

# Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and Mendele's *The Book of Beggars*

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## 1.

*Oliver Twist* was translated into Russian in 1841, approximately five years after its first publication in England in 1837. The Yiddish and Hebrew translations were published much later in 1920 and 1924. I imagine that Mendele Moycher Seform, the pen name of Shalom Jacob Abramowitsch, who was born in 1835 in Kapuli Belorussia and died in 1917 in Odessa, read the Russian translation. The book of his I am discussing was first written in Yiddish under the name of *Fishke der Krume* (*Fishke the Lame*) in 1869, and was translated and rewritten in Hebrew by the author in 1909 as *Sefer haKabbezanim* (*Book of Beggars*).

A comparative study of these two books seems to me quite illuminating. *Oliver Twist* is the story of the illegitimate son of a respectable middle-class gentleman, Edward Leeford, who is born in the workhouse and in order to survive joins a group of thieves and pickpockets. His descent into the daemonic underworld of Fagin, Sikes, and Monks is basically the result of the morals, manners and norms of his father's society. He is the victim of Victorian sexual and social repression. Only the aid of the good surrogate father, Mr. Brownlow, who finally adopts him, makes his ascent possible. Being poor means losing identity and being given a surrogate identity. The poor are without support and the only way they can sustain themselves is by resigning themselves to their lot or by rebelling against the norms of society. Being an outlaw and committing felony is the reaction of repressed instincts against repressive social norms.

The unraveling of the plot against Oliver by Mr. Brownlow is made possible partly by chance and partly because of his rational power of analysis. Through this mental faculty he rescues the pure and naive boy from the irrational powers of crime and poverty and recreates a state of normalcy. For similar reasons Rose finds her legitimate identity, and her marriage to Harry Maylie is like a fertility ceremony ending a long line of hatred, death and infertility, while Oliver is reestablished as the legitimate son of an adopting father after at last finding his lost identity. The final resolution does not bring about social change but only a differentiation between bad and good in the underworld: Sikes is killed and Fagin goes to the gallows but Oliver is restored to legitimacy. The social message actually is that the real sinner is not Edward Leeford, Oliver's father, but the group of destitutes and Monks, the legitimate son.

The structure of the novel points the descent of the newborn (like heroes of antiquity: Moses, Jesus, etc.) into a dark mysterious environment. From the depth of the daemonic hell of the poorhouse and non-identity, the "hero" ascends to identity, moving from unconsciousness of self to a stage of self-consciousness, and having to go through the metropolitan inferno of greed, sadism and lust associated with the group of paupers he joins in London.

## 2.

The plot of *The Book of Beggars* by Mendele is comparable to the plot of *Oliver Twist*. The structure of the *sujzet* is much more complicated and reminds us more of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1760-67) than of a Dickens plot. The sequence of events in this novel is not linear; there are essay-like digressions, flashbacks and continual interference by the frame-narrator, who also functions as a major addressee. (Shklovsky 25-57)<sup>1</sup>

The frame-story tells about the meeting between the frame-narrator Mendele Moycher Seform (Mendele the Bookseller), appearing as a fictitious character, and Alter the Bookseller. The meeting starts as farce and ends in the grotesque as the two booksellers do business lying in the sun and telling stories. After a while they separate and Alter comes across a third character who happens to be somebody Mendele has earlier told of. The third person is Fishke the Lamé, a professional pauper who used to work in the public bath of Mendele's *shtetel*. He is the main character of the *fabula* and his story is analogous to some extent to that of *Oliver Twist*. He is according to Mendele one of those non-persons on the margin of society who have a name but no identity. They are components of the social mass, repressed and depressed by society, but they are also a kind of *synecdoche* of the society they live in.

