11

"A Groan from a Broken Heart": Mendele's *Fishke the Lame* as a as a Demand for Responsibility

1

The premises of my early studies (1954–1964) of the works of Mendele Mokher Seforim in general and *Fishke the Lame* in particular were grounded in New Criticism and Structuralism.[1] In *Between Laughter and Tears* (1965), I examined the structure of metaphors and their meaning in character portrayal, the emotional charge (humor, pathos, irony, etc.) in various thematic areas, and the novel's comic structure based on the interplay of the principles of homonymy and synonymy.[2] Yet *Between Laughter and Tears* went beyond New Criticism and Structuralism in its concern with the figure of the economic man in Mendele's work.[3] I claimed that Mendele wished to emphasize that the low economic status of the Jews in the Pale of Settlement was the main motivating force in their lives and that it distorted their behavior in all areas. This assumption remains partly in force now as well, but it leads to new conclusions under the influence of different critical methods.

Almost forty years have passed since I first dealt with Mendele's work, and I have, like many others, moved away from pure New Criticism and Structuralism (though I still find these methods useful in a detailed study of texts) and drawn closer to reception theory[4] and to studies of the social functions of the literary text.[5] As a result, my rereading of the novel is a processing of its repertoire rather than an analysis of its structure. I am concerned with the raw materials of reading no less than with the process itself.

My work follows, to some extent, Wolfgang Iser's theory of reading[6] as well as the attempts of Pierre Macherey and his circle to redefine the concept of mimesis in a manner independent of such oppositions as essence/phenomenon and coherence/fragmentation, typical of the views of Marxist thinkers. According to Macherey, a work expresses a specific historical trend by means of the metatext, the world view of a social group. In *Pour une sociologie de la production litt'raire,* he points out that the function of criticism is to show how a text reveals and processes ideological

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contradictions.[7] The text, according to Macherey, is not a monolithic structure with a world view (what Lucien Goldmann calls a *"vision du monde"*)[8] at the base of its homogeneity, but an expression of a sociolinguistic state of affairs laden with contradictions and rich in conflicts, with collective struggles embodied in linguistic forms.

Works of fiction portray cultural and social realms based on latent or actualized rules of conduct. One may say that in exploring ways in which the transgression of prohibitions is punished and obedience to social commandments rewarded, literature functions as an institution for imposing cultural values and defining their limits.[9]

Of the multitude of questions that such an assumption may raise in respect to *Fishke the Lame,* I shall attempt to answer the following ones: What types of behavior or models of action does the novel recommend? What is the addressee's attitude to these values, and how does the author manipulate it? What are the larger social patterns to which the praise and censure embedded in the work relate? These questions touch on extra-literary institutions and values that are internalized by the text. The author handles a system of values in such a way as to form the responses that he expects of his addressees. Hence the study of a text does well to take into account the common grounds on which the text meets its assumed audience. This necessitates an interconnection between intrinsic analysis and extratextual perspective: just as an understanding of the cultural context sheds light on the work, so too does an understanding of the work shed light on the culture.

2

As noted above in chapter nine, S. J. Abramowitsch, known by his *nom de plume* of Mendele Mokher Seforim, was born in Kapuli, White Russia, in 1835 and died in Odessa in 1917. His *Fishke the Lame* was published in Yiddish as *Fishke der Krumer* (1869) and in Mendele's own Hebrew translation, *Sefer ha-Kabtzanim,* in an adapted form in the periodical *Ha-Dor* (1901) and later in full, as a book (1909).

The Yiddish text, too, had been revised and had appeared in several versions, the final one being in the Warsaw 1924 edition. The Hebrew text is more problematic than the Yiddish because it raises a sociolinguistic problem: Is it possible to represent a linguistic proletariat by means of an elite language? The Hebrew text was meant to serve as a model for the new language in formation. Meantime, it was the language of a restricted audience, the intellectual Jewish elite largely constituted by yeshiva students who "had

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gone astray." They knew the tradition and rebelled against it; and in fact they alone commanded the stylistic registers of Mendele's book; they alone could both recognize its sources and appreciate its parodical treatment of them.

In late nineteenth-century Odessa, there were several partly overlapping Jewish cultural elites.[10] There was an elite whose language and culture were those of the broader cultural environment; it had assimilated culturally into Russian society, just as the elites of Western European Jewry had assimilated into their surroundings. There was also a limited ethnocentric elite that sought to create a new elite language based on the language of the masses: Yiddish. Politically, this elite group was close to the Bund or to the territorialists.[11]

Only a tiny minority used Hebrew, hitherto the holy tongue, as the language of its secular culture. Though generally tri-lingual, this elite had decided that the new artificial language would serve as its cultural medium. The major figures of this so-called "Odessa Group" were the writers Mendele, Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky (1859–1944), Ahad Ha-Am (1856–1927), Joseph Klausner (1874–1958), Shaul Tchernichowsky (1875–1943), and Zelkind-Zalman Shneur (1886–1959). A good many of them wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish. After the 1880 wave of pogroms in southern Russia,[12] Mendele, for various reasons, moved from Yiddish to the then artificial and esoteric Hebrew.

Not only did he prefer Hebrew, but he actually created it, so that Bialik justly called him "the inventor of the formula."[13] Henceforth he wrote in an elevated literary language about the language of the lower orders. For example, when Fishke, the bathhouse attendant, doubtless totally illiterate and ignorant of Jewish sources, speaks of his beloved, he uses literary allusions: "That lily among the thorns [Song of Songs 2:2], how is she? That miserable woman, who will bemoan her? [Nahum 3:7]. . . . If I am not for her, who will be for her?" [14] Later, using a phrase from Isaiah 53:7, he says: "I lay there, bound hand and foot, *as a sheep before her shearers is dumb.*"

Fishke's language is here that of a scholar-expert in the Bible and in Rabbinic Hebrew. Mendele Mokher Seforim has thus moved from the decidedly colloquial style of the Yiddish version to one that incorporated idioms from different religious sources or liturgical areas (the Hebrew of the Torah, of the Prophets, of the study of law, of prayer, of philosophical works). His text initiated a process of merging, secularization, of erasing barriers around liturgical idioms. Yet it left a gap between the literary and the spoken

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language. From that point on, the authors of his generation tried to transpose the living spoken language into the language of literature.

