

REVIEWS

Fiction and History in the Writings of Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (Bin-Gorion)

Dan Almagor, Shmuel Z. Fishman. *Nahalat Micha-Yosef Berdyczewski* [The Heritage of MYB (Bin-Gorion): An Annotated Bibliography]. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1982 [Hebrew].

Emanuel Bin-Gorion. *Reshut haya'hid* [The Life and Work of Micha Josef Berdyczewski (Bin-Gorion) in His Last Twenty Years]. Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1980 [Hebrew].

Emanuel Bin-Gorion. *Korei hadorot* [M. J. Berdyczewski (Bin-Gorion) in His Stories, Legends, Essays, and Studies]. Tel Aviv: Reshafim, 1981 [Hebrew].

Micha Josef Bin-Gorion (Berdyczewski). *Yidishe ksovim fun a vaytn korev* [Yiddish Works of a Distant Relative]. Introduction and Selection by Shmuel Werses, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1981 [Texts in Yiddish; Introduction in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English].

Zippora Kagan, editor. *Hagut vesipporet biytsirat Berdyczewski: Simpozijon* [Thought and Fiction in the Works of Berdyczewski: A Symposium]. Haifa: University of Haifa, 1981 [Hebrew].

Of all the major European Jewish writers in the twentieth century, few have matched the breadth of literary activities of Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (1865–1921). At various points in his life he was involved in almost every aspect of creative and scholarly writing that has come to characterize modern Jewish culture: fiction, essays on contemporary cultural and literary issues and on Jewish history; the collection, editing, and rewriting of Jewish myths, legends, and folktales; and text criticism and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Although most of his works were written in Hebrew, he also wrote fiction and essays in Yiddish and turned to German for the writing of some scholarly works and of fiction. In every field of his endeavors he broke new ground and often aroused controversial reactions to his revolutionary approaches.

This wide range of Berdyczewski's activities as a writer is most evident as one studies the recently published bibliography of his works compiled by Dan Almagor and Shmuel Z. Fishman. Although the bibliography focuses on Berdyczewski's Hebrew writings and on critical works about Berdyczewski in Hebrew (the compilers state that they believe they have located at least ninety percent of this material), many of Berdyczewski's writings in Yiddish and in

German are included, as are works about the author in a number of languages. Scholars who have benefited from the mimeographed first draft of the bibliography issued in 1970 will gladly welcome the publication of this greatly expanded version now available in an attractive and clearly printed edition.

Berdyczewski's writings may be divided into two major categories: (1) fiction and essays portraying and commenting on the life of European Jewry in the present and (2) historical scholarship reconstructing the Jewish past. Recent works on the life and writings of Berdyczewski reflect an apparent split between two ways of understanding the relationship between Berdyczewski's seemingly contradictory interests in the writing of fiction and of history. On the one hand, the author's son, Emanuel Bin-Gorion, emphasizes the difference between these two types of writing. In line with statements which his father made in his lifetime, Bin-Gorion sees much significance in the shift of interest from fiction to historical scholarship in the last years of his life. On the other hand, critics such as Shmuel Werses, Dan Miron, and Zippora Kagan, while not explicitly disputing Emanuel Bin-Gorion's approach, suggest that there is much which unites these two sides of Berdyczewski's works. Indeed, even a good deal of what the son writes about his father's works unwittingly confirms the assumption of unity.

Reshut hayaḥid is a biography by Emanuel Bin-Gorion covering the last two decades of his father's life.* This time is divided into the Breslau (1903-1911) and Berlin (1911-1921) periods. It was at the end of the first and the beginning of the second period that Berdyczewski began to move away from the types of literature which he had written in his earlier years—fiction and essays—and turned to scholarly pursuits. Emanuel Bin-Gorion attributes this change in his father's identity as a writer to the lack of support for his father from the Hebrew and Yiddish literary establishment of the time (pp. 125-26).

