; one in a thousand; perhaps only one in a generation. You see, anyone can learn Hebrew, provided that he confines himself to his desk for a few years, stuffs himself with the Bible and grammar, and reads some *melitse* books [belles lettres, poetry]. The mastering of Yiddish, however, is a gift; a faculty one must be born with. I am speaking, of course, of the real thing, of radical, authentic Yiddish.<sup>10</sup>

I have quoted this passage at length for its wide aura of suggestion and implication and not as direct historical evidence. It cannot be regarded as the latter for our purposes primarily because it was written at a relatively late stage (*ca.* 1906), and thus it reflects a literary milieu considerably different from that of the earlier period with which our discussion is concerned. Moreover, its subject being the difficulties of the Yiddish press, it bears only indirectly on the problems of imaginative literature. All these facts notwithstanding, the passage can have a provocative, catalytic influence on our thinking. In discussing the plight of Yiddish newspapers, Berditshevski touched upon a range of subjects much wider than that to which he was directly referring. By suggesting that what hampered the functioning of these newspapers was the inadequacy of the language and not external (financial, political) impediments, he hit upon the crucial problem in the development of the literary use of modern Yiddish in all its stages and forms and made a point which is obviously relevant to our argument.

What immediately emerges as a helpful suggestion is the distinction Berditshevski draws in the opening sentences of the passage, between "the Jew"—an abstract, collective, monolithic entity—and "us"—journalists and writers—i.e., between the Jewish masses and the Jewish intelligentsia. This distinction between the Europeanized writers and their non-Europeanized readers is most thorough and far-reaching. It is not only that the writers differ from their readers in taste or range of intellectual interests; the writers and the readers actually inhabit different worlds and make sense of these worlds through different mental mechanisms. They hardly have a common frame of reference. If the literary intelligentsia is able to a certain extent to envisage the world of "the Jew" ("tell about the Jew") because most of

its members had at one stage of their development a firsthand experience of it, it is rarely able to share its own world with the uninitiated "Jew" ("tell about ourselves"). It cannot convey its "ideas," which are admittedly "foreign," outside a limited intellectual territory; at least it cannot be done through Yiddish, for the language, which is still an integral part of the world of "the Jew," cannot correspond to anything beyond its own barriers. Thus, the intelligentsia is gravely hampered in the playing of its official role, that of "guiding" the people. It is a frustrated intelligentsia, since the special historical circumstances under which it has developed have made it largely unfit to carry out the duty which similar intellectual elites naturally assume.

This complete polarization of masses versus intelligentsia cannot, of course, be expected to reflect historical reality. Like most extreme positions that achieve clarity through absolute dichotomies, it oversimplifies certain aspects of the historical situation it pretends to explain while ignoring others. Nevertheless, it has some usefulness. Like similar positions it can, if it carries the weight of serious meditation, throw light on a general and relatively simple principle operating beneath the complexities of the surface. To regard the Yiddish literary intelligentsia and "the people" as inhabiting fundamentally different worlds, or as constituting "two camps" (to use the title Berditshevski gave to one of his best Hebrew novelettes), is to get quite close to the core of the historical truth, as all the evidence offered in these chapters suggests. It was because he differentiated "the Jew" and his world (which includes the Yiddish language) from "us" and "our ideas" in an extreme and, no doubt, simplified manner, that Berditshevski was able to point unequivocally to the historical paradox we have been discussing. Other writers and commentators had certainly sensed this paradox but could not formulate it as simply and as straightforwardly as he did. Against the background of endlessly vague talk about Yiddish literature as "the expression of the people," his position in this matter is extraordinarily perspicacious and edifying.

We realize how edifying it can be when we reach the point Berditshevski makes once his initial distinction is amply clear, that is, when he reaches his conclusion: that because the Yiddish writer and the Yiddish language belong to different worlds, the successful literary use of Yiddish is extremely rare, and involves an attempt on the part of the writer to express his thoughts through the simulated voice of "the Jew" rather than through his own, "natural" voice. To become the

good Yiddish writer (perhaps one should say the "ideal" Yiddish writer), Berditshevski insists, "One must know how to put every idea in the Jew's own mouth; how to let him understand it as if he himself said it and in the way he himself would have explained it." Certainly this is one of the more pregnant remarks ever made on nineteenth-century Yiddish literature in general and on its beginnings in particular. What it amounts to is the suggestion that, for his work to achieve the status of art, a Yiddish writer has to conceal his direct identity and to master a technique of self-alienation or even of self-elimination in his writing. For that, the writer has to be endowed with a gift for histrionic disguise and with a sure sense of the proper limitations of feigned innocence. Making "the Jew" talk naturally and fluently and yet express at the same time "ideas" that might be quite remote from his own, the Yiddish writer is required to be a master of dramatic irony. Irony, indeed, must be the very element in which he functions. Though he is by no means always obliged to be ironic in the strict or rhetorical sense of the term (the sense in which irony is "a figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite from that expressed in the word used"),<sup>11</sup> he is always ironic in the sense that with him the very act of speech, the very application of words to thought is a reconciliation of opposites and a deliberate gesture of simulation. By prescribing this difficult remedy for the difficult ailments of the Yiddish *Wortkunst*, Berditshevski put his finger with unprecedented accuracy on the pulse of the artistic vein running throughout the body of nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction. One does not wonder that he was the first, and for some time the only, critic to acknowledge the genial greatness of Sholem Aleichem and to refer to his best works as poetry of universal relevance.<sup>12</sup> If he could persist in this evaluation at a time when it was the fashion among the Yiddish establishment to tolerate the enviable popularity of Sholem Aleichem with the condescending superiority which "pure" art sometimes assumes toward successful entertainment,<sup>13</sup> it was not only because he had sound literary intuition but also because his thinking was directed by sound principles and because he had a true notion of the scope and limitations of contemporary Yiddish literature as a whole.