Here is an example of the strange process that took place in this transition from a "natural" language to an artificial one. I shall translate the utterances of the characters so as to illustrate the stilted character of the Hebrew:

> "And Rebi Alter, why did you see fit to turn aside and bend your path? Whence comes a Jew?"
>
> "Whence comes a Jew? A Jew, had he only not gone and come again!. . . From that fine fair come I, from the city of Yarmelinetz, may its name and memory be blotted out."[15]

As the protagonist-observer-narrator, "Mendele" is well aware of the sociolinguistic problem created by Hebrew. He refers to it by quoting Fishke's substandard Yiddish ("Ekh mit man vab bi fishe mit fisyekh gay fayndelekh! Zugt i. I man vab pyegt zagin, My keykhin gay famielekh vi yakes") and then comments in Hebrew:

> It was worthwhile for once to make Fishke's speech heard as spoken in Yiddish, so that people should know what pains I had to take to perfect his stammering speech and translate it into Hebrew, and the translation of his speech is this:
>
> "You walk on your feet like wandering beggars in affection and friendship! he says. And my wife says that we crawl like crabs."[16]

The problem of translating Fishke's speech exists in the Yiddish original as well; however, there it is presented not as a transfer from language to language but rather as a transition from the incorrect diction of a man with a speech impediment to the well-formed words of the narrator. [17]

Mendele had to cope not only with the ordinary language of the common people but also with the specific, limited sociolect of beggar society. The sociolinguistic contrast between the thieves' jargon and normative speech is an expression of the clash between two worlds,[18] two semiotic systems, and two mentalities. Mendele presents several examples of the special argot of the beggars and these passages are again different in Hebrew and in Yiddish. In the Hebrew version he explains: "They call whiskey 'The milk of a black cow,' and a person's face they call, 'A clock.' For 'stolen' they say 'redeemed.'" (p. 118). In the Yiddish original all this is presented much more vividly.[19]

If Mendele's Yiddish text relies on sociolinguistic contrast to register the

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gap between the group in the foreground of the novel (the beggars) and the general society in the background, his Hebrew text attempts to impose the sacred language upon a social reality alien to it yet also to make a lower social reality speak by means of elevated language. This two-fold process brings the sacred language and the secular realm closer together, thus initiating a cultural development that continues to this day.[20]

3

As noted above, Mendele's assumed audience was a rather limited group of readers. The narrator, "Mendele the Book-Peddler," is largely the spokesman of this audience. When he criticizes the society that he observes ("Cadaverous creatures! Neither substance nor soul! Creatures with their souls absorbed in eating! Creatures without taste or smell. Dried out, useless rubbish!" [18; Hebrew 91]), he does so in the name of his reference group, former yeshiva students who have become *maskilim* (free-thinkers). According to the norms of traditional society, the narrator is eccentric, but his implied reader accepts his "norm" as "normalcy" and perceives the opposing systems of value as forms of madness.

The system of value most directly targeted in the narrative is that held by the beggars, the code of their own that they consider a legitimate way of life:

> I knew one of them in Glupsk very well—Simchele the Merry. He carries with him a special book with a list of all the houses on which he holds mortgages and how much income he gets from each. "The houses," he says, "are mine. They pay duty to me! All of Glupsk belongs to me." Every day he goes to a different block of houses. He breezes into a house with a loud greeting. If he receives his alms promptly, then all is well. If not, he says, "Good day! Don't you worry. I'll keep track of your debts!" and off he runs.
>
> Maybe you have heard about the beggar from Glupsk who made a match with another one from Teterivke and, as dowry, threw in half the houses of Glupsk? That was Simchele the Merry! Or, perhaps you have heard tell how, at a meal for paupers given by a wealthy man in honor of his child's marriage, a beggar who was invited arrived dragging with him another one who wasn't. When they asked, "Uncle, how is it that you brought along another mouth to feed?" he answered, "Oh, that's my son-in-law. I give him his room and board!" That, too, was Simchele the Merry! In short, Simchele looks upon Glupsk as his city and all its houses belong to him. (114; Hebrew 116)

Paradoxically, the rules of "normal" society apply in the world of Simchele the Merry: the bourgeois conventions according to which "normal" people

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behave are not all that different from the norms the beggars have developed for themselves.

The author does not need to incite his audience against such distorted "norms": by the time the novel was written, its reference group had already rejected them. The author and his assumed readers were already, as it were, "mad"—their principles clashed with those of "normal" society and those of its distorted mirror-image, the beggars' world. Mendele is not the kind of satirist who stands in opposition to his audience or attempts to turn it against society; rather, he is a satirist who reinforces the norms held by his audience.

The free-thinkers of Odessa shared his attitudes; they would have subscribed to his definition of society as "Cadaverous creatures! Neither substance nor soul!" In their eyes, traditional society was a disintegrating world ("Dried out, useless rubbish"), not one whose ideology still reigned supreme. While among Mendele's Yiddish readers there might have been some who unconsciously identified with traditional social norms, among his Hebrew readers there was no opposition to the satirist's values.[21] His work is a satire that voices limited consensus rather than one that challenges consensus. Yet there is an exception to this regularity, a critical message to the reference group itself. To work towards its definition is one of the main purposes of this essay.

4

The message in question is conveyed with the help of several strands of motifs and of the interrelationship between the principal and secondary characters, the narrators who also serve as narratees, and the implied author who orchestrates all of these components.