Fishke marries a blind woman-beggar because the match between her and the groom was canceled by his mother, and the community, who had prepared

the wedding, did not want to waste the food. The heads of the community formulate their views very bluntly: "Actually, we don't care so much about losing the groom as about losing the dinner. What are we going to do with such fish and such roasts? We've run ourselves ragged all day getting everything ready. We didn't even get our commission for arranging the match. It's a sin to let all this work go to waste, our effort, our hard work! We thought and finally we got an idea. Fishke! Let him help us out of our trouble! Let him be the groom. What's the difference? Why should he care?" (*Fishke the Lame*, 56) There is no possibility of personal choice for this group of social underdogs.

The community handles them impersonally because they are not considered human beings. The match between the lame man and the blind woman seems to be an ideal one because each is a wonderful source of income. Both are persuaded by Feivush the redhead, the leader of a gang of wandering paupers, to join the homeless beggars who live like gypsies from alms and stealing. The narrator-Mendele satirically remarks about the subgroups into which beggars are divided: "The two main ones are the infantry or foot beggars, and the cavalry or van beggars. . . . 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." (110). As we will see later, pauperism is a synecdoche of Jewish homelessness; it is a metaphor of a collective subconscious describing the repressed Id of society.

Physical deformity is the best merchandise a pauper can bring to the market place, and whoever does not have this advantage creates it, either by mutilating himself or by playing the role of a deformed person. According to the norms of the beggars, deformity is beautiful and the more you are deformed the better off you are, because this is the best source of income.

### 3.

The main *Oliver Twist* motif is the story of Beila the hunchback. Her mother was left by her father and she is abandoned by her mother and sold to the same group of beggars Fishke and his wife have joined. They use her hunchback as merchandise. Her sentimental song: "My father used to beat me / My mother used to hate me" (150) is the melodramatic leitmotif of the victimized, pathetic, child scapegoat. The leader of the band, Feivush the redhead, is the Fagin of the group. Feivush is the active symbol of the subhuman. He is a bundle of basic instincts—the struggle for survival and sexual greed. He seduces Batya, the blind wife of Fishke, because he savors her deformity and her value as a piece of merchandise. Nevertheless he also desires Beila the hunchback and covets her.

The red-headed bastard's lust for Beila is one more symptom of pauperism as a metaphor of the Id—the social symbol of greed, the brutal struggle for survival and the identification of the subheroes of society with the subconscious. In the primary process there is a transposition from the psychological field of reference to the social one. There is an equalization between the lower class and the lower levels of the human ego.

A romantic affair develops between Fishke, who by this point is an abandoned husband, and Beila, the hunchback and the abandoned child (Beila = Bella the beautiful in Yiddish). She tells him the sad story of her life and the two victims of society use romantic diction in their dialogues. For the booksellers, the addressees, these are sentiments that are not appropriate to this class; for them the reality of the lower classes is sex and lust, not spiritual love. Even if love occurs among the destitute, it is not regarded as a reality according to the expectations and social norms of what may be the intellectual lower middle class of the Jewish ghetto (represented by the two booksellers).

Mendele's satiric theory is that love is possible only among the very rich or the very poor because the middle-class have to make a living and cannot spare time for superfluous sentiments: "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!* We're too busy earning our daily bread, trying to make a living. Our first worry is business. Everything is business; even marriage is a business" (176). In practice love among the lower class is a ridiculous parody. Love's major romantic connotation is beauty, and the love between the lame man and the hunchback is a parody of physical beauty.

#### 4.

Mendele and Alter are the addressees of Fishke's love story and Mendele intervenes with ironic remarks. He does not accept the pathetic love story of the lower classes at face value. I quote from the melodramatic climax of the story told by Fishke the lame and the manipulation of the reaction to this climax by the addressee-narrator of the frame story, Mendele. Beila complains: "Oh, woe! Oh, woe is me!" she sighs from the depths of her heart:

"What's the good of my living? It's better to be dead than to live this way. God is so kind, so merciful—why did He create people like me, who only suffer in this world?" "Silly girl!" I said to her. "Surely, God knows what He's about. It must give him pleasure that people like us live in this world etc." "When I awoke early the next morning, my little hunchback lay in the corner, nestled in my capote, and slept like a little bird. My eyes filled with tears and I cried. The first one to come into this part of the house in the morning was the bastard, his bones should rot!"