To be sure, these notions and principles were not expressed in critical abstractions but in an image: the poet assuming a mask, playing the role of "the Jew." A mere metaphor, this is highly suggestive, and it has a concrete bearing on the reality of the artistic employment of

Yiddish by such writers as Linetski, Abramovitch, Sholem Aleichem, and to a certain extent, even Perets. In order to realize how concrete and direct this bearing is, one has only to recall the numerous historical and biographical examples such as the one offered as the motto of this chapter. Abramovitch's imaginary calling on his "little Jew" (as described by the poet D. Eynhorn, who was for a time Abramovitch's secretary) is in every way symbolic. It is the symbol of the nineteenth-century Jewish writer, definitely one of "us," the Europeanized Jewish intelligentsia, immersing himself in "their" world, the world of "the little Jews," in order to function as an artist. He is an actor, impersonating "them," speaking in a voice not his own, and he depends on an imaginary "prompter" who puts the right words in his mouth. Thus he performs the difficult task, which Berditshevski described as putting "every idea in the Jew's own mouth . . . as if he himself said it and in the way he himself would have explained it."

iii

It is worthwhile, I think, to dwell on some of the associations that Berditshevski's conception of the ideal Yiddish writer give rise to. First, he is a dedicated artist. To achieve his goal, he must absorb himself in his work, "lose whatever he possesses in it." Second, he is a mimetic genius. He evokes comparisons from one distinct area, that of the theater or even the circus. One may compare him to a tightrope dancer who skillfully keeps his perilous balance between the historical bias of the language toward the exclusive mentality of "the Jew" and his own intellectual bias toward "foreign" ideas and concepts. One may even compare him to a ventriloquist who is able to assume a voice or voices distinctly different from his own and master them with such mimetic subtlety, with such accuracy of nuance, as to make them express his own "ideas" without letting his audience become aware of his trick. Above all else, this conception of a writer reminds one of the comic actor; the skilled, self-disciplined, highly effective comedian.

These are by no means idle comparisons. They certainly have a bearing on the way many Yiddish artists regarded themselves and were regarded by their readers. Linetski, for instance, established himself in the imagination of his contemporaries as a *beyzer marshelik* ("a sharp-tongued wedding-jester," the title of his first and best-known collection of poems), who was permitted to tell his audience the bitter

truth about themselves because he conveyed it by theatrical means. He also liked to compare himself to a wandering minstrel, to a beggar with a lyre, etc.<sup>14</sup> At a certain stage in his career, he wrote satirical *chansons* for the entertainers in the Jewish wine cellars of Odessa, and sometimes he himself would perform.<sup>15</sup> To the end he remained a superb performer of his own works,<sup>16</sup> and a hilarious mimic with a repertoire of celebrated "numbers" (he would stage, for instance, a hasidic *Melave-malke*\* and would himself improvise the role of the *tsadik*).<sup>17</sup> The very act of writing was with him a theatrical gesture. Not only did he write a considerable part of his *feuilletons* in a dramatic form, but he conceived of all his works as of theatrical *tours de force*. Each of his collections of *feuilletons* opens with a noisy introduction, which more than anything else resembles the appearance of a vaudeville entertainer on the stage amid applause, laughter, whistles, and provocative interjections. Having bowed to the readers, his persona, Eli Kotsin Hatskhakueli, immediately establishes "contact" with the audience present, exchanges jokes, answers questions, and welcomes old acquaintances with sarcastic congratulations.<sup>18</sup> A similar "act" is performed by Mendele the Bookpeddler in his prefatory addresses, which open most of Abramovitch's works.

Abramovitch, as we learn from the numerous reminiscences of those who knew him, was the supreme actor in whatever he did. Many of his letters to his fellow writers can be described only as private epistolary theatricals, and his famous table talk was an elaborate scenic performance.<sup>19</sup> To him writing itself was an essentially histrionic gesture. In the aforementioned article of D. Eynhorn we find this description:

I remember my first day as his secretary. He was then translating the new chapters of *The Nag*, which had originally been written in Hebrew. Having finished his coffee and rested somewhat, he beckoned to me to be ready with my pen and ordered: Write! From that moment the show started. He was not dictating; he impersonated, acted like a performer on the stage. In front of my eyes living characters began to hover. They gesticulated, talked, and eventually evaporated. From time to time he would remain paralyzed, a fixed grimace on his face, searching for a word. . . .

When you translate something, he used to say, forget your original,

\* *Melave-malke* (literally, "ushering out of the queen"; in this case, the holy Sabbath)—the meal eaten at the conclusion of the Sabbath, with singing.

close your book, quarrel with it. Each language has its own grimaces. And so he would stand without a rest for four hours, sob, laugh, get angry, quarrel, talk like a merchant, like an old Jewish woman, like a *rov*, like a *maskil*, mimicking each in his turn.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most revealing part of this vignette is the statement "Each language has its own grimaces," which portrays not only the writer but even language itself as an actor or a clown with his own mimetic manner.

Sholem Aleichem recorded in his autobiography the first manifestation of his artistic nature as an irresistible urge to mimicry and impromptu theatricals. He also attributed this urge to many of his artistically gifted child heroes, such as Motl, the son of the cantor Peyse.<sup>21</sup> All his life he was fascinated by the theater (for which he wrote copiously) as well as by the other performing arts. Three of his major novels deal with performing artists and describe what may perhaps be called Jewish *vie de bohème* (*Stempenyu* describes the world of the *klezmers*, the popular musicians of the traditional Jewish wedding; *Yosele solovey*, "Yosele the Nightingale," is a brilliant cantor; and in *Blondzhnde shtern*, "Wandering Stars," a traveling theatrical troupe is followed from a small town in Bessarabia to the Lower East Side of New York). From quite an early stage of his career he identified himself with the romantic concept of the circus-clown with a fixed expression of hilarity concealing a broken heart. So intensely did he identify himself with this image, that he made it the subject of the little poem he prepared as early as 1905 to have engraved on his tombstone:

Do ligt a yid, a posheter,  
Geshribn yidish-taytsh far vayber,  
Un farn proshn folk hot er—  
Geven a humorist a shrayber.