Although the son expresses considerable anger at the neglect and scorn his father allegedly suffered at the hands of the European Jewish literary establishment, he sees that treatment as a blessing in disguise because it forced Berdyczewski to seek and find his true identity as a writer. Berdyczewski expressed this shift in identity symbolically by beginning to make use of the pseudonym Bin-Gorion, taken from the name that Hebrew tradition had assigned to the Jewish historian of antiquity, Josephus. Although, as the son notes, Bin-Gorion had been one of many pseudonyms used by the author at the turn of the century, it was during the transition from his Breslau period, the final years of his main preoccupation with fiction and essays, to his Berlin period, when he was mainly preoccupied with scholarship, that he began to use it more consistently. The symbolic significance of the pseudonym is indicated in a note which Berdyczewski wrote in 1911 to Shmuel Abba Horodetzky, the editor of *Hagoren*, explaining why he wanted to sign an article he had written on the rabbinical figure Elishah ben Abuyah with the name Bin-Gorion:

I also insist on the name. These are two separate matters. My name as poet and author [Berdyczewski] is an existing and fixed concept, while in these

* Although Emanuel Bin-Gorion completed the manuscript of the biography in 1942, he did not publish it until nearly forty years later, in 1980.

matters (i.e. of scholarship) I am entering completely new ground. There is much to this. (page 27)

Berdyczewski gradually became so attached to the pseudonym he had chosen for the last decade of his career that upon applying for German citizenship following World War I, he declared his official family name to be Bin-Gorion (pages 27–28).

Emanuel Bin-Gorion's focus on the importance of the change in his father's identity as a writer and his citing of statements by his father such as the note to Horodetzky create the impression of a dramatic turn by the author from one sphere of writing under the name Berdyczewski to a completely different one under the name Bin-Gorion. The Berdyczewski/Bin-Gorion split, however, is not as clearcut as it might seem. Indeed, to this day it has been customary in publishing works by or about Berdyczewski to refer to him with both names, as if to recognize that the two sides of the author's literary activities—the earlier writing of fiction on contemporary experience and the later scholarship of the past—are distinctive yet somehow linked in the same man.

Berdyczewski's fictional and scholarly works are connected by an underlying assumption on the part of the author that myths, legends, and folktales contain the keys to understanding the nature of human existence. In his scholarly collection of these three types of traditional narrative and in his critical reading of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Berdyczewski became interested particularly in those myths, legends, and folktales which expressed traditions that had been suppressed by a cultural establishment.

As an historian he turned to these narratives to reconstruct hidden versions of history which he considered to be truer than those sanctioned by normative tradition. In his fiction he increasingly drew upon the myths, legends, and folktales he had collected to express the hidden human drives which he believed were suppressed by the traditional Jewish cultural establishment of his time, as well as by the excessively rationalistic movement of Jewish enlightenment, the *Haskalah*. In effect, both as a writer of history and as a writer of fiction Berdyczewski was engaged in the art of constructing narratives that told of the hidden realities of human existence in the past and in the present. In both kinds of writing, the myths, legends, and folktales which he collected were the raw materials from which those narratives were created.

In *Korei hadorot*, Emanuel Bin-Gorion's summaries of the results of his father's critical studies of ancient texts tell us much about the skill with which Berdyczewski approached the narrative art of history. In his text criticism of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, Berdyczewski rewrote scriptural versions of the history of ancient Israel and the origins of Christianity by "discovering" in those texts the ways in which the cultural establishment substituted one set of narratives for another.

In place of the Hebrew Bible's emphasis in its narratives on the centrality of Moses, the covenant at Mount Sinai, the city of Jerusalem, and the tribe of Judah, Berdyczewski claimed that he could discern the existence of a hidden tradition based on the centrality of Joshua, the covenant at Mount Gerizim, the city of Shechem, and the Samaritans. What emerged in Berdyczewski's studies was a bias in favor of the hidden tradition because it represented a commitment

to more physical, land-based values than that of the official tradition. It was Joshua who led the Israelites to victory against the Amalakites when Moses' hands weakened (Exod. 17:8–13). It was the Samaritans with their sanctuary at Shechem who remained loyal to the Land of Israel, while the Judeans went into exile in Babylonia and upon their return to the Land insisted on the primacy of the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Such reconstructed versions of biblical history corresponded to Berdyczewski's call for a *shinnui ha'arakhim*, a Nietzschean transvaluation of values favoring the physical drives of the people over the spiritual demands of the religious establishment.

