

The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third: A Look at Its Sources

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A reading of *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third* (*Kitsur massov Binyomin hashlishi*; 1875) by Mendele Mocher Seforim (pseudonym of Shalom Jacob Abramovich; 1835-1917) immediately calls to mind its literary ancestor, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Perhaps less obvious, but equally present, is another influence, that of Voltaire. As Mendele repeatedly expounded his ideas about Jewish life in the Pale of Settlement in the middle of the nineteenth century, his approach reflects the combined effect of his literary models on his own writing. He has selected certain key aspects of *Don Quixote* and adopted some of the ideas and techniques typical of Voltaire's work to produce his satire of the Luftmensch,¹ Benjamin, in which he makes his most successful plea for the enlightenment of his people.

Basically, Mendele's ideas are those of the Enlightenment: he speaks in favor of education, of scientific knowledge, both theoretical and practical, and of clear communication through language; with these, there comes the hope of fighting ignorance which, in turn, is seen to be the primary cause of superstition, isolation, and poverty. From Voltaire, Mendele takes the unbridled attack on those "unenlightened" enemies of modernity and progress, an attitude which, in his eyes, characterizes the Jews of his time. In his philosophical tales, such as *Candide*, *Zadig*, and *Micromégas*, Voltaire totally subordinates character to ideas and satirizes, often savagely, the mores, practices, and institutions of the Western world. The reverse is true of *Don Quixote* (I: 1605; II: 1615) where the criticism in Cervantes's portrayal of life in 16th-century Spain remains implicit, one tributary in the general flow of the novel, and subordinated entirely to the characterization of his heroes, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Our heart may go out to Don Quixote, but we find little opportunity for compassion in *Candide* (1759) for instance, where the hero is merely a representative of a philosophy, not a flesh-and-blood human being. To the extent that Benjamin remains in the tradition of *schlemiels* (fools, good-for-nothings) he is much closer to *Candide*, but if Mendele succeeds in portraying him as a lovable bumbler, it is by following the quixotic model.

The parallels that can be drawn between Don Quixote and Benjamin III go far beyond the imitation of a character and a set of adventures to be parodied. The focus should rather be on those fundamental ideas implicit in *Don Quixote* which contributed to making Cervantes the creator of the modern novel: the desire to appeal to a broad public, the realistic portrayal of everyday life and people, the implicit plea for social justice, the stress on the dignity and value of the individual, the supreme importance of freedom, the relationship between reader, narrator, and fictional character. The next step in my analysis of *Benjamin III* will be an examination of an element which, to my knowledge, has not yet been noted, namely the Voltairean influence. The deliberate use of this source makes it crucial to a full understanding and appreciation of the novel.

¹Literally: "airman," a person without a steady occupation or visible means of support.

In his *Mendele Mocher Seforim*, Theodore Steinberg points out that both *Benjamin III* and *Don Quixote* are double-edged satires, aimed not only at the hero but also at his society, and for the latter work, he traces the sources as far back as Horace and Juvenal.² The literary model for *Benjamin III*, however, can be found much closer at hand than in the Latin writers mentioned, namely in the works of Voltaire and particularly in *Candide*.

The resemblance with *Don Quixote* and the parody of the work is obvious but is generally seen merely as a convenient vehicle for Mendele's ideas. Students of Mendele's writings do not acknowledge that the model, *Don Quixote*, is also a novel containing a specific viewpoint and a criticism of contemporary society and politics.³ Mendele begins the novel with the intention of presenting a contemporary *shtetl*⁴ Don Quixote off on a quest for the Lost Tribes in the mythical land where even the turbulent river Sambatyon rests on the Sabbath.⁵ However, he soon leaves this pattern and turns to a denunciation of the degraded state of the Jews, as seen by the followers of the Jewish enlightenment, the Maskilim. For them and for Mendele, the crushing Russian domination with its virulent anti-Semitic policies is not the sole cause of Jewish misery: the Jews themselves are to blame for the poor quality of education, and even more for their apathy and for the lowering of their moral standards and ideals, once so high. The People of the Book, the light unto the nations, are now grovelling in the filth of townlets like Tuneyadevka; their learning has become shallow, superficial; even their prayers and rituals are merely the outward shells of their former, life-sustaining experiences.