Dos gantse lebn oysgelakht,  
Geshlogn mit der velt kapores.  
Di gantse velt hot gut gemakht,  
Un er—oy vey—geven af tsores!

Un dafke demlt, ven der oylem hot  
Gelakht, geklatsht un fleg zikh freyen,  
Hot er gekrenkt—dos veyst nor got—  
Besod, az keyner zol nit zen.<sup>22</sup>

("Here lies a simple Jew./ Who wrote Yiddish for women,/ And for the common people;/ He was a humorist, a writer./ He ridiculed life itself;/ He laughed at the whole world./ The whole world prospered,/ While he—alas—was hard up./ And at that time, when his audience/ Laughed, clapped and had fun—/ Precisely then he pined away—God is his witness—/ Secretly, lest anybody notice.")

In a first version of this epitaph the penultimate line read: "Hot er geveynt" ("he sobbed" instead of "he pined away"), which further emphasizes the connection between the self-portrait of the author and the idea of the actor, since it so obviously smacks of the operatic gesture (Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* had a strong appeal for Sholem Aleichem).<sup>23</sup> Incidentally, during his later years Sholem Aleichem virtually acted the role of the pining comedian as, not unlike Dickens, he read his stories throughout Europe and the United States with immense success, thereby ruining his deteriorating health.

The idea of the stage and the image of the actor were bound to loom large in nineteenth-century Yiddish literature. Their prominence was postulated by the logic of the linguistic situation. As a communal idiom, external to the consciousness of the writer, Yiddish had to be used mimetically simply because there could be no other way of using it effectively. A language of public communication and not of meditation, it functioned only in actual speech, that is, dramatically. A Yiddish work, whether it was meant to be read aloud or not (and more often than not it was), had a distinct vocal quality; it was written for recitation—if only in the imagination—with the proper intonation and gesticulation. When the writer or his persona spoke it, they addressed an audience, explicitly or implicitly; when a person talked to himself in it, he treated his consciousness as a stage. Abramovitch's and Sholem Aleichem's works are full of theatrical inner dialogues ("dialogues," because in them the consciousness is dramatized as two separate beings engaged in a discussion; "theatrical," because in spite of being avowedly internal, they are reported as if actually staged, with gesticulations, descriptions of tone of speech, etc.). Whatever artistic use was being made of Yiddish, the presence of the language had to be distanced from one's self, moved into the limelight of a stage, made spectacular and, in a way, impersonal. Staginess was the linguistic reality of Yiddish literature at the time, and there was no way to avoid it. On the one hand, this staginess indicates the basic limitations of the artistic use of Yiddish by nineteenth-century writers. This use was

confined to dramatic imitation, to monologues and dialogues of a comic (i.e., "low") nature. Levinzon, with the negative attitude of a *maskil*, defined it quite correctly when he insisted that the language was "sufficient only for vulgar subjects and for common conversations." We have only to drop the pejorative adjectives, or perhaps to replace the words "common conversations" and "vulgar subjects" by words such as "idiomatic dialogues and materials" or "subjects fit for comedy or satire" in order to see how close to the truth he was.

On the other hand, however, this quality of the literary use of the language constituted an outlet for positive artistic effort. Levinzon pointed out the insufficiencies of Yiddish, but unconsciously he was also defining areas where it could achieve artistic excellence—the areas of comedy and dramatized speech. Here was certainly an opening for a notion of artistic pleasure within the boundaries of the aesthetics of ugliness. (Had not Aristotle prescribed that even the ugly could yield a pleasing effect in a work of art, because "the pleasure felt in things imitated" is "universal," and thus, even "objects, which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity. . . .")<sup>24</sup>

The idea of the theater and the image of the comic actor are suggestive of what might be described as a positive principle in the aesthetics of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature. They are associated not only with the pleasures of artistic imitation, but also with the idea of artistic skill and self-discipline. What is more important, they imply the separateness of art and life, or the autonomy of art. The mimetic writer must shed his private personality and develop another one: independent, objective. In a literature so deeply committed to immediate utilitarian ends, this suggestion could have a considerable liberating influence. It could, and it did, fashion the identity of writers as artists. It is not accidental that the novelist Y. Dinezon found fault with some of Abramovitch's best works (*Benjamin the Third*, for instance) because, as he put it, "when I read them I have a feeling that the author performs a dance on a tightrope for the benefit of his friends and of other writers, and cares little whether he is being useful to the people or not."<sup>25</sup> This is not accidental, because Dinezon, perhaps more than any other writer, represents the homiletic-sentimental streak in Yiddish fiction; a streak which in his works as well as in those of other minor novelists proved definitely antiartistic, inimical to irony, to conscious structural artistry, to the idea of literary technique, to

stylistic perfection, and favorable to moralistic sermonizing, to unbridled emotionalism, and to stylistic sloppiness. Above all else, the tradition which Dinezon represents objected to the separation of art from life. But for those Yiddish writers who aspired to artistic self-control such a separation was absolutely necessary. In a sense, they really were tightrope dancers, and in order to maintain their balance they had to detach their personal self from their skill. Sholem Aleichem's epitaph implies that without the disciplined simulation of the clown he would not have been able to function as the great comedian of the Jewish people. The theatrical gesture enabled him (as it enabled Mark Twain) to isolate his bruised self from his comic art. In the introductory chapter to his autobiography, *Funem yarid* ("Back from the Fair"), Sholem Aleichem developed the same idea from a somewhat different direction. Here it emerges from an explanation of the difficulties he faced in this book:

Writing an autobiography, a true, unfabricated life story. Why, that amounts to accounting for one's whole life in public, to saying one's last confession before the whole world. Indeed, writing one's biography and writing one's will are almost the same thing. . . . Besides, it is so hard for a person speaking of himself to rise to the moral height required for resisting the temptation of showing oneself to the best advantage, playing the good fellow whose cheek calls for your pinch. This is why I decided to write my biography in a special form, the form of a novel, a biographical novel. I shall therefore talk of myself in the third person, which is to say, I, *Sholem Aleichem the writer*, shall tell you the true life story of *Sholem Aleichem the person* . . . as if it were told by an outside observer, a complete stranger, but a stranger who has always been with my hero and who has seen him through the seven circles of hell. . . .<sup>26</sup>

For many of Sholem Aleichem's dedicated readers this must have seemed strangely coy. For decades they had been used to regarding him as their most familiar friend, a veritable member of the household. He had talked endlessly with them in the first person, treated them to his jokes, trusted them with his innermost secrets. With him they had always been *entre nous*, so to speak, and finally, after thirty years of public familiarity, to exhibit this maidenly shame, this stage fear, this need for the technical aid of the third person and of the "special form" of the biographical novel! In the same way the few remaining readers of Linetski must have been baffled by the old writer's confession that, do what he would, he could not bring himself to publish an autobiog-

raphy because "he could not let his naked I," his "deep-hidden I," appear in public, as if literature were a bathhouse (this confession was made in Linetski's last printed work, a slim brochure titled, like Sholem Aleichem's autobiography, *Funem yarid*).<sup>27</sup> After all, hadn't he told the story of his childhood in all its terrible ugliness fifty years before in his *Dos poylishhe yingl* (this satire was generally treated as an autobiography), then reiterated it in his *Vorem in khreyen* ("The Worm in the Horseradish"), and again elaborated on it in his *Khsidish yingl* ("The Hasidic Boy")? Didn't his entire literary output amount to one long exhibitionistic autobiography? Both Sholem Aleichem and Linetski tried to use the compositions they regarded as summing up their literary activity for telling the public the long-blurred truth, namely, that they had never revealed to their readers the "naked, deep-hidden I"; that the first person, always assumed with such an air of naturalness, did not represent their personal selves; that with all their familiar garrulity they had concealed as much as they had revealed; that their whole literary achievement was based on a deliberately deceptive duality. Emphasizing and antagonizing the concepts of writer versus person, Sholem Aleichem was plainly out to make even his most naive readers understand this crucial matter: the writer and the man were two different entities. The writer had always accompanied the man, and yet he had remained a stranger to him, an impartial observer. He had seen him through the seven circles of hell, like Dante's Virgil, but he did not share his pains. He understood, sympathized, but never lost his objectivity.

*iv*

We can now complete this cycle of observations by linking Sholem Aleichem's differentiation between the writer and the person with Berditshevski's distinction between "the Jew" and "us." There can be no doubt that they are significantly related to each other. Of course, the difference between the artist's persona and his individual personality did not necessarily originate from the historical situation that separated the Jewish intellectuals from the Jewish masses; it is, indeed, a difference of a universal character, for it has to do with the nature of art itself. Still, it was absorbed and refashioned by this situation and thus given its specific historical and literary direction. A few illustrations will help make this clear.

The introductory chapter to Sholem Aleichem's *Funem yarid*, written two or three years before the author's death, reflects the enlarged self-knowledge of the aging artist who had had a brush with death and who, already on his way back from the fair, could find time for a leisurely study of himself and his world. But the awareness of the duality of writer and person did not require all this leisure and introspection. It existed even when the writer was impatient to get to the fair. In 1888, that *annus mirabilis* of his career (the publication of two novels, *Sender Blank* and *Stempenyu*, the appearance of the first *Folks-bibliyotek*, the long articles on Shomer and on Jewish poverty in Yiddish literature, the establishing of the grandson-grandfather relationship with Abramovitch, etc.), he wrote a *feuilleton*, in which the narrator, Sholem Aleichem, finds himself in his own home town but in an unfamiliar, modern-looking street. "Be good enough to tell me who lives here in this big brick house?" he asks a Jew who happens to hurry by. A characteristic staccato conversation (quoted here in a somewhat abridged version) develops:

"Oh yes, here lives. . . . Wait. Wait, I'll remember presently. Oh yes. It seems that no less a person than Monastiryov, Yakov Borisovitch Monastiryov, lives here."

"A Jew?"

"A Jew!"

"Yakov Borisovitch?"

"The same!"

"Wait a moment, isn't this Yankl Bereles?"

"I cannot tell."

"Isn't he the son of Berele Monastrishtsher?"

"Ask him."

"No, don't be angry with me. Do understand. There is something. That Yakov Borisovitch was my schoolmate. We studied together in the same *kheyder*,<sup>o</sup> and he was. . . ."

"But where do I come into all this?"

". . . . But you must understand how important this is for me. After all, a friend of mine—I mean Yankl, Yankl Bereles was my friend . . . and suddenly Yakov Borisovitch Monastiryov!"

