Berdyczewski

Micha Yosef Berdyczewski was born in 1865 in Medzhybizh, a town in the Russian Empire, now Ukraine. The son of a rabbi, Berdyczewski was raised in a traditional Hasidic household, but turned to secular literature in his youth. After being forced to divorce his first wife because he was caught reading forbidden books, Berdyczewski went to study at the famous Volozhin *yeshiva*, one of the premier institutions for the study of Jewish texts at the time, where he wrote his first literary works. Strongly influenced by the *haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, Berdyczewski began publishing widely in the Hebrew press, initiating a literary feud with the writer Ahad HaAm over the future of modern Jewish literature. In the years 1899-1900, Berdyczewski published two novellas that became highly influential in the world of Hebrew modernism and deeply affected the next generation of Hebrew writers, *Makhanayim* (Two Camps) and *Urvah Parakh* (Nonsense). These stories introduced male protagonists who struggled with the competing demands of tradition and modernity. In the early twentieth century, Berdyczewski began a project of collecting and anthologizing Jewish rabbinic and folkloristic materials. This apparent turn toward the past was Berdyczewski’s way of demonstrating the historical diversity of Jewish cultural traditions, a diversity he saw as a model for a modern, secular Jewish literature.

After Berdyczewski’s early years in the traditional world of the yeshiva, in 1890 he went to Odessa to prepare for his departure to Europe to further his secular studies. There he encountered some of the first modern Hebrew writers, including S.Y. Abramovitsh and Asher Ginzberg (Ahad HaAm). In 1891 Berdyczewski departed for Europe, studying at the Universities of Breslau, Berlin, and Bern, where he received his doctorate in 1896. During the course of his studies, he came into contact with European culture and philosophy, and was particularly influenced by the ideas of Nietzsche and Hegel. As Berdyczewski began to concretize his own ideas about Jewish literature and culture, he undertook an extensive, years-long public debate with the essayist Ahad HaAm over the character and nature of Hebrew *belles lettres*. Berdyczewski argued, in opposition to Ahad HaAm, that Jewish literature should strive for aesthetic excellence and artistic value, rather than simply representing the collective national interest. He developed the notion of the *kera shebalev*, the “tear in the heart,” to describe the situation of the modern Jewish writer and intellectual torn between tradition and modernity. But rather than seeing this disruption as negative, Berdyczewski came to understand it as important and even necessary to the creative process and the development of a genuine, artistic Jewish literature.

The end of the nineteenth century also marked the most productive period of Berdyczewski’s literary career. In the years 1899-1900, he published nine volumes of short stories and essays, including his famous and highly influential modernist novellas, *Makhanayim* and *Urvah Parakh*. These stories, along with many of the others published during this period, present young male protagonists who have left behind the traditional religious world of their upbringing and are searching for place and identity in the modern world. Formally, these novellas marked Berdyczewski’s modernist style: interior and deeply psychological portraits of the protagonists, rendered in a stream of consciousness style that reflected the disorder and fragmentation of the psyche and modernity itself. The endings offered few solutions to the problems of the protagonists, frustrating a tidy narrative resolution. Not only did these works reflect a major break with earlier Hebrew literature of the Enlightenment tradition, but they became the cornerstones of modern Hebrew literature itself (Miron 193).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Berdyczewski turned his modernizing project toward Jewish history and folklore. He began to collect rabbinic stories, wisdom literature, and folklore from Jewish tradition, publishing several anthologies of diverse material in both Hebrew and German. While Berdiczewski turned to the past for his material, this recuperative project was another aspect of his modernism: he hoped to create, through reclamation of diverse and previously uncollected or non-canonized pieces of Jewish history and culture, a non-normative understanding of Judaism and Jewish life. Berdiczewski’s alternative history of Jewish culture, as expressed in both his essays and his fiction, encompassed the strange and the taboo, and stressed the need to be free of the artificial fetters of tradition, which suppressed the natural feelings and desires of the Jewish people.

In 1911, Berdyczewski settled in Berlin, where he was part of a growing circle of Hebrew modernists. There he wrote several of his later, mature works, including several novellas and a novel, *Miriam*. In his later works, his extensive research into the fabulous and legendary in Judaism is visible, and a mythic atmosphere pervades his fiction. Many of the stories from this period return to the small towns and villages of Berdyczewski’s childhood, yet are narrated by a speaker who has left the community. The psychological dramas of his earlier, individual protagonists are also on display, as whole communities struggle with the human urges that conflict with the strictures of traditional Jewish life. Berdyczewski’s final novel, *Miriam*, completed days before his death, is comprised of short sketches and character portraits, a “free, dismantled, pluralistic form” that has been described as a kind of postmodern “anti-novel” (Holtzman 18). Berdyczewski died in Berlin in 1921.

List of Works

M. Y. Berdyczewski. (1899) *Mibayit umikhutz*, Warsaw: Tushia.

-. (1899) *Makhanayim*, Warsaw: Tushia.

-. (1900) *Meirei haketana*, Warsaw: Tushia.

-. (1900) *Urvah parakh*, Warsaw: Tushia.

-. (1900) *Sefer hasidim*, Warsaw: Tushia.

- (1913) *Meotsar haaggdah*, 2 vols., Berlin: Ahisefer.

-. (1913-1926) *Die Sagen der Juden*, 3 vols., trans. Rachel Ramberg Bin-Gorion, Leipzig: Inzel.

-. (1960) *Kol sipurei m.y. berdyczewski*, Tel Aviv: Dvir.

Bibliography

Bar-Yosef, Hamutal. (1997) *Magaim shel dekadens*, Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik.

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