The plot of *Fishke the Lame* is close to those of Dickens's melodramatic-grotesque novels; but its structural connections are more reminiscent of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.[22] The novel has a frame narrative that embeds the main plot-line and several secondary plots; it concludes with the convergence of the frame narrative and the central plot-line. The frame narrative begins with a kind of ideological monologue spoken, as it were, by "Mendele Mokher Seforim," the protagonist-observer-narrator, and hinting at a contrast between traditional Jewish ways and the would-be sensible norms of the implied audience:

> Just when the bright sun begins to shine proclaiming another summer to the land, when people feel newly born and their hearts fill with joy at the

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> sight of God's glorious world—just then the time for wailing and weeping arrives among Jews. This time of sorrow brings with it a host of mournful days: days of fasting, days of self-torment, days of grief and tears—starting at the end of Passover and lasting well into the damp cold and deep mud of autumn.
>
> This is the very time when I, Mendele the Book Peddler, am busiest. I travel from fair to fair and from town to town to provide the children of Israel with all the wares needed for shedding tears: Books of Lamentations, Penitential Prayer Books, women's Books of Supplication. (17; Hebrew 91)

The narrator's monologue presents the duality of self-consciousness: "Mendele" is aware of himself in a way in which his assumed audience would also be aware of itself—grasping the duality of their status as free-thinkers who, however, still observe the religious commandments, living as they do in a social setting whose culture is no longer a matter of inner obligation. Since most of the free-thinkers have lost their religious faith, in their eyes the heteronomous grounding for most of the customs, permissions, and prohibitions has lost absolute validity and must contend with rational values. A doubt regarding the entire cultural attitude is hinted at throughout the novel.

In the frame story a meeting takes place between Reb Alter and Reb Mendele: their wagons collide, and then "the hand of Esau" extricates the two Jews from the debacle. This meeting is followed by the first inset narrative with the first subsidiary plot: Alter's dealings as a match-maker in Yarmelinetz. Alter has failed in arranging a marriage because it turned out that both the parties were of the same sex. This story contains the question that will be answered in the last inset story. Alter claims that he has to make a living because his daughter must be married and he needs to prepare a dowry for her, and also because his wife has given birth to a son. She is his second wife; he has divorced his first one. This provokes Mendele's question: "Why did you divorce your first wife and ruin her whole life? She was a good housewife" (35). Thus at the beginning of the novel the ground is laid for its conclusion. Alter's reaction hints that there is more to the situation than meets the eye:

> Alter's last *"beh"* was a bitter one. Contrition, repentance, and self-accusation seemed to be wrapped up in it. Surely, this mean treatment of his first wife and their children must have left a wound in his heart. He must have seen in the many misfortunes that had befallen him a punishment for his sins. This was clearly expressed by the bitter heartfelt sigh, by the helpless way he waved his hand, and also by the sheepish scratching under his prayer curl, as if to

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say: "Bite your lip and keep your mouth shut! The devil take you!" (36; Hebrew 95)

Other secondary plots in the novel are those of Fishke's and Bassia's betrothal in Mendele's inset narrative and of Chaya-Traina's efforts to marry off her daughter to the son whom Mendele may or may not have. The main plot comes in the inset story told by Fishke to Mendele and Alter; it consists of the development of the relationships among Fishke, his wife Bassia, his beloved hunchback woman, and Feibush, his wife's lover. The secondary plots either parallel the main plot or foreshadow it; and, as noted above, the main plot eventually merges with the framing subplot.

Common to all the plots is the theme of the influence of economic motivations on relations between the sexes. Various distortions occur in a culture where relations between the sexes are mainly an economic bond and the emotions of those involved are not taken into consideration. The analogies between the subplots present different kinds of such distortions.

The connections between the various plots are decidedly comic though their contents are ambiguous. A homonymic connection is created, for example, between the heat of the sun on the road, which causes the protagonists of the framework, Mendele and Alter, to sweat, and the heat of the bathhouse. There is also a synonymic connection between the two settings: both the road and the bathhouse serve as frames for stories on bizarre subjects. On the road, Alter recounts the debacle of the betrothal of two men; and Mendele, recollecting the bathhouse, tells of a chance betrothal that took place between a lame bath attendant and a blind beggar-woman (her first groom fled from the marriage canopy, yet the guests wanted to eat at the banquet): "It's a story about a bathhouse and it ends just like yours," says Mendele to Alter. "There's not even a hair's breadth difference between them [the synonymic connection], except the other story is short. It's worth hearing. Oho, you're sweating, Reb Alter [the homonymic connection]" (44; Hebrew 97).

The author creates a similar homonymic-synonymic connection in the story that accompanies the return of Alter and Mendele from their search for the lost horses. Both have again been faced with problems of marriage and betrothal: Mendele in Chaya-Traina's inn, where the hostess tried to bespeak his son for her daughter; and Alter in the encounter with Fishke, the former bathhouse attendant and now a refugee from a wrecked conjugal bond. "And I found Chaim-Chena, Chaya-Traina's husband, who dreads his wife," says Mendele. "It seems to me that our Fishke also sometimes receives

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blows and mighty slaps in the cheek from his wife" (Hebrew 117; absent in English translation). Mendele creates the comic homonymic tie by means of comic symmetry between the two returning men: "'Your head is bound, Reb Alter, because you have a bump, and mine—because I'm missing a side curl. You brought your fellow and I brought Reb Chaim-Chena, Chaya-Traina's husband!'" (96).

In Mendele's model of reality, systems of interpersonal relations are solely economic ones. This structure of relations is typical not of Jews alone, though the implied author gives it a peculiarly Jewish character because he believes that a preference for match-makers' fees and the economic ties that match-making facilitates over the emotions of those concerned is one of the traits that characterize Jewish society: "Perhaps your honor isn't Jewish, perish the thought, and you don't know how matches are made?. . . It seems to me, Rebi Mendele, that you certainly know the way Jews arrange betrothals and marriages among ourselves. . . . And so why are you so surprised about this event, that could have happened not only to me but to anyone?" (Hebrew 96; rendered partially in the English translation 42).

In this passage, as in a few others, the protagonist addresses one of the internal narratees while at the same time speaking to the external audience. The paradigm, the protagonist suggests, is not an unusual one: it represents the entire society where impersonal match-making is one of the rules of the game. The cultural rules that prevail in the society lead to absurd situations, and the presentation of these cultural rules as absurd in themselves supports the demand of the implied author and the bulk of his assumed audience that Jewish society should undergo a cultural, social, and moral revolution.

The framework story resolves the main plot: the story of Reb Alter, his divorced wife, and neglected daughter—who turns out to be the protagonist of the main plot. According to the development of the intrigue, Reb Alter of the framework story (who is also one of the narratees of the inset account of the main plot) is the original cause of the girl's suffering in that plot. The resolution of the framework story thus reveals the results and some of the causes behind the distortion of norms in the society portrayed.