The impatient interlocutor flees, and Sholem Aleichem resumes his

<sup>o</sup> *Kheyder* (literally, "room")—the traditional small private school where most Eastern European Jewish children got their *khumesh* (Pentateuch) and *gemore* (Talmud) education.

walk in the modern street. He discovers—by the brass plaques on the brick and stone walls of the spacious houses—other *kheyder* classmates concealed under crudely Russified and even Christianized (Monastiryov, “of the monastery”) names. Among others, he encounters one who gives him an especially disagreeable surprise:

Solomon Naumovitsh—who could this creature be? A-a-ah? Oh, it’s you Sholemke, isn’t it? Sholem Reb Nokhem Vevek’s son. . . . Fine, fine, very fine indeed. I believe I still remember you when you walked in your little shoes and stockings<sup>o</sup> and had quite a head for the *gemore*. I thought then that you would certainly end up as a *rov* of a small town, or at least as a *shoykhet*, a *moyel*, a *bal metsise*,<sup>o o</sup> and what do you know? Here you turn up a Solomon Naumovitsh of all things. What does your uncle Pinye say to this? And Itsik—does he let it be? How come?<sup>28</sup>

This is a private joke, which only a part of the reading public could sense, let alone fully understand, in 1888, although even then, it was quite clear that Solomon Naumovitsh was the author himself. We need, however, the information Sholem Aleichem supplied in *Funem yarid* to know, for instance, that Pinye was his fanatically hasidic uncle. Always suspicious of his brother Nokhem, who in his secret heart was a moderate *maskil*, Pinye took upon himself to guard his nephews from sinning; he was especially circumspect with the high-spirited Sholemke, about whose *yidishkeyt* (“Jewish faith,” or “Jewish way of life”) he had always had the worst misgivings. It was therefore quite natural for the narrator of the *feuilleton*, obviously acquainted with the family situation of Sholemke, to wonder what Pinye’s reaction to the Russification of his nephew’s name (as well as to the other changes it implied) could have been. A joke though it is, this little scene is nevertheless also a manifestation of critical self-awareness on the part of Sholem Aleichem; critical self-awareness on two parallel levels, aesthetic and sociological. From the aesthetic point of view, the early *feuilleton* clearly foretells what was to be said twenty-five years later in *Funem yarid*, about the difference between Sholem Aleichem the public figure, the well-known comedian, and the private Sholem

<sup>o</sup> The Jewish shoes and socks are contrasted here to the more Russian boots. Low shoes and white cotton stockings were items of traditional, especially hasidic, attire.

<sup>o o</sup> *Rov*, rabbi; *shoykhet*, ritual slaughterer; *moyel*, circumciser; *bal metsise*, one who sucks the blood at circumcision. All are *kley koydesh* (literally, “holy vessels”)—the clerical elite of the Jewish congregation.

Rabinovitsh. The notion of this difference is employed here for the purposes of comedy, but that does not mean that it was not taken seriously. On the contrary, realized in a comic situation, it is all the more concrete and immediate. The writer-comedian here is literally the outsider, the stranger referred to in the opening chapter of the autobiography. He is perhaps an even more remote personality than this. In *Funem yarid* the writer has accompanied his hero throughout his life; here the narrator seems to have lost touch with Sholemke immediately after the *kheyder* days. If the difference between writer and man has schizoid overtones, here they can be heard much louder.<sup>29</sup> The second level upon which our comic scene is staged is sociological and cultural. The narrator Sholem Aleichem differs from Solomon Naumovitsh in his cultural allegiances. Though he does not directly refer to his position on the problem of tradition and Europeanization in Jewish life, it is clear on which side of the fence he stands, and by what criteria he judges the metamorphosis which has taken place in his old friends’ names and, no doubt, in all the other marks of their cultural identity. Though he is not necessarily to be identified with people like Uncle Pinye, he is, at least for the purposes of this specific scene, certainly antagonistic to Solomon Naumovitsh and to what he represents. In any case, there can be no doubt that he still belongs to the world of “the Jew”; he speaks its language and thinks its thoughts. In this respect the opening conversation is of importance. Whatever Sholem Aleichem the writer may be, he is always *on speaking terms* with the common Jewish people. This, indeed, is his central characteristic as a literary persona. He addresses Jewish people, and he listens to them. The ease, the casualness with which the narrator opens the conversation with the unwilling passer-by, his almost tiresome insistence on sharing with him his feelings (a then-current comic device in Sholem Aleichem’s *feuilletons*) are indications of his unquestionable “belonging.” His familiarity with his occasional interlocutor is that basic familiarity of a monolithic society, where one does not have to know people personally in order to address them freely and even intimately. Besides, the narrator clearly addresses his Jew as a potential ally against Yakov Borisovitsh Monastiryov or, for that matter, against Solomon Naumovitsh. Incidentally, the *feuilleton* not only opens with a conversation in which one party is unwilling to take part but it also ends with such a conversation. The narrator recognizes a childhood friend in a foreign-looking gentleman who is eyeing him rather suspiciously. “Why do you



gape at me so, Yoylik? Don't you know me? I am your friend, Sholem Aleichem," he pleads, but in vain. The gentleman, who answers in Russian (the foreignness is conveyed in the Yiddish text by heavy Germanisms), insists that his name is Yevlik Petrovitsh and not Yoylik, that he does not know any Sholem Aleichem, and that he is too busy to be bothered. If this Yevlik Petrovitsh is to be taken as representative of Sholem Aleichem's Russified acquaintances, then we may have here some further comment on the possible relationship between the narrator and Solomon Naumovitsh. Would Solomon, too, have denied his *kheyder* friend his recognition and conversation?

The *feuilleton* we are discussing should perhaps not be overpressed for "meanings." It is too slight a piece to stand much pressure; but surely it proves Sholem Aleichem's awareness of the ambiguity of his position as a Europeanized intellectual who is also a popular Yiddish humorist. Likewise, it surely indicates the existence of a connection between this awareness and the author's insistence on the separateness of Sholem Aleichem and Solomon, the persona and the person. Moreover, this *feuilleton* is by no means an accident, an isolated case. However slight, it is characteristic. The situation it creates recurs in nineteenth-century Yiddish fiction. It is developed more than once in the works of Abramovitsh. For instance, Abramovitsh has his Fishke the Lame, the itinerant beggar, find his way in the course of his wanderings to Odessa and there have a glimpse of the principal of the local *Talmud-toyre*,<sup>9</sup> who is also a well-known satirist. This momentary encounter occurs as Fishke is strolling along the boulevards of the southern city with another beggar, with whom he is engaged in a heated argument. Yontl, the other beggar, like Fishke, is a native of the Jewish town Glupsk ("Silly-town," one of the three symbolic Jewish towns that figure in Abramovitsh's works), but he has already stayed in Odessa long enough to refer to it as "our Odessa"; he is already "assimilated," so to speak. Fishke, a newcomer and a person of a much stronger character, constantly compares Odessa with Glupsk and finds