Ostensibly, the author of *Benjamin III* is Mendele the Book Peddler (Mendele Mocher Seforim), but in reality he is the persona of Shalom Jacob Abramovich. A writer of scholarly texts in Hebrew, a teacher in government schools, and an ardent follower of the Haskalah, the Jewish enlightenment movement, Abramovich took the pen name of Mendele Mocher Seforim in 1864 and began to write novels in Yiddish, with himself as one of the characters; in *Benjamin III*, Mendele functions as narrator of the hero's exploits, while filling in the canvas with background information and opinions, the latter most often in the form of exclamations, laments, and appeals to the Almighty. In order to tell the story of this famous person whose extraordinary deeds must be recorded for all time, Mendele decided to write in Yiddish rather than in Hebrew. In doing so, the author followed directly in the footsteps of Cervantes who used his Prologue to *Don Quixote* to make a complete break with all the existing prose narrative traditions. Cervantes addressed the question of who the reading public was and how to write for the masses without jeopardizing his position in the educated community.⁶ He resolves to write plainly, without artifices, in the vernacular, so that all, the old and young, the wise and the simple, can enjoy the work.

Almost three centuries later, Shalom Abramovich faced the same choice; whereas most of Europe had long settled the question of language and style—learned versus vernacular, elevated versus down-to-earth—the Jews had not yet

²Theodore L. Steinberg, *Mendele Mocher Seforim* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), pp. 87-88.

³Even Dan Miron and Anita Norich in their brilliant essay "The Politics of Benjamin III" (*The Field of Yiddish*; Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980) do not touch on this point.

⁴*Shtetl* is the Yiddish name of the little towns in the Pale of Settlement where the vast majority of east-European Jews lived. The word is related to the German *Städtele*, which means little town.

⁵For the source of this folk legend and its occurrence in post-Talmudic and apocryphal literature, see entry under "Sambatyon" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971) XIV, 762-63.

⁶See Miguel de Cervantes, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. Samuel Putnam (New York: Modern Library, 1949), p. 12. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

confronted the problem. Eastern Europe did not share in the Renaissance tradition of the West and its life had developed along a different path. The Jewish community, contained, indeed confined within the larger nations of eastern Europe, had not experienced European history in the same way and had led a separate existence. It had closed in upon itself, both because of the host countries' refusal to allow Jews the rights of citizenship, and because of the Jews' own desire to retain their identity, traditions, and the right to self-government according to Jewish law. As a result, the changes that took place during the Renaissance and the Enlightenment came to the east-European Jews considerably later. Abramovich, who saw the intellectual as well as the spiritual poverty of the Jewish masses, was a fervent believer in education. If people were to understand the times in which they lived and the new ideas current in the world, these must be made available in the everyday language of the people, Yiddish, and not in Hebrew, the language reserved for the liturgy and the learned treatises read only by the educated few. "He was well aware in 1864 when he switched from Hebrew to Yiddish, that he was risking the literary reputation that he had already acquired. 'My embarrassment was great indeed when I realized that association with the lowly maid Yiddish would cover me with shame. I listened to the admonitions of my admirers, the lovers of Hebrew, not to draw my name in the gutter and not to squander my talents on the unworthy hussy. But my desire to be useful to my people was stronger than my vanity.'"⁷ As Cervantes wrote the first modern novel in Europe in a language and a style that would become the model for prose narratives, so Abramovich also enriched and molded Yiddish, freeing it from its stiffness and pomposity, thus enabling it to pioneer a modern Jewish literature.⁸

It is clear from the prologue of Mendele's novel that Benjamin's travels have made the headlines of all European papers and that accounts of them 'exist in all foreign languages. It is only a matter of time before a Hebrew scholar will write a scholarly commentary on this material. Implicit here is that foreigners and Jewish intellectuals will be aware of the tale of Benjamin's life and adventures, while the simple little people who know only Yiddish and lead the very narrow life of the innumerable Tuneyadevkas of the Pale will remain ignorant of the hero in their own midst. This is why Mendele, the persona, proposes "at least an abbreviated account of it in plain, everyday Yiddish."⁹

