jewish
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND BIOGRAPHY

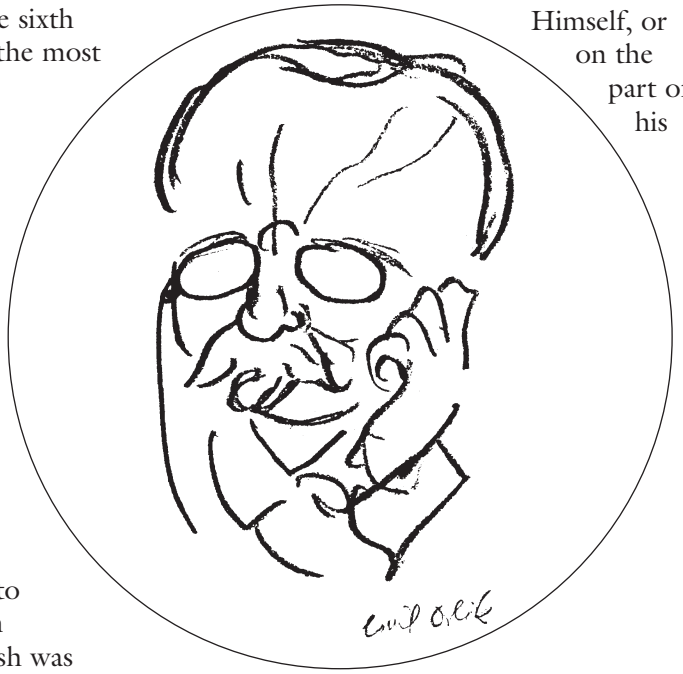
DOUBLE TALK: TOWARD A YIDDISH POETICS OF THE SELF

Marcus Moseley

> We jargon-Jews are perhaps the only people in the entire world upon whom lies the bitter curse, never to know the sweet taste of a beloved and intimate mother-tongue. The language in which we were raised in our childhood years, by means of which we received our earliest notions and in which we first gave expression to our childish emotions, this very language holds no intimacy for us, is alien to us. We feel no tenderness toward it . . . For we all know, that it is in truth completely alien to us, a sort of stigma of exile, which our bitter fate imposed upon us with violence, like the yellow mark of disgrace that in times past, our oppressors forced our ancestors to wear on their breast . . .

Since the inception of the *Haskalah* movement in late eighteenth-century Berlin, many cruel things have been said about Yiddish. In sheer venom, callousness of tone—not to mention masochism—few assaults on this language could match the above diatribe penned by the spiritual mentor of the "Renaissance" period of Hebrew literature, Ahad Ha'am. His indictment of his own *mame loshn* is all the more odd in that this "letter to the editor," printed on the first page of the bimonthly *Der yud*, thus constituting in effect its leading article, marked both the Yiddish literary debut of Ahad Ha'am and, not surprisingly, his swan song in the language. Stranger still is that this article is followed almost immediately by the sixth chapter of one of the most celebrated autobiographical depictions of childhood to be written in Yiddish, Sh.Y. Abramovitsh's (Mendele Moykher Seforim) *Shloyme reb khayims.* The implicit conundrum that emerges from this publication data is how it is possible to speak of the self in "jargon," as Yiddish was almost universally referred to at this period and later by both its proponents and detractors—a language so utterly "alien," indeed inimical to the "man." The conundrum is further compounded by the fact that Ahad Ha'am himself spoke freely and fluently in Yiddish—a phenomenon that left the militant Hebraist Yosef Klausner utterly aghast. It should be noted that Abramovitsh himself, the "grandfather" of Yiddish literature, was by no means immune to the symptoms of self-alienation described by Ahad Ha'am. "My very being," he writes in a letter, written in 1882 in his none-too-perfect Russian, to a close friend:

> bears unmistakable witness to a strange error, either on behalf of the Creator Himself, or on the part of his



Sketch of Michah Yosef Berdichevsky by Emil Orlik from cover of *Boded be-ma'aravo: Mikhah Yosef Berdits'evski be-zikhronam shel bene zemano*, ed. Avner Holtzman, introduction by Nurit Govrin (Holon: Dvora and Emmanuel House, 1998). Courtesy of Avner Holtzman.