<sup>9</sup> A *Talmud-toyre* (literally, "the study of the Torah," the divine law) was the name given to the charity school usually found in every Jewish community. It was maintained by the community and meant to give the children of the poor the rudiments of a Jewish education. The Odessa *Talmud-toyre* greatly differed from its traditional namesakes, as the fact that in 1881 Abramovitsh was made its principal indicates. It was one of these typical semimodern Jewish educational institutions which aspired to strike a compromise between traditional Jewish values and modern ones. Abramovitsh remained the principal of the institute, at least nominally, until his death in 1917.

the new place absurd as well as obscene. Dress and manners along the boulevards infuriate him. The females, he says, are scandalously half-naked, while the "Frenchified" men are ridiculously overdressed. It is at this point that the *Talmud-toyre* teacher with another Odessa gentleman appear before Fishke's eyes:

On our way we see two of those fine Frenchies walking toward us. Yontl stretches out his hand; one of the two stops, exchanges a few words with him, and gives him a coin.

"Fishke, do you know who these are?" asks Yontl, proud as a cock, his eyes glistening with pleasure. "The one who gave me the coin is the chief teacher in our *Talmud-toyre*, an acquaintance of mine, mind you! What would you say to that, Fishke? Surely *he* must be good enough for you . . . ?"

"Let all my enemies have such a good year as he is good for me or for anything!" I answer and spit. "Seeing your fine chief teacher, one imagines what sort of a *Talmud-toyre*, God forbid, you must have here. Let me ask you just one question, Yontl: How can you say without a blush that this is how things should be! No, you have already been corrupted, Yontl! You have already become like these people here. . . . A *Talmud-toyre* teacher, you say! Just like our Reb Hertsele Daredevil, not to confuse the holy with the profane! Isn't he? Reb Hertsele Daredevil—this is a real Jew, a Jew with a vengeance! Wherever you don't look for him—there he crops up, and he performs his duties with all his heart. A funeral—he is there; a match is to be clinched—by whom if not by him? Chanting psalms in the graveyard, reading a chapter of *Mishne* to the memory of the deceased—everything is done by him. Once a week he makes his rounds of the town, as the custom is, and do you know what? People come out to meet him with a coin ready in their hand. On *Simkhes-toyre*<sup>10</sup> he flocks with his *Talmud-toyre* scholars to all the rich people of the town to say the 'He that blessed' benediction, and he is given his blessing-wine in generous quantities! He shouts 'Holy flock!' and the children shout back 'B-a-a! B-a-a!' This is how things should be! and your Frenchy, what about him, eh? What taste can his psalms and 'He that blessed' have! How can his Sabbath benediction or his participation in a funeral, God forbid, be proper?"<sup>30</sup>

Here again is a private joke, but a much richer one than Sholem

<sup>10</sup> "The rejoicing of the law"; the last day of Tabernacles, on which the public reading of the Torah is annually concluded and reopened. It is celebrated with great festivity. In Eastern Europe the scholars of the *Talmud-toyre* and their teachers played in this festivity the part Fishke describes here.

Aleichem's. Here the irony, as almost everywhere in Abramovitsh's works, is double-edged. Of course, the author makes use of Fishke's naiveté and satirizes Glupsk through him. The praises Fishke has for the educational capacities of Reb Hertsele Daredevil turn, in his mouth, into an exposure of the whole Glupsk-style educational system. It is important, however, to notice that Abramovitsh is also satirizing himself through Fishke, for the latter's objections to him as a *Talmud-toyre* educator are by no means irrelevant. It is not only to the "Frenchified" appearance that the objections apply, as it is not only to the Russified name that the narrator in Sholem Aleichem's *feuilleton* objects. The question posed by Fishke—which remains, significantly, unanswered—is what kind of education can such a "Frenchified" Odessa gentleman give to his scholars. Certainly not the authentic Jewish one, and yet he pretends to run a *Talmud-toyre!* Thus, through his naive protagonist, Abramovitsh questions his own commitment to the so-called modern Jewish education, that dubious, eclectic, self-contradictory amalgam which to this day has not achieved a real integrity either as a system for the inculcating of cultural values or as a framework for the imparting of unified, meaningful information. This obviously may also have a bearing on Abramovitsh's commitment to a modern Jewish literature, a literature, one should not forget, which from its start considered itself primarily an educational instrument. Indeed, Fishke's encounter with Abramovitsh, light and momentary as it is, poses by implication the grave problem of whether there exists the possibility of a real relationship between the Yiddish artist and the world he portrays. This was a problem which Abramovitsh kept pondering with ever-growing misgivings. To put the matter in its simplest form: Fishke does not, and never will, comprehend the world of his "Frenchified" creator. Nothing, as far as he is concerned, could be more remote and meaningless than the language, concepts, and values of this world. Doesn't that make the possibility of a complete understanding in the reversed direction somewhat problematical? Such a possibility, we must conclude, depends completely on the ability of Abramovitsh to separate himself into two independent entities: one, the Abramovitsh of Odessa, the well-dressed gentleman, the member of the educational profession, etc.; the other, an old-fashioned Jewish bookpeddler, Mendele Moykher-Sforim. It is to Mendele Moykher-Sforim that Fishke tells about the queer Odessa *Talmud-toyre* teacher, and it is Mendele who understands his story not only because he talks