5

The ingenious structure of the novel tends to belittle and ridicule the melodramatic pathos of the narrative intrigue that links the different secondary plots and the structural units.

The novel is actually laden with melodramatic intrigue, surprising turns

of events, and strange discoveries; it is full of bizarre adventures and ludicrous farces, complete with violence and sex, horse-thieving, attempted rape and murder, disguise and faking, adulterous seductions, and marital betrayals. A surprising twist takes place, for example, when Fishke, who has figured in Mendele's story about the bathhouse, suddenly appears in the framework story as the man whom Alter brings back from his search for the horses and who will eventually take up Mendele's story where it left off. At its base, the novel is an ironic fairy tale that pits absolute evil against total innocence. The characters who represent the poles of this contrast are depicted in what Northrop Frye calls the ironic mode;[23] they are ugly anti-heroes, parodies of the fairy tale tradition.

The intrigue is based on a tangle of relations between the sexes: Fishke is married to Bassia, who is seduced by the red-headed *mamzer* (bastard) Feibush; Fishke is in love with the hunchback girl Beila, who is also harassed by the bastard. Bassia and the bastard are demonic figures who struggle for control over the two innocents and sadistically torment them. There is no happy ending: the lovers are separated and do not meet again; the duty of restoring harmony or righting wrongs is placed on the girl's father, who is the original source of all the trouble. This fairy tale has no sweetness; moreover, the author takes care that the narrative should undercut sentimentality as soon as it makes an appearance.

The most melodramatic and sentimental part of the novel is the telling of the hunchback's early experience and of the love between her and Fishke. By way of summing up her story, Fishke declares: "There is no one in the whole world as good and as sweet as she!" (134; Hebrew 121). The miserable lovers function as a pair of *bomolochos* (victims of the plot), who need each other in a world full of two kinds of *eiron*:[24] the negative agents of the plot (Feibush, Bassia, and Alter) and its ironic witnesses (Mendele and Alter in his other role).

Yet the pathetic heightening is consistently subverted by ironic and satiric stratagems—in accordance with Mendele Mokher Seforim's anti-pathos poetics. Even where pathos lingers, having been refined and passed through seven circles of irony,[25] it is no longer of the kind typical of the Haskalah tradition. Mendele's text enters into a parodical confrontation with sentimental texts of the Haskalah period in general, and, in particular, with those of Abraham Mapu (1808–1867).[26]

As the four men are shown lying in the sun, the narrator comments:

> Had a talented writer seen us on that fine morning, he would have found ample material for a poem. This would have been a poem about four married

> Jews and how they lay unbuttoned on the grass, enjoying the day in silence. Also included would be a sun and its warm rays, a sky, nature, dewdrops, songbirds, and horses, each prettier than the last. Such a writer should, of course, be generous enough to add some products of his own imagination too: a flock of sheep grazing in the meadow, a clear running brook at which "Jews do break their thirst."
>
> He would doubtless place flutes in our mouths on which we would trill a song of praise to the beloved bride in the Song of Songs, just like the shepherds of yore. We had our own baskets of food, thank God, so that we would not have to impose upon the writer for refreshments. This far you may go, Reb Writer, but no further! You shall not delve into *my* soul or palm off your little wisdoms by putting them in my mouth—that is not for you. You'd better find yourself another victim. . . . I can express my thoughts better myself. (99; Hebrew 111)

This is a parody of the false psychologization of the protagonists as well as of the pastoralization and idealization of Jewish life, typical of a number of poets and novelists of the Haskalah period. The Mapu tradition had created Jews who trilled on flutes, spoke in the style of the Song of Songs, and lay with their loved ones in the sun of a dreamland Israel. Yet lofty poetic imagery does not suit the four men in Mendele's text, with their rucksacks and rags and their ugly polluted world. Mendele knew the terrestrial Pale of Settlement and maintained that one should not talk about it in the language of the heavenly Zion.

6

In order to capture Jewish beggar society in a literary construct—Jewish horse-thieves, kidnappers who live off theft, and beggars are not a common literary model of Jewish society—Mendele has recourse to non-Jewish social materials. The foregrounded community of beggars is closer to Gypsies than to any marginal Jewish group; indeed, when Reb Alter first sees the traces of the band of beggars, he thinks they have been left by Gypsies (90; Hebrew 109). The link is then further reinforced:

> I made some order of the groups into which our beggars are divided. The two main ones are the *infantry*, or *foot beggars*, and the *cavalry*, or *van beggars*. The first travel on foot; the second in vans or wagons. These are further subdivided into branches: *city beggars*, those who were simply born in a city, usually in Lithuania, and *field beggars*, those who were simply born on a van in a field. Their parents and their parents' parents as far back as anyone

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> remembers have been wandering. *These are the Jewish gypsies. They wander forever from one end of the land to the other. They are born, grow up and marry, they multiply and die—all on the road. They are free people, relieved of being Temple slaves, of paying the kosher meat tax and the like. They are also rid of praying and Jewishness—they have neither Lord nor Master.*[27] (110; Hebrew 114, emphasis added)

Itinerant Jewish beggars and Gypsies share nomadic ways and utter dependence on others; they are, as it were, perpetual guests of the host society. Both have placed themselves beyond the bourgeois norm, which they largely reproduce. Mendele seems to rely on his addressees' presumed antagonism to Gypsies in order to shape its antagonism to the Jewish society reflected in that of the beggars.

The world that the author describes, ugly and damaged, is laid bare like bodies in the bathhouse, anonymous and devoid of identities. The impurity of this world is set against the standard of "cleanliness" that the author shares with the implied reader. This shared standard allies them against the Jewish way of living as presented in the novel. The author notes, for instance, that if there had been no cholera epidemic in Glupsk that year, it was "not because the polluted lake nearby had been drained, or because the piles of stinking mud and the dead cats had been removed from the streets, or because the homeowners had decided to fly in the face of tradition and stop emptying their garbage pails in front of their houses under the noses of passers-by" (49; Hebrew 98).