The style of *Don Quixote*, as promised in the Prologue, indeed "flows along smoothly, pleasingly, and sonorously"; the words "are the proper ones, meaningful and well placed, expressive of your intention in setting them down, and of what you wish to say, without any intricacy or obscurity" (p. 15). In addition, however, one finds a multitude of styles, including that of the novels of chivalry, mock-epic passages, the speech of Sancho and of the rustic people, the language of the interpolated tales, and many more. The fact that Mendele wrote a much shorter novel did not prevent him from making brilliant use of the bivocalism of the narrative voice, to which he adds an astonishing display of rhetorical styles, changing with great rapidity at times and producing a dazzling effect.¹⁰

⁷Sol Liptzin, *A History of Yiddish Literature* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David, 1972), p. 42.

⁸Abramovich rendered the same service to the Hebrew language; he himself later translated a number of his Yiddish works into Hebrew, including *Benjamin III*.

⁹Mendele Mocher Seforim, *The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin the Third*, trans. Moshe Spiegel (New York: Schocken Books, 1949), p. 11. Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

¹⁰Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973) lists eight different rhetorical styles and makes most illuminating analysis of the "polyphony" attained in *Benjamin III*. See especially pp. 221-29.

Escape from the ugliness of external reality into a world of perfection serves as an end as well as a means for our three heroes for they do not withdraw into their fantasy, but rather they go out to find it or to create it based on the model in their imagination. Don Quixote, dissatisfied with a lifetime of unfulfilling activity, turns to the novels of chivalry as an escape and eventually seeks a rebirth as a knight-errant who will return the world to the utopian state of the Golden Age. Voltaire's hero, Candide, whose very name proclaims his innocence about life, society, and human relations, is bent on proving that the philosophy of optimism is in harmony with real life, even if it means ignoring or distorting what so obviously runs counter to his unfounded idealism. Benjamin, a dreamer who has immersed himself in Talmudic study, travel literature, and fantastic folk tales leaves to his wife the task of struggling to make ends meet while he, smug and superior in his book-learning, escapes from the heartbreaking poverty of everyday life.

All three have a Bible of sorts, the point of departure of their quest. Don Quixote's model is, of course, the famous knight Amadís of Gaul, and, like Amadís, he hopes to be eternally associated with his country, "a village of La Mancha the name of which I have no desire to recall" (p. 25). Candide, too, originates from an insignificant place, a "castle" in a nameless village in Westphalia, whose inhabitants have a grossly exaggerated sense of their own importance. Here Candide imbibes the philosophy of Pangloss which he accepts blindly as the unquestioned word of truth about the world. His peregrinations give him some hard jolts and after some time, when he sees that Pangloss's catechism fails to explain the evils and calamities of real life, he stops reciting the articles of optimistic faith which he learned from his first mentor. Eventually Candide comes to renounce the abstract philosophy which had once guided his life and delighted his mind in favor of a pragmatic and totally un-metaphysical approach to living. Benjamin's quest has as worthy a motive as Don Quixote's: to free his unhappy brethren from their bondage in the Pale by going out in search of the Red Jews, the mythical Lost Tribes who were said to have made their home in a far-off, wonderful land and who would surely be able to help their unfortunate brothers. But Benjamin is a coward and must "overcome all cowardice and fear and become a perfect instrument, a blessing to Israel, and an enhancement to the glory of Tuneyadevka [Dullsville], a little town far, far out in the hinterland" (p. 15). Benjamin's life is steeped in the religious traditions of the Jewish Bible. His name, Benjamin the Third, is derived from two famous earlier travelers, Benjamin of Tudela, the twelfth-century Spanish traveler, and the more recent Israel Joseph Benjamin who had journeyed to Asia and America in the 1840's and 1850's. Our Benjamin, whose brain is aflame with the excitement generated by his readings, sees himself as the third in this egregious line. However, he chooses to model himself on a hero of classical antiquity, Alexander of Macedon, the legendary pinnacle of conquerors and a bringer of glory to his name and country. All three heroes are dreamers, estranged from reality; however, there is a closer similarity between Benjamin and Candide. Ruth Wisse's reminder that a satire is not a Bildungsroman applies to both *Candide* and *Benjamin III*, while Cervantes's masterpiece is, of course, a classic model of character portrayal and development.¹¹