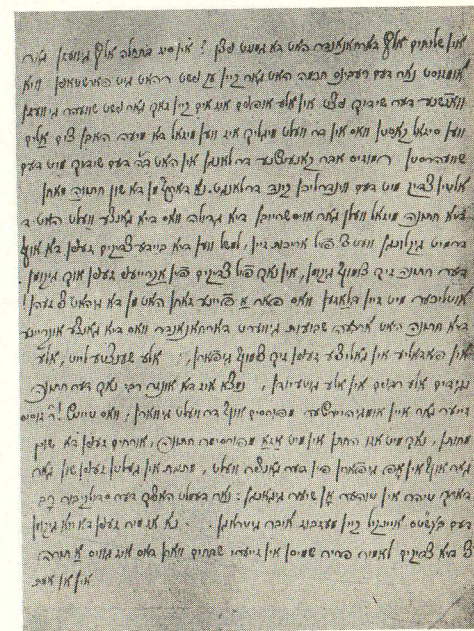
the language of Fishke's world but also because he literally understands the words he uses. As Fishke tells his tales of wanderings and woes, Mendele reminds us several times that, although the story is being told in the first person, it is not a verbatim rendering of Fishke's speech, for this speech (of which he gives several examples) would be incomprehensible to us, the readers, were it not improved upon and elucidated by himself.<sup>31</sup> Abramovitsh's Odessa, the teachers of its *Talmud-toyre* presumably included, is completely dependent in this respect on the services of a mediator. It needs a Mendele, differentiated from Abramovitsh, just as much as Glupsk needs a Mendele if it is to understand the "ideas" of an Abramovitsh.

The separation of Mendele from Abramovitsh had always been regarded by the author as an indispensable condition for his artistic creativity. Answering Sholem Aleichem, who had invited him to participate in his projected *Folks-biblyotek*, Abramovitsh wrote, "Let it be, that I have reached an agreement with one party; now it is necessary, after all, to have a word with the other party as well; I mean with Reb Mendele himself. My Reb Mendele, poor thing, is indisposed. He is always so occupied by his business, that I am afraid I shall have to work long and hard before I talk him into confining himself to his desk, plying his pen, and absorbing himself in writing."<sup>32</sup> From Abramovitsh's next letter we learn that he has already had a word with his Reb Mendele, that the latter is favorably disposed, and that he will accommodate the young editor, provided that the financial arrangements are satisfactory. This he has instructed Abramovitsh to convey to Sholem Aleichem, and he has probably also advised him how and in what language to do it, for his message, indirectly quoted, bears the characteristic marks of his commercial shrewdness. Forcing Sholem Aleichem to an immediate monetary advance, the arrangement commits him to nothing in particular. "Mendele thanks you for your willingness to send him money in advance," Abramovitsh writes, adding, "According to his calculation, you should send for the meantime *at least* three hundred roubles. With God's help, everything will turn out well. Mendele will grease the wheels of his wagon, harness his horse, and off will he drive."<sup>33</sup>

This is an elaborate game of hide-and-peek, played with all the coquetry of Abramovitsh's prima-donna manner, an overflow of *esprit*. Nevertheless, it contains a weighty truth. The author's reference to himself as a go-between whose task is to make "parties" external to

himself see eye to eye is, as jocular analogies often are, highly revealing. It was quite habitual with Abramovitsh in his fiction to dramatize the consciousness of his characters, especially that of Mendele, by splitting it into two different persons engaged in a dispute or a discussion. In fact, what I have referred to as a theatrical internal dialogue often seems to be connected with his very conception of consciousness, or at least of an aroused or troubled consciousness.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the distinction he makes in his letters to Sholem Aleichem between the Abramovitsh who writes in Odessa and Reb Mendele, who at the time is supposed to be somewhere in the small towns of the Volhynian Jewish pale, completely absorbed in his business of bookselling—this distinction may well be taken as reflecting his conception of his own literary consciousness. Just as he used a theatrical internal duality to dramatize psychological divergencies within his heroes, so he used this duality to identify divergencies in the substratum of his creative activity. It is therefore worth noting that between the two aspects of his literary personality, Abramovitsh and Mendele, it is to the latter that the actual power of creation is assigned. The former is a mere dilettante. No doubt, from many aspects he is “superior” to Mendele. He is Europeanized; he is well read; he can, for instance, express informed opinions on literary matters in terms which the poor bookpeddler would probably find incomprehensible. But he is completely dependent on him as far as the delivery of the story which Sholem Aleichem has commissioned him to write is concerned. Whenever that Mendele is for one reason or another “indisposed,” he must wait for him with endless patience, coax him, dance to his tune, and never take a step forward without him. Only when he sees that Mendele has greased the wheels of his wagon and harnessed his horse can he be sure that “off will he drive” and that “everything will turn out well.”

Yoysef Perl (1773–1839), one of the leaders of the *Haskala* movement in Galicia in the first half of the nineteenth century and a vigorous enemy of Hasidism. The most brilliant Hebrew parodist of the age, he wrote some of his works in Yiddish as well. The Yiddish version of his parodic masterpiece *Megale-tmirin*, discovered in our century in his archive in Tarnopol (first Hebrew edition 1819), is the first significant artistic achievement of Yiddish *Haskala* fiction. The medals awarded by the imperial Habsburg regime indicate Perl's close relationship with the Austrian authorities.