All of these ugly features are still there, and they reach into what is meant to be an example of an ordinary Jewish house, the dwelling of Chaya-Traina, the inn-keeper: "A rather large room with a low ceiling, no floor and tiny windows. Some of the panes were cracked, some patched with pieces of greased paper, and some were missing almost entirely—with only a triangle of glass left in a corner like the last tooth of an old woman . . . . On the walls hung portraits covered with cobwebs, dead flies, dried cockroach eggs, and flyspecks. From underneath the covering of filth peculiar figures peered out (79; Hebrew 106).[28] Later we also learn that though "Chaya-Traina was indeed a pious Jewess and a good woman. . . the bedbugs in her house were positive villains" (84; Hebrew 107).

If most of the settings in the novel are ugly, most of the characters likewise deviate in one way or another from standards of beauty. The motif of defects dominates the fictional world. Even Chaya-Traina's "hard-working" daughter, who has no particular handicap, is described as a "broad, chubby"

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girl with "little hair on her head and two short pigtails behind," who walks without lifting her feet, "the head leading the way" (80; Hebrew 106).

Motifs of ugliness and handicap are linked with those of arranged marriages and the need to make a living:

> "Do you see how among us Jews the lame and the blind are paired? How our weddings are arranged? How the fate of couples is decided, and for what purpose? So that the marriage brokers may eat and drink till they burst! That is how it is among the poor and also among the rich, except that when the rich marry, it's a different type of dinner with a different taste." . . .
>
> "Don't worry, Reb Alter! If you haven't yet succeeded in making a match between two men then you will surely succeed, with God's help, in making some other kind of match." . . . "Once you come across an eligible young lady, things will be different! Whether she's blind, deaf, dumb—'Go, daughter o'mine! Under the *chupeh* with you and my best wishes! The printer needs money. My mare has to eat. My daughter must get married. (57; Hebrew 100)

Moreover, most of the handicapped characters try to turn deficiencies into advantages. The more something is damaged, the better: "In our business," says Bassia the blind woman, "to be crippled like we are is a blessing. Others with such blessings would have made a fortune by now" (106; Hebrew 113).[29] A handicap being a positive norm, the society emerges as fundamentally sick. The beggar community's admiration for a smart invalid who has become a legend in his lifetime (107; Hebrew 114) is one of the expressions of the norm of "madness" typical of the marginal society. In the novel this society has been displaced to the foreground and turned into a synecdoche for the lower-middle-class Jewish society in general; hence the latter is likewise diagnosed as diseased.

The handicapped characters with distorted lives are a social underworld, but they are also symbols of something pathological, repressed, and distorted in the lower-middle class strata of Jewish society and in the lower strata of that society's collective unconscious. We get a glimpse of what it may be through the narrator's tracing of Fishke's antecedents back to multitudes of orphans who are devoid of identity: "And then the young ones suddenly stand on their own feet and a fresh crop of new, quivering little Jews makes its appearance in the world: little Fishkes, little Chaikes, Chaims, Yoseles—naked, barefoot, clad in rags, cluttering up the houses, the synagogues, the streets, the towns, and getting between everyone's feet" (45; Hebrew 97).

The protagonist is dehumanized and de-individualized even before he sees the light of day. Scornful diminutives are used in a single series to portray the many bodies who bear different names but display no other distinctive features in the eyes of society. In Mendele's text, these identity-less youngsters from various orphanages turn into a metaphor for the repressed id of the collective unconscious.

They live in everyone: "Pilgrims to Jerusalem, Jews on their way back from Jerusalem, Jews who were burned out, sick Jews, Jews with hemorrhoids and doctors' letters to prove it, deserted wives, widows of all sorts, writers, and—the devil won't take us, Reb Alter—we might as well include book peddlers . . . let them all join the ranks of the paupers!" (Hebrew 115).

The collective depersonalized id is at the bottom of the psychological ladder. There is something pre-human in it, coming from before birth and differentiation. Both unrestrained and helpless, it is part of the infrastructure of Jewish social existence; and it emerges as damaged, distorted, ugly, sick. In the domain of the id there reigns impersonal sexual freedom; hence the "bestial" image of a chicken coop in the description of the sexual mores of the beggar society (204; Hebrew 139). The very appearance of the beggars is a metaphor for the distortions and flaws of the society into which they have been thrust: the traditional Jewish ways of life have produced distortions in the underworld of its unconscious, and these distortions are bodied forth in the physique of the beggars. Thus, while satirizing the socio-economic reality, Mendele also brings the repressed out of the collective unconscious and into the attention of his readers.

7

By choosing to foreground a marginal social group in preference to other parts of the novel's repertoire,[30] the author emphasizes the metaphorical and synecdochical relations between this group and the Jewish middle class. The narrator, indeed, frequently makes general comments connecting the beggars to the Jewish people, e.g.: "This profound thought led to others concerning the children of Israel; I mused about their wisdom, their mode of living, their communal leaders, and their sorry condition" (20; Hebrew 91–2).

The norms of the beggars are a version of the familiar scale of values that grants the hierarchical top position to those who manage to make money without working, defraud people, and dupe those who support them. At the foot of the scale are those incapable of cheating successfully or learning the

fine details of beggary. Whoever manages to play the game or to sell his or her image survives; whoever fails is destroyed. Thus at the head of the scale stand figures like Feibush the Bastard, Bassia the Blind Woman, Simchele the Merry, and Yontl the Amputee, while the focal figures of Fishke and Beila fmd themselves at the bottom.

As noted above, such social rules apply not only in the foreground, in the society of the beggars, but also in the normal, bourgeois, religious Jewish society in the background. The beggars revile the group from which they make their living, yet basically share its scale of values. Alter (who has abandoned his wife as a result of his sexual desires) has tried to make a match between two men in order to make a living; Chaya-Traina tries to arrange a match between her daughter and Mendele's son, almost against his will. The beggar society treats relations between the sexes in the same way: among them also, concern for making a living outweighs concern for human relationships. And though the assumed elite audience has the option of a different system of values, it may still be found to share part of the norms of the background "normal" society and hence be indirectly implicated in the ways of the beggar society as well.