Fishke was ashamed of what he'd said, it seemed. (141–42)

And this is the reaction of Mendele, the narrator-addressee, to the sentimental confession of Fishke:

“Who among us has not experienced at least once in his lifetime, a brilliant hour of inspiration, when his mouth gave utterance to pure, true human feelings which burst forth like clouds of seething and steaming gases from a fire-spouting volcano? Even upon Balaam's ass a blessed hour descended during which he opened his mouth and delivered a fine speech.

“It happens sometimes that even a preacher, pardon the comparison, who is forever chewing his cud and talking nonsense enough to make you sick, is suddenly struck with inspiration and without thinking comes forth with an idea that leaves both him and his audience gasping with wonder.

“As soon as the moment of inspiration evaporates the ass remains an ass and the preacher, pardon the comparison, a bag of wind and . . . but that's not my point.” (142–43)

This reaction is a trivialization and banalization of Fishke's emotional state and his deepest feelings. He is implicitly compared to the speaking ass or the cud-chewing preacher. According to Mendele the bookseller, the addressee of Fishke's story in the fictive circle (semi-intellectual lower middle class), who represents the assumed real addressee, emotions in the lower classes are out of bounds, ridiculous and illegitimate. From the point of view of the implied author communicating with a more sophisticated implied reader, this functions as an implied criticism of the assumed addressee who denies emotions in the lower classes and actually represses sublime human feelings in his own emotional life. The chance of catharsis in the plot and on the part of the reader is negated. The implied message is that actually there is no chance of emotional elevation in the world of the addressees in the fictive circle and in the world of the assumed readers. Feivush interferes in the Fishke-Beila affair and his interference destroys the relationship. Fishke escapes from his devastating anger, but Beila remains the prisoner of lust and greed.

As mentioned above, the structure of the novel is quite complicated and the meaning of the novel depends on its complicated structure (Wiener 41–47).<sup>2</sup> The frame-story is not static but dynamic and changes take place in the *sujzet* of the structure. Digressions of secondary narrators are mostly homo- and heterodiegetic analepses. These digressions (secondary stories) are told by characters in the frame-story (Mendele and Alter) and by the protagonist (Fishke) and other narrators who enter into the frame-story (*sujzet*) later, and enlarge and extend the range of time and space of the *fabula*. The frame-story and the secondary stories are not communicated directly by an authoritative narrator, but Mendele is the permanent extradigetic narrator and interpreter of several intradigetic narrators (Alter, Fishke). Most narrators are

also narratees when they function as the audience of one of the narrators. Mendele himself is the major narrator (communicating for the implied and real reader, the stories of the secondary narrator) and also a permanent narratee to the stories of his companions. This complex structure opens all kind of narrative options: the narrator as narratee responds and reacts to the stories of the secondary narrators; the linear plot is frequently disturbed and disrupted by the interpretations of the secondary stories by the narrator-addressee. These disruptions and digressions create comic effects and are conventions of the comic novel (Junger 81–91).

Comic effects are created also by “collisions” between the logical linear plot and a series of irrelevant actions of the narrators. The story Fishke narrates is divided into two parts according to the places of narration of the “hero”-narrator: The first part is narrated on Alter’s wagon (105–45), the second part on Mendele’s (45 ff). This division is artificial and external and has nothing in common with the progression of the plot: it is a collision between a logical-causal pattern and an arbitrary one—the source of a very special comic effect. As we have seen in Mendele’s interpretation of Fishke’s melodramatic-sentimental love story, the melodramatic major plot is challenged by comic patterns that change its mood and meaning. But if we look at the novel from a different point of view, we find that the novel’s structure is neither compound nor causal but analogical and between what seem to be compound irrelevant units of the novel, there are some striking thematic analogies.<sup>3</sup>

This loose and compound comic novel has a unifying, coherent deep structure: Mendele as an interpreting addressee-narrator has told the story of match-making between the blind and the lame and he associates it with an unfortunate attempt at matchmaking by Alter, who matched two men (57).

