Saul Tchernichowsky’s Mythical Childhood: Homeric Allusions in the Idyll “Elka’s Wedding”

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The Hebrew poet Saul Tchernichowsky was born in 1875 in a small village in Tauria, in the steppe north of the Crimean peninsula. When he was a boy, his neighbours called him “a salted Greek” (grek solenyĭ in Russian). Many years later he was called “the Greek” among the Hebrew poets. Tchernichowsky learned to read Russian when he was five years old and Hebrew when he was seven. In the gymnasium in Odessa he studied Greek and Latin. Between 1918 and 1931, he translated the Odyssey and the Iliad from the original, as well as the fifteenth idyll of Theocritus and the poems of Anacreon. He was the first Hebrew writer who had never studied in a ḥeder.1

As well as being a translator, Tchernichowsky wrote his own sonnets, ballads, and idylls. The idylls, which have always been the author’s most widely read works, are dedicated to the life of Jewish children and to the link between generations: between those of the parents and grandparents who could hardly imagine a life outside the Diaspora and that of budding Zionism. As almost all of these poems are centred around a hero in the first years of his adolescence, they were avidly read by Jewish children and teenagers in the Diaspora, and were featured on essential reading lists in Israeli schools over several decades. One of them, “Keḥom ha-yom” [In the heat of the day],2 tells the story of Velvele, who decides to follow a meshuloḥ (an emissary) to Palestine and dies on the way. The idyll “Berele ḥoleh” [Berele is sick]3 relates how the Jewish boy

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1 Ḥeder (lit. “room”)—the common name for the elementary school for the teaching of Judaism. The heder was a privately run institution, the teacher receiving his fees from the parents. It was generally housed in a room in the private home of the teacher, called the rebbe (Yiddish form of “rabbi”) or melammed. The age groups were from 3–5, 6–7, and 8–13. No secular studies were taught, the subjects for the three classes being, respectively, reading in the prayer book, the Pentateuch with Rashi, and the Talmud. See Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum, eds., Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 8, s.v. (Detroit, Mich.: Thomson Gale, 2007).
2 Sha’ul Ṭsherniḥovski, “Keḥom ha-yom” [In the heat of the day], in eiusdem, Shirim [Poems] (Tel-Aviv: Shocken, 1947), 215–225. For the readers’ convenience, the transliteration of Hebrew words, proper, names, and titles in the main text has been simplified.
3 Sha’ul Ṭsherniḥovski, “Berele ḥoleh” [Berele is sick], in eiusdem, Shirim, 233–245.
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Berele is cured by a Ukrainian sorceress (volkhovitka). In the idyll “Levivot”, the grandmother recalls the childhood of her granddaughter Rezele. All these stories are narrated in Hebrew hexameters (Tchernichowsky was the first to use them in Hebrew). The idylls were inspired by Homer and Theocritus, but also by Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea* (1796–1797) and Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz*—the Polish epic national poem first published in 1834. Tchernichowsky also wrote several collections of poetry for Hebrew children who were just about to learn to speak and to read. These poems—some of which have recently been republished—describe scenes of the everyday lives of children or refer to Biblical stories or Talmudic legends.

Tchernichowsky's works drew on the memories of his own childhood. The memories which grew into his idylls and his autobiographical poems have also yielded the poet's autobiography, describing the poet’s youth until his arrival at the gymnasium in Odessa. In this autobiography he combines the memories of the magic moments of his childhood with his family history, which he himself calls the “mythology” of the family—using the Greek word for “mythology” transliterated into Hebrew. By this he refers to the heroic deeds of his ancestors which contributed to the image of the “Hebrew hero” that he created for himself when he was still a child.

We have to be aware that the autobiographical works of Hebrew poets fulfilled part of the role that the *Bildungsroman* had in European literature. Clothing Jewish childhood in the garments of a Greek genre clearly reveals the universal element in the childhood experience. This element was based on references to Classical Antiquity. Before Tchernichowsky wrote his first idylls, clothing Jewish childhood in the garments of a Greek genre clearly reveals the universal element in the childhood experience. I am aware that the universality of childhood experience is a broadly disputed and contested topic in childhood studies. However, since this chapter is focused on philological matters, I chose not to join this discussion. See: Martin Woodhead and Heather Montgomery, eds., *Understanding Childhood: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Chichester: Wiley–The Open University, 2003); Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorising Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998); Mary Jane Kehily and Joan Swann, eds., *Children's Cultural Worlds* (Chichester: Wiley–The Open University, 2003).

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6 Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz* (Kraków: Dom Książki, 1992; ed. pr. 1834).
7 See Shā’ul Ṭsherniḥovsḳi, *Ba-ginah* [In the garden] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2012).
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