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WHAT IS POPULAR JEWISH CULTURE? THE EXAMPLE OF ANCIENT YIDDISH LITERATURE*

For more than a decade, research on the "popular cultures and literatures" in medieval Europe through the eighteenth century has flourished. This interest serves as testimony to the development of new fields, such as, the study of material civilization and historical anthropology, which lead, in conjunction to the know-how of ethnologists or folklorists, to circumscribe fields until then seldom taken into consideration, such as the modes of thought, the symbolic systems and the study of oral traditions or literatures. However, a number of studies bear the mark of a prejudice associated with the notion of "people" or of "popular". Since the nineteenth century, scholars have examined these areas of knowledge according to the models and categories of the high scientific culture, without taking into account the culture of the less or the barely literate. Concerning the Jewish Ashkenazi world, we possess, with the ancient Yiddish literature, a substantial set of printed texts, a true "laboratory" for the endeavor to understand what was once the popular culture of Ashkenazi Jewry.

Certain socio-historical realities made possible the rise of the ancient Yiddish literature. The influence of the cultural structure proper to the Jewish society must be emphasized. The Rabbinic literature is replete with considerations on the hierarchy of knowledge. One can mention the dichotomy between the wise (*hakham*) and the ignorant (*am ha-erets*). The four main orders characteristic of the Jewish traditional culture may be recalled: (1) The wise men (*hakhamim*) (2) the semi-literate (*mevinim* or literally those who "understand") (3) The ignorant (*amei ha-arets*) and (4) the women (*nashim*) who constitute a cultural group apart from the others. It must be stressed here that the illiteracy of the *amei ha-arets* implies ignorance of the sacred language, of the prayers, of the essential religious texts of the Jewish tradition and of the technical vocabulary that derives from it. The originality of the ancient Yiddish literature is that of aiming at the three last categories of readers, and, in particular, at the female readers. A separation is drawn between the high culture

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of the literate in Hebrew and in Aramaic on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the vernacular culture directed to those whose insufficient level of study or of competence in the sacred language often relegated them into the margins of knowledge.

Similar oppositions are also visible concerning the religious practices and rituals. Ashkenazi society of Modern Times is characterized by a rising professionalisation of knowledge, where the cultural gap grows wider between the literate, owners of knowledge, and the vast majority of Jews. The *gemeyne layt*, *proste yidn* or the *yeshuvniks* are content with a kind of syncretic, polytheist para-religion, a witness of the danger of paganization of the masses. The ancient Yiddish texts reflect an obvious ambivalence. On the one hand, the rabbis, through books in the vernacular tongue, declare war on the false faith, on syncretic religion and wish to eliminate all forms of paganism. The *rabanim* or *hakhamim* are conscious, in well defined limits, of the potentials of the vernacular language, an efficient means of reconquering the Jewish masses drifting away. This is the meaning of the publishing of a whole set of books of morals (*muser seforim*) among which the most famous are the Brantshpigl (Cracow, 1597 and Hanau, 1602), a true "encyclopedia of the Jewish woman" from which one can reconstitute the cardinal aspects of Jewish daily life in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as the Lev tov (Prague, 1620), a manual of good conduct for the men. One must add the tradition of good conduct and customs books (*Minhogim seforim*) whose aim is to explain, for those who would have forgotten them, the main public or domestic ceremonies that punctuate the Jewish year and Jewish life. The oldest one was edited in Venice in 1589 by Simon ben Yehuda Levi Ginzburg. On the other side, the battle is accompanied by an obvious suspicion, mostly on the part of the rabbinical authorities, in regard to the vulgar culture, loaded with threats of deviance towards rabbinic orthodoxy or halakhic orthopraxy.

One can thus make up a typology of the texts which circumscribe the space of expression proper to the popular literature in Yiddish. The examples are mainly translations of the Bible (*taysh-h'umesh*), of homilitic literature, including the Tseenah ureenah (Basel, 1622); tales and stories (*mayses* and *aggodes*), such as the Mayse bukk (Basel, 1602); bilingual prayer books, including the supplication prayers (*teh'ines*); customs and practices books (*minhogim seforim*); and books of morals (*muser seforim*). To this, one must add the rich profane literature among which the most remarkable examples are the Italian court novels by the humanist Renaissance Jew, Elie Bah'ur Levita, the Bovo bukh (Isny, 1541) and the Paris un Viene (Verona, 1594).

We understand what was the ideological or religious role played by these works in Yiddish, which, in their vast majority, served very well defined purposes, i.e. to offer to the barely-educated Jewish masses the essential bases of religious knowledge necessary for the preservation and the perpetuation of Judaism. These texts transmit, no doubt, a certain social conformism, a religious conservatism or a vision of the world close to the sages and rabbis' average conceptions. Yet, at the same time, these works are in the wake of the needs and the claims of the not-so-literate. Without breaking the traditional monopoly of knowledge and authority, the vernacular production consecrates the opening of a new space of creation that anticipates modern Jewish literature , as a mutation or a stepping stone of the religious. This literary food will feed for centuries the religious life of the humble Jews in pre-modern Ashkenazi society.

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(Translation: Lisa Anteby)