“Don’t give up! You started your matchmaking like an experienced broker. Just because the young fellow . . . well, *beh!* Upon my word! But once 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. My wife has just borne me a son. God praise him. Go then, daughter o’ mine! Under the *chupeh* with you.” (57)

This implied analogy (the match between two men and the blind and the lame) and the grotesque interpretation of the narrator indicates the main subject of the novel: the meaning or negation of meaning of personal life in this society. There is a secondary episode in the pub where Mendele gets lost when he is looking for his lost horse. The lady of the pub is perfectly sure that she can make a match between her elderly daughter and Mendele’s son, whether Mendele has or has not a son who happens to be a bachelor. This is a kind of comic relief after Mendele’s grotesque story of the Beggars’ wedding

of the lame and the blind, and it comes before the main "Oliver Twist" melodramatic plot of the triangle of Fishke, Feivush the redhead, and Beila the hunchback told by Fishke as second narrator.

The main analogical subject of the novel is the destruction of the personal life of the members of the society by its basic economic and social norms. The indirect narrating filter and the interplay between *sujzet* and *fabula* in the frame-story give this novel its unique ambiguity—the ambiguous state of mind resulting from a satiric interpretation of a basically melodramatic plot, and the ambiguity of the tragicomedy of the destruction of human beings by their biological and spiritual parents (social norms). The mixture of ambiguous fragmentary comic forms and of a sentimental social subject conveys the grotesque mood of a social problem that has no positive solution.

## 6.

The grotesque meaning of an unsolvable social issue is intensified at the turning point: the point where *sujzet* and *fabula* coincide and merge. This is the most interesting structural and thematic point of the novel. The frame-story becomes part of the main intrigue and the turning point gives the whole story a new meaning, previously alluded to in the quoted passage that describes the reaction of the assumed addressee. It is this turning point that makes all the difference between the psychological and social messages of Dickens's novel and Mendele's.

The turning point (*peripeteia*) is also a point of recognition (*anagnorisis*) when one of the two addressees, Alter, recognizes that Beila is his abandoned daughter, whom he lost when he divorced his wife and married a younger woman. She was not born a hunchback, but sitting under the kitchen tables of her mother's workplace, she became one. Let me quote this turning point that is also the point of discovery and recognition:

"Tell me, Fishke!" I continued when I was sure that Alter was in no danger: "do you also know what was her mother's name and where she is from?"

"Yes," Fishke answered. "My hunchback told me that her mother's name was Elkeh. She remembered that her mother and father were divorced in Tuneyadevkeh. Her mother used to talk about it whenever she lost her temper with the miserable child."

"Divorced in Tuneyadevkeh?" I wondered. "Who could have been her husband there—that monster of monsters with a heart of stone, who cast off his child and made her life miserable? Eh, Reb Alter, it's your town. Who could it have been?" Alter sat there more dead than alive. His bulging eyes rolled wildly. My heart sank when I saw him gasping for breath.

"His name was . . ." Fishke rubbed his forehead in an effort to recall the name. "His name, his name, I think . . . wait a minute—"

"Alter is the name!" Alter screamed and again fell down in the wagon.

"Yes, yes, that's it!" Fishke exclaimed, looking at Alter without understanding the meaning of his screaming. "And he had another name—Yaknehoz. Her mother used to pinch her cruelly and call her 'Yaknehoz's daughter' or 'Lady Yaknehoz,' especially after she'd had a lot of trouble or lost a job."

By now everything was crystal-clear to me and I sat there as if I had been doused with a pail of cold water.

