THREE OBSTACLES TO A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF SHOLEM RABINOVTZ

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Two years ago marked the nineteenth yortsayt of Sholem Rabinovitz, the actual name of the Yiddish writer popularly known as Sholem Aleichem, and 2009 will mark his hundred and fiftieth birthday. Unlike the centennial of Isaac Bashevis Singer in 2004, it is unlikely this Yiddish writer will be honoured with a multivolume edition published by the Library of America. Sholem Aleichem did not have the good fortune of reinventing himself as an American Jewish writer in English. His breakthrough to an English speaking audience didn’t even come in his own words, but rather in the form of the 1964 musical Fiddler on the Roof, produced almost fifty years after his death.

An obvious way of celebrating the life and work of a great writer on such significant anniversaries would be to write his biography. Unfortunately, however, ‘the long-overdue critical biography of Sholem Rabinovitsh’ is still long-overdue.¹ It seems almost inconceivable that, except for encyclopaedia articles, a critical biography of Sholem Rabinovitz has never been written in any language. Indeed, such a gap would be unimaginable for a classical writer of similar stature in American, German, Scandinavian and Russian literature. What are the obstacles to writing a critical biography of Sholem Rabinovitz?

I chose to title my book Imagining Lives: Autobiographical Fiction of Yiddish Writers (Madison, WI 2005) because the focus on life-writing as a hybrid of fiction and fact is the defining hallmark of Yiddish autobiographical fiction from the classical trio, Sholem Yankev Abramovitsch, Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz, to I.B. Singer. This genre in Yiddish could be summarized by the introduction to Rabinovitz’s autobiographical novel From the Fair. A Description of a Life:² ‘Why

novels when life is a novel’ (*Tsu vos romanen, ven dos lebn iz a roman*). In *From the Fair*, Rabinovitz wrote a biography of himself in the form of a novel narrated in the third person. With a few exceptions the autobiographical genre in Yiddish is characterized by extreme modesty and a strong resistance to reflect on a life gone by. The communal features of the writer’s life narrative are fore-grounded; its individuality and uniqueness are downplayed. Yiddish autobiography excels in creating historical myths about a culture and society that no longer exist. The title of I.J. Singer’s posthumous autobiography, *Fun a velt vos iz nishto mer* (*Of a World That Is No More*), is paradigmatic of the ‘burden of history’ that characterizes Yiddish autobiography.

Maurice Samuel’s book, *The World of Sholom Aleichem* exemplifies the communal focus of Yiddish biographical writing. First published in March 1943 and reprinted five times in less than two years, the work presents an anthropological catalogue of Sholem Rabinovitz’s literary world. Its introductory words delineate a rupture in the historical memory of the Eastern European Jews:

> This book is a sort of pilgrimage among the cities and inhabitants of a world which only yesterday—as history goes—harbored the grandfathers and grandmothers of some millions of American citizens... For that world is no more. The fiery harrows of two world wars have passed closely across its soil within the lifetime of a generation; and in between it was a participant in one of the world’s great revolutions... Sholom Aleichem is almost unknown to millions of Americans whose grandfathers made up his world. This is not simply a literary loss; it is a break—a very recent and disastrous one—in the continuity of a group history. (7)

Samuel harnessed the world of Sholom Aleichem to the broader aim of rescuing the memory of a community that had been uprooted and decimated. The *first obstacle* to writing a biography of Sholem Rabinovitz is to reconstruct the historical context of Yiddish life-writing beyond the myth of a community ‘that is no more.’ As Ken Frieden points out, ‘A recurrent theme in the biography of Sholem-Aleichem is the blurring of life and literature.’ In response, a biographer must uphold a clear distinction between the historical Sholem

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3 New York 1946.
4 New York 1943.