> ministering angel: removing from the box, marked with some specific number, one of those souls designated for a privileged, fully enfranchised man, of a generous disposition, he betook himself, by some mistake, to some place in a shtetl, Kapulie, and inserted it—what a fool—into the body of some Jewess, a decent woman, but poor, downtrodden etcetera—and so it came to pass that there was born to the world a strange creature, one who is not in accord with himself!

Yiddish emerges, by implication, from the above-cited passages as a sort of dybbuk that sets self and anti-self at loggerheads within the psyche.

No Hebrew or Yiddish writer explored the phenomenon of Jewish duality or split consciousness at greater depth and length than Michah Yosef Berdichevsky (1865–1921), nor did any other writer of his day conduct so extensive an enquiry into the socio-psychological implications of Jewish bi-and tri-linguism. Since he wrote in Hebrew, Yiddish, and German, he knew whereof he spoke. Of special interest are Berdichevsky's meditations on language, since he was one of the very few Hebrew or Yiddish writers who underwent his literary apprenticeship in the school of *Haskalah* to evince an unqualifiedly positive attitude to his mother tongue. He is nonetheless at one with Ahad Ha'am in positing an ineradicable distinctiveness between Hebrew and Yiddish. Thus he writes in an essay included under the rubric *Sheniut* ("Duality"):

> In the *Hebrew language*, the language of the book, we immerse the entire ancestral heritage in words and phrases, in ideas and images, in various visions and conceptions within our own soul, and we give new birth to the language through the grafting of our spirit making of it a new creation . . . This is not true of the *Yiddish language*, the language of the moment, bereft of a past, in which we do not give of ourselves—any *investment of the self* in it (Yiddish) only leads to *the destruction of the language*—rather do we receive, receive from the quotidian, the utterances of the moment.

WE DO NOT HAVE TO DO WITH A NARRATOR TELLING OF EVENTS THAT OCCURRED TO HIMSELF OR TO OTHERS, BUT RATHER THESE OTHERS COME TO TELL US OF THEIR OWN LIVES IN THEIR OWN WAY, PASS BEFORE US AND SPEAK AND WE ARE BUT THE LISTENERS . . .

With Yiddish as opposed to Hebrew poetics, Berdichevsky writes further:

> We do not have to do with a narrator telling of events that occurred to himself or to others, but rather these others come to tell us of their own lives in their own way, pass before us and speak and we are but the listeners . . . We do not find in the Yiddish language and in Yiddish poetics, in the authentic and not counterfeit sense of these terms, a poet speaking on his own behalf, proclaiming his individuality. It is the spirit of the people, rather, which speaks from his throat.

While Berdichevsky and Ahad Ha'am are diametrically opposed in their emotional stance toward their mother tongue, they share essentially the same premise: Yiddish is somehow stamped with an irreducible alterity. For Berdichevsky, it is precisely the alterity deplored by Ahad Ha'am that constitutes the distinction, in both senses of the term, of this language. He of all people, arguably the most autobiographically driven Hebrew writer of his day, embraces the prospect afforded by Yiddish of voiding of authorial self and reducing the narrator to a type of ventriloquist's puppet from whose "throat" issues the "voice of the people." In view of Berdichevsky's psycho-historical conception of Yiddish as "the utterances of the moment," it is understandable that he accords pride of place in his Yiddish writings to the monologue—a literary category virtually absent in his Hebrew writings. Ever the master of contradictions, however, Berdichevsky manifested a strong penchant for the simultaneous embrace of mutually exclusive alternatives. As Shmuel Werses points out, it is precisely in Berdichevsky's monologues, "although he only participates in these monologues as a listener, never stopping his interlocutor's confessional outpourings," that his autobiographically presence is most keenly felt. The negative of the verbal snapshot of the "moment" is somehow transformed into a positive as it meets the reader's eye.