The beggars, whose livelihood comes from alms, could not exist without those Jews whose earnings from business bring money in. One could, of course, claim that this relationship between the guest and the host is like the relationship between Jews and gentiles who are engaged in productive economic activity. The text, however, does not support such an analogy. The providers, moreover, hardly appear in the novel at all, and then only as the householders who feed Fishke and Beila. They too are poor, through no fault of their own. Mendele treats these providers positively, in a manner reminiscent of his depiction of the free-thinking, bourgeois Jewish society in his novel *Vinshfingerl*, known in Hebrew as *Emek ha-bekha* ("The Vale of Tears"). Large segments of Jewish society, segments of which the assumed audience would be well aware, are practically left outside the purview of the novel.

Indeed, the text creates a tension between the manifest and the implicit social background of the novel. At the nexus of this tension are the two focal characters, Fishke and Beila, around whom the author spins a melodramatic plot with such pathetic topoi as the "limping hero,"[31] the persecuted maiden, and the neglected child. Beila is the victim of parental negligence and cruelty: her biological father (Alter) has abandoned her, and the redheaded Feibush, who claims the position of, as it were, the head of the tribe, the patriarch of the beggars, torments her and tries to rape her; he

also takes away Fishke's wife, separates Fishke from his beloved, and attempts to castrate him.

Through Beila an analogy is established between Reb Alter, a representative of the background middle-class society, and Feibush, the strongman of the beggar tribe. Beggary thus emerges not only as a caricature of the background society but also as a penalty imposed on its victims. The assumed audience, whose values are those of the implicit rather than the manifest social background of the text, is thus called upon to condemn not only the ways of the beggars but also those of the manifest background society—those who lead a traditional bourgeois Jewish life.

At the same time, however, the author also manipulates the audience's attitudes toward Fishke and Beila. Their love story seems to suggest that even in a society where sexual relations have become an exchange value and where marital life malfunctions accordingly, some sexual relations do retain a spiritual and moral meaning. The narrator, however, repeatedly mocks Fishke's pathetic experiences, thereby preventing him from functioning as the exponent of this idea.

The stylistic gap is one of such techniques of subversion. In one of the pathetic climaxes of the plot, Fishke describes a great moment of love between himself and the hunchback girl: "I felt like the beggar in the fairy tale when his hovel suddenly turns into a huge palace and he finds himself sitting with his queen at a table loaded with food. I took my coat off and quickly wrapped it around my queen, who was shivering with cold" (140; Hebrew 123). In Hebrew this is rendered in the high stylistic register of fables about royalty, thus creating a contrast between the character's expression and his personality.

As the narratee-turned-narrator, "Mendele" adopts an ironic-satiric attitude toward Fishke's words. He compares Fishke to Balaam's ass, to a preacher spouting nonsense, to a cantor whose song is a horse's whinny, and to two plodding operators of a printing press who suddenly, as though "bewitched," begin "to crank the wheels with great ardor, full of enthusiasm," with sparks shooting from their eyes and "such rapture that you might have thought they were in seventh heaven" (143; Hebrew 133). The narrator thus dampens the melodramatic excess; and it is not clear whether the implied author behind him identifies with this attitude or accepts the melodramatic experience at face value.

Later Mendele modifies his attitude and presents Fishke and Beila's love as an exception that proves the rule: only the very poor and the very rich have free time for the business of love; ordinary Jews are mainly concerned

with making a living (176; Hebrew 132). In this context Fishke's pathos is granted moral credit: driven to the margins of the margins, he and his beloved emerge as more worthy than either the smart beggars in the foreground or the bourgeoisie in the background of the plot. Their love is presented as equivalent to spiritual experience:

> Love affairs and marriages for love are customary only among the upper and lower classes. The rest of us, folks of a middling sort, have our minds in a bowl of *borscht!* (176; Hebrew 132)
>
> We never eat, drink, or get married except to glorify His Holy Name and for the sake of the Holy Spirit.
>
> But none of this applies to Fishke. In his unfortunate situation, the hunchbacked girl was a good thing for him. She was his hope, his all and everything. A drowning man grasps at a straw. Is it any wonder then that Fishke held on to the hunchbacked girl as though his life depended on it and became so attached to her? . . . None of the preachers or moralists I have ever heard—put them all together—ever moved me or softened me, or made me so good and gentle, as *a groan from a broken heart* or a pure note from a little fiddle. (178; Hebrew 133; emphasis added)

Yet immediately after these statements a metaphorical digression takes place: the narrator's sentimental digression is compared to the straying of a horse whose master is not watchful; the horse is then compared to pupils who go astray in their studies when the teacher is not vigilant (179; Hebrew 133). "Mendele's" reaction to his own pathos in response to Fishke is ironic after all. And, indeed, the efforts of Fishke and the hunchback girl to live according to principles different from those surrounding them turn out to be futile: as far as the narrator can see, the norms of the foreground, parallel to the norms of the bourgeois background, will prevail. Struggle against them is doomed to abject failure—as long, perhaps, as the addressees, the assumed audience, remain contemptuous of the values of the unfortunates who are at odds with all the social frameworks sketched in the text.

I believe that the implied author does not wish the extra-textual addressees (the audience) to share the intra-textual addressees' (Mendele's and Alter's) disparaging attitudes to the pathos of Fishke's and Beila's predicament. Alter, "Mendele's" companion, is the *primum mobile* of the pathetic plot; and responsibility for its development lies upon his shoulders.

At the end of the novel, he is, indeed, prepared to take responsibility and swears to rescue his daughter: "I swear by Him who lives eternally, that I shall not return home to my wife and children, that I will not marry off my eldest daughter before I find my unfortunate child! Heaven and earth are my witnesses! I am leaving immediately and woe to him who stands in my way" (216; Hebrew 142). It seems that according to the implied author, as distinct from the ironizing narrator, Fishke's story is an implicit request that addressees should take responsibility. If parental responsibility is demanded of one of the intra-textual addressees (Alter), social responsibility is demanded of the extra-textual addressees, the assumed audience of the novel.

The focal figures are orphans; and the depiction of their suffering is an accusation against their parents and the extra-textual parent-figures whom they parallel. As Didier Coste has noted, the effect of the motif of orphanhood in the relations between authors and their addressees is the promotion of solidarity between the addressees and the victims.[32] Yet in *Fishke the Lame,* owing to the distancing irony of the narrator, the audience cannot identify with the focal characters. The implied author explores the dialectics of sin and punishment, of guilt and responsibility, of satire and pathos by giving the floor to all those involved but making them reveal themselves in an unflattering light.