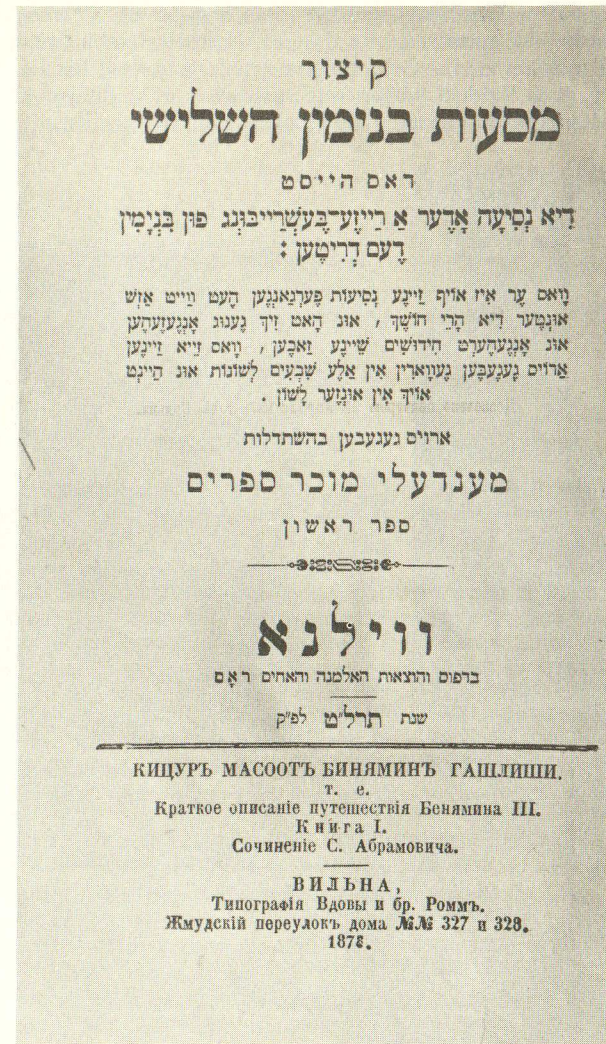
A page from the manuscript of *Gdules reb Volf*, an accomplished parodic monologue of a hasid, written in the Perl manner by the almost unknown Podolian *maskil* Khayim Malage (probably in the 1820s). Discovered in the Perl archive and published with Perl's *Megale-tmirin*, it is a remnant of the largely extinct body of Yiddish maskilic literature written during the first half of the nineteenth century.



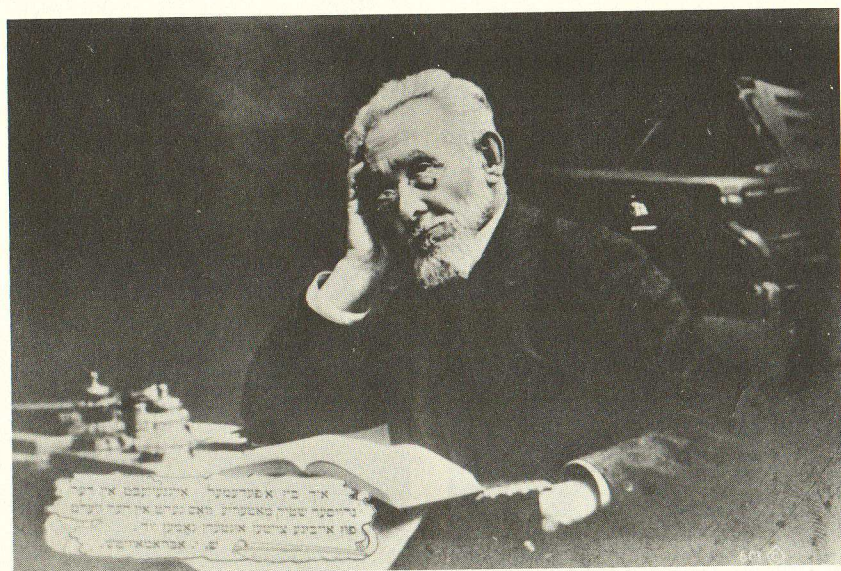
Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1836?–1917) in 1862. At the time the author, who was destined to become the great innovator of both Yiddish and Hebrew modern artistic fiction, was known mainly as a controversial literary critic and as the adaptor of popular Hebrew articles on the natural sciences. However, in 1862 Abramovitsh published his first novel (in Hebrew), *Limdu-hetev*. In two years he was to turn to Yiddish and, hidden behind the fictional character of Mendele the Bookpeddler, publish his first Yiddish work, *Dos kleyne mentshele*.



The title page of the first volume (*Fishke der krumer*) of an edition of Abramovitsh's collected works started in 1888 (only two volumes appeared). The title (barely perceptible even in the original) reads: "The Complete Works of Mendele the Bookpeddler, published in separate volumes one after the other. Book the First: Fishke the Lame." Abramovitsh's name is never mentioned on this title page (it is mentioned on the Russian title page which follows). The vignette of the old traditional Jew with his wagon and horse against a Ukrainian country background (designed by S. Kishinevski), was also intended to shift attention from the Europeanized Odessa author to his bookpeddler persona.



The title page of the first edition of Abramovitsh's *Masoos Binyomin hashlishi* (1878). While its Yiddish part refers to the work as "published through the mediation of Mendele the Bookpeddler," its Russian one says simply: "A work by S. Abramovitsh."



Another Abramovitsh postcard. The posture of deep and somewhat melancholic meditation is conventional. The photographer took care to include in the portrait the author's inkstand (symbol of his profession) as well as an open piano (representing his muse?). The short text is a quotation from Hershele's proclamation in the prologue (and subsequently the epilogue) to the enlarged *Vintshfingerl*: "I am a thread interwoven in that large piece of fabric which from ancient days is known to the world as the Jew."



A primitive Mendele postcard illustrating the stormy encounter of those two Jewish bookpeddlers, Mendele and Alter, from the opening chapter of *Fishke der krumer*. As in the story, the two curse and lash at each other while wearing their phylacteries and prayer shawls (they dozed off while praying and their wagons collided and got entangled). Soon they will recognize each other, and hostility will give place to cordial familiarity. This particular copy of this rather pathetic postcard was used for the purpose of a "robust" friendly greeting. The writer humorously promised his friend an encounter and a well-deserved "thrashing" in due course. The fact that he chose the Mendele-Alter encounter as the proper illustration for his card indicates the extent to which Abramovitsh's art became part of the popular imagination.