Berdyczewski's theories on the origins of Christianity were as radical as those he developed on the history of ancient Israel. His textual studies led him to conclude that much of the New Testament contained non-historical legends developed to foster particular aspects of Christian self-understanding. Thus, the Jesus of the New Testament was a legendary creation based on Jesus ben Hanan, the prophet of the destruction of the Second Temple mentioned by Josephus. Judas was not an historical figure, but was developed out of motifs in the Hebrew Bible and the story of the betrayal of Julius Caesar by Brutus. In contrast to the New Testament claim that Paul had originally been a Jew named Saul, Berdyczewski argued that Paul and Saul were two different historical figures, the former a pagan and the latter a Jew.

Without attempting to verify whether there is any historical validity to Berdyczewski's claims for challenging the New Testament versions of the origins of Christianity, one may speculate as to what motivated Berdyczewski to rewrite the history of Christianity. Much of the motivation would appear to have been an attempt to reconcile the centuries-old conflict between Judaism and Christianity. Judas, the Jew who betrayed Jesus, and Paul, the Jew who chose to follow Jesus, represent negative and positive images respectively that express the importance of the need for Jews to accept Christianity as the legitimate successor to the Jewish tradition. If the narratives in which these characters play a central role were actually the products of non-historical legends seeking to justify the supremacy of Christianity over Judaism, then Christian claims to truth would be severely undermined and Jews and Christians would have much to reevaluate in terms of their relationship to each other.

As Emanuel Ben-Gorion points out, Berdyczewski's collections of legends, no less than his theories of history based on text criticism, were meant to uncover suppressed traditions. From the rabbinical collections of legends, Berdyczewski culled parts of a mythic tradition defeated by the rabbinical establishment which edited those collections. Referring to Berdyczewski's anthology *Me'otsar ha'aggadah* (1913) the son declares:

That which Berdyczewski collected mainly from the midrashim . . . but also a bit here and a bit there from the literature of rabbinic thought and again from kabbalistic and mystical teachings, is actually a disunified myth; for after the complete and absolute victory of the God of the fathers and the nation, no opposing force was left. (page 35)

It remained for Berdyczewski to rediscover these legendary fragments of the myth opposed to the rabbinical interpretation of the nature of God and the nation and present them to the contemporary reader. Emanuel Bin-Gorion states that for his father these legends preserved "the heartbeat of the folk"

(page 34) who knew answers to the problems of life that were different from those of the rabbinical establishment.

This interest in the anti-establishment voice of the folk is found in Berdyczewski's Yiddish writings as well. These works were written mostly during the years 1902–1906 after Berdyczewski visited his hometown in the Ukraine. As Shmuel Werses points out in his introduction to this new selection of these works, Berdyczewski sought in these Yiddish writings to “gather [what he could] from the spirit and the language of the masses” (*Yidishe ksovim*, vii). Berdyczewski's Yiddish works fall into two main categories: portraits of the contemporary realities of Jewish life in the shtetl and retold versions of ancient legends. The persona of the narrator is often that of “a middle aged Jew, deeply rooted in Jewish life” (*Yidishe ksovim*, xxxi), who retells the legends and recounts the incidents based on the life of contemporary traditional Jews in a style reminiscent of that of tellers of folktales. Furthermore, the narrator at times points to connections between the experiences conveyed in ancient legends and those found in the present or recent past. In these writings, “there is a mutual bond between the two time sequences of the ancient and recent past which may be expressed by actualizing the former and archaizing the latter” (*Yidishe ksovim*, xliii). Berdyczewski's Yiddish writings suggest a strong set of connections between the hidden voice of ancient legend and that of the contemporary folk. Berdyczewski considered both voices to be valuable cultural resources.

The role of myths, legends, and folktales in Berdyczewski's Hebrew fiction is discussed by Emanuel Bin-Gorion in *Korei hadorot*. Despite his emphasis on the Berdyczewski/Bin-Gorion split, the son does recognize that after his father's self-confessed change of identity from writer of fiction and essayist to scholar, he went on to publish (under the name Bin-Gorion) some of his greatest works of Hebrew fiction, drawing upon the myths, legends, and folktales that he had collected as a scholar. This connection between Berdyczewski as scholarly collector of legends and Berdyczewski as writer of Hebrew fiction is traced in two studies presented at the Haifa University symposium on “Thought and Fiction in the Works of Berdyczewski,” published recently under the editorship of Zippora Kagan.