Alter sobbed and beat his breast with his fist, crying, "Verily, I have sinned! I have ruined her life. She was right, poor thing, with her little song: 'My father used to hate me. . . .'" (214-15)

This is a recognition scene in which the circle of addressees-witnesses becomes part of the main melodramatic plot. The source of all evil is in this circle. There is no difference between the victims and victimizers in the story and the victimizers in the fictitious audience and implicitly in the assumed audience of the implied author. The result of sexual lust and material greed is the distortion of the life of the young generation. The children become cripples, sacrificed by their biological and social parentage (the Jewish community). According to the implied author, they have become homeless, wandering and mutilated because their home is corrupted and the only rescuing father is Mendele the narrator, who is not a Mr. Brownlow and cannot change their social status. He can only be a witness to the cul-de-sac and tell the addressees that they are the real sinners, that it is their fault that all this happened. If the novel is a metaphor for the Jewish people, it is an indictment of the morals, manners, and norms of the social entity that is responsible for its own sufferings. Mendele's verdict on his society is much more severe than Dickens's verdict on Victorian society.

In *Oliver Twist* mischief is done by the sexual misdeeds of a father who repents and actually after his death reestablishes his lost son and, through his surrogate, brings him back into the family of man. He has to go through the abyss of the lower world of beggars and crime and descend into the depth of the subconscious in order to ascend victorious with the help of the rationality off the middle class, who rescue the lost son from anonymity and suffering and return his identity and social status to him. According to this plot there is some hope in the rational power of the middle class. They can reestablish justice, reward the victims, and punish the malicious villains.

Fishke and Beila are victims of the sexual sins of the fathers: Fishke is an orphan and he is the victim of his only parent—the *shtetl* community. Beila is the victim of her father (who divorced her mother for a younger woman) and the lust of a mother (who abandoned Beila for a lover). There is no positive solution: Beila is still the victim of Feivush, that is of unconscious greed and lust personified, the symbolic hyperbole of the Fathers. In abandoning their children they take away their identity, and these children, losing



their social status, become part of the what Mendele calls the infantry or cavalry of paupers. There is no happy end in this and other Dickens-like novels of Mendele such as *Beemek haBacha (In the Valley of Tears)*. There is no reward for the victims and no punishment for the villains apart from the regret and the bad conscience of an Alter. Mendele did not conceive of a positive solution for the homeless victims of society or for the society that is responsible for its own misdeeds. For Dickens there was hope in social change and evolution; Mendele implies that only a major revolution can change the distorted social structure of his society.

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## NOTES

1. See: Victor Shlovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary," *Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays* (Trans. L. T. Lemon & M. J. Reis), U of Nebraska P, 1965, 25–57. This is a brilliant formalist explication. Some of the devices Shlovsky elucidates are used by Mendele.
2. M. Wiener. *Zu der Geschichte der Yiddisher Literatur in 19-ten Jahrhundert, Mendele Moycher Seforim*, Band II, N.Y. 1945, S.41–47 (Yiddish). Wiener emphasizes the influence of the French romantic-sentimental novel *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) by Victor Hugo (1802–1885) available in Russian in the sixties. In his opinion Fishke is comparable to the hunchback Quasimodo and Beyla to Esmeralda. The comparison seems to me farfetched.
3. G. Shaked. *Between Laughter and Tears, Studies in the Works of Mendele Moycher Seforim*, Ramat-Gan, 1965, 1974, pp. 120–24 (Hebrew). Dan Miron in a new edition and republication of *The Book of Beggars (Fishke the Lame)* has written an interpretative epilogue under the title "Mendele's Education Sentimentale." *Mendele Mocher Sefarim, The Book of Beggars*, Tel-Aviv, 1988, 203–68 (Hebrew). His interpretation here is quite different from the one given in his earlier English book, *A Traveler Disguised*, N.Y. 1973. His last psychological approach to the novel seems to me quite farfetched.

## WORKS CITED

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Mendele Mocher Seforim, *Fishke the Lame*, tr. from the Yiddish by Gerald Stillman. New York and London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960.