Although towards the end of the story the author's attitude toward the ugly victims of the id is obviously sympathetic, the fact remains that while they are victims of distorted sexual instincts and a malfunctioning economic system, they are also sharers in the "Gypsy mentality." The audience tends to identify not with them but with "Mendele," the ironizing addressee of Fishke's tale; and this alignment of solidarities actually amounts to the audience's being implicated in the complacency and indifference displayed by "Mendele" and Alter. But inasmuch as the narrator's attitude is subverted by the stridency of the focal characters' appeal for sympathy, the audience is called upon to emulate Alter's final decision to right wrongs: to ignore the focal figures' demand for a change in values means to remain under the sway of the norms caricatured by the beggars' world.

Mendele's poetics implies that the function of literature is to demand social responsibility of readers.[33] The narrators tell each other stories in order to shift responsibility from, as it were, one concentric circle to another—until the story reaches the circle of the actual readers. The novel calls on the addressees to change their perspective on the world placed before them, to learn to see this world, with all its repressions and distortions, as their own world, a world to be engaged in rather than spurned.

1. Foreshadowings of structuralism were latent in German New Criticism and mainly in some of the basic propositions of Wolfgang Kayser's *Das Sprachliche Kunstwerk* (Bern: Francke, 1948).

2. See Gershon Shaked, *Bein tsehok le-dem 'a* (Between Laughter and Tears) (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1965), as well as "Le-Gisha ḥadashah el ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-klasit" (Towards a New Approach to Classic Hebrew Literature), *Zemanim,* May 13, 1955. Since the publication of my book, scholars such as Werses, Miron, Peri, and Schwartz have contributed significantly to the study of Mendele; see Shmuel Werses, *Mi-Mendele ad hazaz* (*From Mendele to Hazaz*) (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1987), 11–118; Dan Miron, "'Ḥa-'Ḥinukh ha-sentimentali' shel mendele mokher seforim" (Mendele Mokher Seforim's 'Sentimental Education'), Afterword to *Sefer Ha-Kabtzanim* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1988), 203–68, and *A Traveller Disguised* (New York: Shocken, 1973); Menachem Peri, "Ha-Analogia u-mekomah be-mivneh ha-roman shel mendele mokher seforim: Iyunim ba-poetika shel ha-proza" (Analogy and Its Place in the Structure of the Novel of Mendele Mokher Seforim: Remarks on the Poetics of Prose), *Ha-Sifrut* I (1968): 65–100; and recently, Yigael Schwartz, "Be-Kitzur, eikh she-yehiye ha-davar, bein kakh u-vein kakh lo tov" (In Brief, No Good One Way or Another) *Akhshav* 57 (1991): 145–68. These scholars have presented a different point of view, from Peri's structuralism through Miron's historical structuralism, which in its later version tends toward a psychological interpretation, to the semi-deconstructionist effort of Schwartz. The changes that have taken place in my own approach are partly owing to the influence of these studies.

3. "If two Jews happened to be marooned on a desert island in the middle of the ocean, just the two of them without another living soul, then it is quite certain that with the passing of time one of them would open some sort of a little store and the other one—also a little business. They would trade with each other. One would borrow from the other at a certain rate of interest and thus they would both manage to earn their keep." See Mendele Mokher Seforim, *Fishke the Lame,* trans. Gerald Stillman (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 58. Unless otherwise specified, the English quotations in the text are taken from this Yiddish edition; the Hebrew text referred to is *Sefer Ha-Kabtzanim,* in *Kol kitvei mendele mokher seforim* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1966), 100.

4. E.g., Rainer Warning, *Rezeptionsasthetik* (Munich: W. Fink, 1979) , and Günter Grimm, ed., *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Munich: W. Fink, 1977).

5. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (Norfolk: Verso, 1985); Fredric Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics* (Norfolk: Verso, 1980); Dominick La Capra, *History, Politics and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

6. Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens* (Munich: W. Fink, 1984).

7. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production,* trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978).

8. Lucien Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (London: Tavistock, 1977).

9. See Stephen Greenblatt, "Culture," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study,* ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 225–32. The values in question are liable to lose their validity from

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generation to generation; therefore one must reconstruct the values that guided the authors in their own time.

10. See Steve J. Zipperstein, "Assimilation, *Haskalah* and Odessa Jewry," in *The Great Transition,* ed. Glenda Abramson and Tudor Parfitt (Totowa: Rowman and Allan Held, 1985), 91–98.

11. *Fishke the Lame* is dedicated to Mendele's close friend Menashe Margolius, one of the fathers of the territorialists: *"Mayn liben, tayeren fraynd Menashe Margolius brehgt dos dozigyn sefer bemasona fun'm gantzn hertzn, der mekhaber" Fishke der kromer,* in *Alle verkn fun mendele mokher seforim* (*Complete Works of Mendele Mokher Seforim* vol. 2 (Warsaw: Farlag Mendele Gezelshaft Tzentral, 1924]). Menashe Margolius (1837–1912) was born in Berditshev and published books in Russian and Yiddish. He wrote a book on the Haskalah generation as well as articles on the Talmud. He translated two volumes of Mendele's letters into Russian.

In the introduction to the Yiddish edition of his book, Mendele addresses Margolius as if to interpret for him the ambivalence of the text: "Sad is my melody in the symphony of Yiddish literature. My works express the very core of a Jew who, even when he does sing a merry tune, sounds from afar as if he were sobbing and weeping. Why, even his festive *Shabbes* hymns sound as if they were taken out of the Book of Lamentations. When he laughs, there are tears in his eyes. When he tries to make merry, bitter sighs escape from the depths of his heart—it's always *oy-vay,* woe is me, *vay!"* (p. 13). Later in the apostrophe, Mendele compares Margolius's books on elevated Jewish life to his own ironic concern with lowly Jews, beggars, and unfortunates. The assumption is that the figure of Mendele as a representative character is liable to arouse a negative response in the audience, in contrast to the positive attitude enjoyed by Margolius, who deals with elevated characters.