In a paper titled “The Turning Point in Modern Hebrew Fiction and *Maḥanayim*,” Dan Miron sets out to demonstrate the role Berdyczewski's story of 1899 had in providing a transition from Haskalah fiction of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century fiction of such younger contemporaries of Berdyczewski as Brenner and Gnessin. The story, he argues, expresses the author's view that life is driven by “biological, psychological, vitalistic, instinctive” (p. 33) forces, a view opposed to the rationalism of the Haskalah and attractive to the psychologically-oriented Hebrew writers of the early twentieth century. In *Maḥanayim* Miron finds allusions to the Oedipus myth to be the basis for expressing the drives that move the hero of the story to his destruction. Michael, who had fled the world of East European traditional Judaism to pursue secular studies in Germany, is driven by his resentment over the death of his mother and his father's subsequent remarriage. This resentment leads him to an Oedipal rebellion against the traditional world of his father and to quasi-incestuous sexual relations with the mother of the woman he loves.

While, as Miron's analysis makes clear, in some of Berdyczewski's earlier fiction one can sense the role of myths, legends, and folktales, they play an even

more dominant role in his later fiction. Zippora Kagan, in her paper on "Genre Traditions in the Novel *Miriam*" adds to the analysis of the mythic-legendary dimensions of Berdyczewski's later fiction already made in recent years by a number of critics, most notably herself, Gershon Shaked, Dan Miron, and Ortziom Bartana.

Kagan demonstrates that two genres of traditional Jewish narrative, *pinkasim* (community records) and rabbinic legend, are sources upon which Berdyczewski's last work of fiction, the novel *Miriam* (1921) is based. Berdyczewski, she argues, saw in both genres evidence that supported his understanding of Jewish history as a struggle between individualistic rebels and normative authority. Non-normative events in *Miriam* seem to be inspired by the records in *pinkasim* of Jews acting contrary to community norms. Four characters in the novel who approach issues of Jewish law and faith in an unconventional manner appear to be related to the four rabbis who entered the mystical realm of the *pardes* in rabbinic legend (B. Hagigah). The *pinkasim* emphasized the community sanctions against non-conformists, and the rabbinic legend told of the dangers inherent in mystical speculation (only one of the four rabbis, Akiva, emerged from the experience unharmed). While the traditional narratives affirmed the primacy of normative thought and practice, Berdyczewski used these sources as material to glorify the rebel against the norm who attempted to widen the bounds of what is defined as Jewish culture. Thereby, Kagan maintains, Berdyczewski developed in *Miriam* a new genre of the "Hebrew-Jewish novel," drawing upon Jewish narratives of the past, yet challenging the assumptions of those narratives in order to assert the need for a transformation of Jewish culture from a monolithic way of life to a more pluralistic one.

During the years of Berdyczewski's literary career, many Jewish writers displayed a fascination with myths, legends, and folktales and their relationship to contemporary concerns: Bialik, Tchernichovsky, (Judah) Steinberg, Frishman, Horodetzky, Peretz, Anski, Buber, Agnon, and others. What is most striking about Berdyczewski's contributions to this neoromantic strain in early twentieth-century Jewish literature is the extent to which his practice of the narrative arts of both history and fiction was infused with the truths borne by myths, legends, and folktales. As a scholar, Berdyczewski's purpose was to collect from narrative accounts of the past (the Bible, the New Testament, Jewish legends, community records, and folktales recounted by the masses) the hidden vital narrative traditions which went against the grain of the cultural establishment and imaginatively to reconstruct them in order to provide an alternative past history for those, like himself, who refused to accept the versions of history put forth by traditional Jewish culture. As a writer of fiction, Berdyczewski drew upon the myths, legends, and folktales of the past to portray in narrative form the powerful forces of human instinct which traditional Jewish culture, and even the Haskalah, were reluctant to recognize. Berdyczewski's fictional and historical writings declare that the truth about human existence is found (as in the title of one of his later stories) *beseter ra'am*, in "the hidden thunder" beneath the surface of establishment history and conventional notions of contemporary reality.

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