The Voltairean influence is at its most evident in Chapter X, which depicts the arrival of the pair in Glupsk (Foolstown). First comes a description of the town: the road is full of mudholes and from the contents of the gutters one can tell whether it is Friday (chicken and fish heads and guts) or Saturday (egg shells, herring skeletons, sucked-out marrow bones). Next come the inhabitants: igno-

¹¹Ruth Wisse, *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 39.

rant, indifferent, divided into various groups such as the Grab-All-You-Can Clan, the Connivers, the Phony Bankrupts, and many others. Mendele's hilarious account of the local hierarchy does not fail to include the sages who are "known for their ingenuity in making mountains out of molehills" while, perhaps most important, "literacy and keeping of any written records is by no means general" among the villagers (p. 92). As for the archaeologists studying the origins of Glupsk, no two agreed, as might be expected. These examples could just as well have leapt off the pages of *Candide*: the hyperboles, the juxtapositions of opposites, the understatement, the satire of scholarship, as well as the general commentary of humankind, all characterize Voltaire's text in much the same way. We note in passing that "Voltaire" is also, of course, an assumed name and that the author pretends to have found the story in the pocket of a "Dr. Ralph" upon the latter's death, and then to have translated it from the German. However, he makes no further literary use of this device in the text. Both novels are indebted to Cervantes's celebrated use of a pretended Arabic historian, of a second author, and of a translator, used partly to camouflage any controversial or heretical views proposed indirectly in the novel. Sansón Carrasco blesses Cide Hamete Benengeli who "wrote down the history of [Don Quixote's] achievements and upon that . . . one who was at pains to have it translated from the Arabic into our Castilian vulgate for the universal entertainment of the people" (p. 527).

In Glupsk, there are two old crones who have taken upon themselves the task of going to the outskirts of town every day at twilight to await the Messiah; in the arrival of Benjamin and Senderel they sense a miraculous event. This passage immediately follows a reference to another "pious soul," a "miracle-mongering cobbler" who had raised a following among Glupsk citizens. Mendele's irony drives home his view of what goes under the names of religion and piety. For Mendele, just as for Voltaire, it is not religion, but rather ignorance, that is the enemy to be combated by the enlightenment.

Chapter XI of Mendele's work takes up another critical theme which plays an important role in *Candide*, the liberty of the individual. Benjamin and his companion Senderel are accosted by two strangers and courteously invited to join them for dinner, as guests of the community. The outcome is that in short order the two become victims of the prevalent practice of kidnapping Jewish men and young boys for the Czar's army. The professional kidnappers take the unsuspecting pair to an inn for the night; the next day they invite them to go to the steam bath and instead, take them to the induction center where they are stripped of their clothes and of their liberty. The very same thing happens to Candide just after his expulsion from his Edenic home in Westphalia: "Two men dressed in blue took note of him . . . They approached Candide and invited him very politely to dine with them".¹² During the meal they convince Candide to drink to the health of the king of the Bulgarians, and when he has gladly done so, he finds himself in chains and led to the regiment. This episode is followed by a rapid-fire description of war; with ferocious irony, yet apparent detachment, Voltaire paints its atrocities, conveys its irrationality, and points up the hypocrisy of its leaders. Mendele, on the other hand, steers away from a universal statement on war and focuses instead on the outrage of the recruitment procedure just referred to. In a setting of dark cloud and heavy rain, he tells his audience that "the very heavens wept in sympathy with the despair of the woebegone travellers" (p. 114). Benjamin and Senderel had visualized their journey in imaginative terms and could not have dreamt that the cruel deserts and beasts of prey they would encounter could in reality turn out to be communities and evil people.

¹²Voltaire, *Candide, or Optimism*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 3.