12. See Shmuel Ettinger, *Toldot ha-yehudim ba-et he-ḥadashah (The History of the Jews in the Modern Age),* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1969), 168–70.

13. "The formula" here means the Hebrew literary style adopted by the writers of that generation. See H. N. Bialik, "Yotzer ha-nusaḥ" (The Inventor of the Formula), in *Kitvei H. N. Bialik* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1947), 240–41.

14. Hebrew version, p. 137. The last phrase recalls the well-known saying in *The Ethics of the Fathers,* "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (1:14)

15. The actual English translation is as follows:

> "And you, Reb Alter? Why the back road?" I tried to feel him out again. "Where have you been?"
>
> "Where I've been? On the road to ruin, that's where! I've been to the fair at Yarmelinetz—may it sink into the earth!" (p. 23).

16. Hebrew version, p. 115.

17. In the Yiddish original the passage is written as follows: *"Ekh mit man vab aben gekayt tzi fishe. Ni kenti akh mshaeh zan mit mane kyanke fisyekh pyegen mi zakh shyepen zie fameilekh, kakhin vi di yakes"—et azoy haybt Fishke an vayter tzu dertzehlen mit zayn lashon, vas oys gebesert mit mayn hilf makht es: ikh mit mayn*

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wayb haben gehert tzu di fishe, dos hayst fom armelayt, nu, kent ihr aykh meshaer zayn, vi mit mayne kranke fislekh plegen mir zikh shlepen zehr famelikh, krikhen vi di rakes. Un azoy geht fishkes dertzelhkung oysgebesert vayter" (Fishke der Kromer, p. 90). In Gerald Stillman's imaginative English, we have: "'My wife and me, we bewonged to the infantwy so you can guess how swowwy we cwawwed awong, me with my sick feet—just like cwabs,' Fishke began again in this manner, unable to pronounce an 'l' or an 'r.' His tale, with my corrections, continues" (p. 113).

18. The phenomenon of thieves' argot can also be found, for example, in Alfred Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz.*

19. See *Fishke der Kromer,* p. 98. The English translation is as follows: "They made fun of the whole world. They would mimic and laugh at anyone who rubbed them the wrong way. One of them would describe in thieves' language the tricks he played or the traps he laid: how he had 'Borrowed a bread' (stolen a bread), or 'racked up some ringers' (stolen money), or 'lectured a lamb' (beaten a child of a rich family" (p. 121).

20. Hava Turniyansky has pointed out to me that Yiddish too underwent stylization in Mendele's works. He transformed it from a spoken language to a literary language, so that Mendele's literary Yiddish also belongs to a higher register than spoken Yiddish.

21. Actually, the Yiddish elite (represented, for instance, by Menashe Margolius, the territorialist) did not accept the traditional norms and struggled against them perhaps more than the Hebrew elite, which despaired of reforming Jewish society in the Diaspora. Mendele's social criticism could but add to their despair. By contrast, the Yiddish elite believed in social reform in the Diaspora and therefore accepted the implicit reproaches of the text.

22. See Chapter Nine, "Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Mendele's *The Book of Beggars,*" above.

23. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 41–42.

24. Ibid., 216–17.

25. Cf. Robert Penn Warren, "Pure and Impure Poetry," *Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment,* ed. Mark Schorer, Josephine Miles, and Gordon McKenzie (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 366–78.

26. Abraham Mapu (1808–1867), a sentimental Hebrew writer, was one of the first creators of the Hebrew novel. He wrote two sentimental historical novels: *Ahavat zion* (Love of Zion [1853]) and *Ashmat shomron* (The Guilt of Samaria [1865]). The former is perhaps the first sentimental Zionist novel; it deals with love in the kingdom of Judea in the First Temple period.

27. See also: "I saw now that I was to the band what a bear is to a gypsy. They led me around by the nose and made money from me" (pp. 166–67; Hebrew, 130). Mendele himself had lived among destitute Jews and had the experience of wandering with a band of Jewish beggars, and mainly with Avramele the Lame, his delicate aunt and her son, with whom he had roamed through the Jewish Diaspora (Yakov

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Fichmann, "Shalom Yakov Abramowitsch," in *Kitvei mendele,* xiv). Mendele writes about this experience: "From the time that God made me roam from my stepfather's house a new chapter began in my life, a chapter of wandering, trials, and many tribulations" ("Reshimot le-toldotai," ibid., 3). Thus Mendele was closely acquainted with the world of the beggars, as we see from his autobiography. However, he felt that this was a deviant phenomenon in Jewish society, so he used the Gypsy metaphor where such experiences were at the forefront of social reality.

28. Ugliness is a recurrent motif of the book. See: "Ten men to one Book. What shoving and crowding! What a confusion of lice! What a tangling of Beards! And side curls full of burrs! And the stench of eggs and noodles rising into everyone's nostrils" (p. 66; Hebrew, 102); See also 136–37; Hebrew, 121–22. Mendele's criticism of the inaccuracies in the Jewish printing of books combines with this motif of filth and disorder.

29. See also p. 122; Hebrew p. 118.

30. On "repertoire," see Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens,* 114–43.

31. See Peter L. Hays, *The Limping Hero: Grotesques in Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 1971, 63–106.

32. "Orphans are victims or even martyrs, they appeal to the warmhearted reader in more than one way. If they were abandoned by their true parents or others who had a duty to them, they are threatened by hunger, exhaustion, loneliness; they suffer and thus show clearly the satisfactions that a 'normal' family should and would provide for them. . . . The suffering of children also bears an accusation against their *actual* parents, dead or alive, and bad parental figures are bound to be to some extent the work of displacement: they are safe substitutes that allow us to blame the real supposedly good (but never good enough) parents through them. . . . This affiliation with the audience can either make us reenact our need for parents together with the orphan's or detect the storyteller's vested interest in the ideological content of his tale and arouse our suspicion." See Didier Coste, *Narrative as Communication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 319–20.

33. This is similar to Sartre's tendency to view literature as a demand for social responsibility: the addressees need not necessarily take any specific line of action, but they are called upon to adopt a different perspective on options for action. Mendele's critical and social views were, of course, influenced by the nineteenth-century Rusian positivists.

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