Berdichevsky wrests autobiographical presence from autobiographical absence by implanting within the monologue of the "others who come to tell us of their lives" a ubiquitous consciousness of their unspeaking addressee, repeatedly addressed as "*Reb* Yosl" or "Yosl *dem rovs*,"

whose real-life identity is beyond doubt. The monologists also frequently allude to the occasion of their encounter with this "distant relative," his return to his home town, Dubova, in 1902 to introduce his newly wed third wife, Rachel, to his family. Berdichevsky's autobiographical presence-in-absence is well illustrated in the monologue "*Af der elter.*" "Yosl," the monologue begins:

> Do you ["Yosl" is addressed in the intimate "Du" throughout] not remember me at all? I am after all your teacher's wife. How long is it since you attended our Kheyder, some twenty years perhaps…Who could then have predicted of you that you would become a German! We thought that you were cut out to be a rabbi [*Rov*] in Berditshev. Are you at the least a Reform rabbi [*Rabiner*] out there? For all that you are still a Jew and you have not forgotten our shtetl, no! No! How God guides His world: There you sit without a hat and I come to you and see that same Yosl, that nice little boy with *Peyes* . . . If Yoyel were alive he would have sounded you out in Toyre study, so as to see whether by now you have forgotten it all. Master of the universe! I see you still, sitting at the table sunk in thought over the *Gemore.* Then I said to myself: that one is peering into some place different . . . Yoyel was the great Talmudist, as you know, but he did not see beneath the surface, did not know his own pupils. But I had eyes to see . . . I can tell from your eyes that you are no hater of *Yidishkayt.* How long are you going to be staying with us? . . . I just cannot get it into my head that you are that Yosl from so long ago. Tell me the truth, do you ever recall once in a while your teacher and the wife of his? Have you any idea how much we loved you!

Berdichevsky sets into play here an elaborate game of mirrors in which self and other are alternately cast into ironic relief; the same kind of reverberation is effected by Rimbaud's formulation "*Je est un autre.*" Which leads one to ask, is this really the "voice of the people" that speaks from the writer's "throat" or high sophistication masquerading as folksy reportage?

While not the first to employ this intro/extrospective oblique approach to the self, Berdichevsky innovated in giving theoretical expression to a "duality" (*Sheniut*) or cleavage of self that is by no means unique in Yiddish autobiographical writing, as is so richly demonstrated in the pioneering studies of Dan Miron in nineteenth-century Yiddish literature. Striking confirmation of such duality/cleavage is the election of both Abramovitsh and Sholem Aleichem to speak of themselves in the third person in their auto/allo/biographies. Consider the following passage, taken from what must be one of the most bizarre autobiographical preambles ever written, by Sholem Aleichem, a writer whom Berdichevsky worshipped, acclaiming him as "the only one who knows the Yiddish language and who created the Yiddish language":

> "Write your autobiography"—the real story, not an invented tale—is easier said than done…That's why I chose a special form of autobiography: memoirs in the form of a novel. I'll talk about myself in the third person. I, Sholem Aleichem the writer, will tell the true story of Sholem Aleichem the man, informally and without adornments and embellishments, as if an absolute stranger were talking, yet one who accompanied him everywhere, even to the seven divisions of hell.

Having cited the "grandfather" and the "grandson" of Yiddish literature, I conclude with a citation from a monologue written by the "father" of Yiddish literature, Y. L. Peretz, a monologue that the young Berdichevsky so much admired that he provided a Hebrew translation/reworking of the piece:

> How is it possible for a man in this world to understand himself? . . . I want to tear myself out of my body, I want to stand apart from myself, or have the Other stand apart from me. Then "he" can look at I-he or I-he can look at him-I.

Marcus Moseley is associate professor of Jewish studies in the Department of German at Northwestern University.

(see page 4 for further details)