The final chapter sees the two heroes court-martialed for their attempt to escape and subsequently freed, their performance in court having fortunately amused the judges and convinced them that Benjamin is crazy and quite useless for the army. Impelled by the impossibility of living without freedom, without his dream-journey, without his Jewish values, Benjamin is finally able to conquer his cowardice and weakness, and pleads—eloquently if naively—for his and Senderel's discharge. For a moment, Benjamin rises to a stature not reached before as the noble side of the *schlemiel* character is revealed. The book ends with the pair's release from bondage.

It has long been established that freedom is also a pervasive theme in *Don Quixote*.¹³ However, there it is treated quite differently.¹⁴ On this point there is greater similarity between *Benjamin III* and *Candide* since both are short novels written for their message rather than for their entertainment value. In both the author intervenes constantly, either by identifying with the narrator, or by the views and comments he puts in the mouths of various characters. Thus, in both novels, we have a series of events accompanied by a running commentary on their course and development, so that the chief interest of the events themselves lies in the reflections made about them. In both cases the entire action is visibly controlled by the mind which analyzes it.¹⁵

As Mendele the Book Peddler, Shalom Abramovich could express his compassion for the downtrodden masses of Jews oppressed by czarist policies while at the same time presenting his program for their internal regeneration. Indeed, he wanted to see the Jews of the Pale freed from external bonds, but equally important to him was to see their minds freed from the superstitions and narrow religious learning which constituted their intellectual baggage. He realized that Yiddish bound them to each other, but also isolated them from modern ideas in science and in politics. This is brought out through the description of Benjamin's wonder at Lake Pyatignilovka in Chapter XI. Basing his knowledge on *The Image of the World*, a fifteenth-century book of geography, Benjamin takes for a sea monster the scum blanketing the lake at that time of the year; he further mistakes the reflection of washerwomen in the water for a vision of mermaids, not because he sees the world through the prism of a fantasy, as Don Quixote mistakes inns for castles and windmills for giants, but because he does not have the slightest understanding of the simplest phenomena of daily life. This points to another similarity between *Benjamin III* and *Candide*. Mendele ridicules Benjamin for his ignorance and especially for the sources of information which he uses. Voltaire satirizes *Candide* for insisting in the pursuit of the answers to fruitless metaphysical questions instead of seeking solutions to the human problems at hand. For Mendele and for Voltaire, their central character is an unproductive member of society because he is on the wrong track in the search for truth and knowledge. Benjamin relies on myth, legend, and hearsay for functioning in daily life, refusing to adapt to the changes in the contemporary world; *Candide* retreats from the real world by adamantly trying to prove a philosophical theory taught

¹³See, for instance, Luis Rosales, *Cervantes y la libertad* (Madrid: Sociedad de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1960).

¹⁴See Renée Sieburth, "Metamorphosis: The Key to an Interpretation of Don Quixote's Adventure in the Cave of Montesinos," *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, 15, No. 1 (1981), 3-13.

¹⁵See Jean Sarrailh, *Essai sur Candide* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1967), p. 82.

by the foolish Pangloss. Both are beguiled by the grandiose and poetic concepts they have learned from their readings and which have alienated them from the world of action.¹⁶

Mendele and Voltaire arrive where Cervantes began: the world we desire must be worked for here and now. Don Quixote sets out to restore to the world the lost qualities of simplicity, equality, freedom, justice. His goal is Utopia. Benjamin's happy land of the Lost Tribes, like Candide's "best of all possible worlds," has no real locale in space, and human beings cannot live in Eldorado. Books that give us the values and dreams by which to live the best life are indeed essential as models of perfection, but men can do no more than strive toward the goals set in such books and fulfill themselves in the attempt to bring these goals closer.

¹⁶Rightly or wrongly, Voltaire and the other Encyclopedists are seen as active participants in the process of thought which culminated in the French Revolution. The purpose of their writing, namely, informing and raising the consciousness of the masses, is echoed in Mendele's words, here quoted from the biography *Mendélé*, by Isaac Pougatch (Paris: Albin Michel, 1973): "Nous autres, écrivains, sommes le marteau—et le peuple est l'enclume. Fraillons jusqu'à ce qu'il se réveille!" (p. 63).