

JEROLD C. FRAKES, *The Politics of Interpretation: Alterity and Ideology in Old Yiddish Studies*. State University of New York Press, 1989. xv, 283 pp. \$49.50 (hb)/\$16.95 (pb).

Frakes sets out to expose and chronicle the bias and ideology inherent in purportedly 'objective research' on literature and language. His object is the radically non-objective recent history of ideas among scholars of Old Yiddish literature, with particular emphasis on works dealing with the 'Cambridge Codex', the oldest-known continuous Yiddish literary manuscript bearing a date (1382). The Yiddish Codex, forming part of Schechter's Fostat Geniza, was discovered by Ernest-Henri Lévy and rediscovered by Leo Fuks, whose edition, *The Oldest Known Literary Documents of Yiddish Literature* (Brill, 1957) set off a storm of controversy on both the language and the content. A sizable chunk of the debate transpired on the pages of this journal (see *JJS* 4 (1953), pp. 176–81; 5 (1954), pp. 85–6; 8 (1957), pp. 246–9; 9 (1958), pp. 47–62; 10 (1959), pp. 151–67; 12 (1961),

pp. 19–31; 14 (1963), pp. 37–57; 20 (1969), pp. 101–3).

Modern scholars' complexes about Yiddish are traced to two sources: traditional European anti-Semitism with its anti-Yiddish component; and the derivative Jewish self-hatred of the German-Jewish Berlin Enlightenment-inspired derision of Yiddish. On both counts, he draws profitably from Sander Gilman's *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (John Hopkins, 1986). Frakes demonstrates, via meticulous analysis of the scholarly literature that forms his corpus, that both factors have continued, sometimes unconsciously, to condition the choice of topic, approach, methodology and conclusion. Frakes stakes out his own vantage point as a Tennessean Protestant 'without any false pose of objectivity, without any goal of determining Truth, but rather from a consciously polemic perspective—that of the "pro-Yiddish" ideological construct' (p. xi).

The preface recounts the author's personal involvement with Yiddish, and the bewildered and hostile reactions he met (pp. vii–xv). 'Alterity, Ideologies, and Old Yiddish' (pp. 1–20) sets the stage by surveying contemporary views of 'ideology' and positing 'centre' versus 'margin' (or 'other') as the operative concepts. The book's prime evidence for the author's thesis lies in the two weighty chapters that form its core: 'The Names of Old Yiddish' (pp. 21–103) and 'Alterity, Accessibility, Audience, Alphabet: On Editing Old Yiddish Texts' (pp. 105–63). Both chapters lucidly demonstrate the twin pillars of German and German-Jewish treatments of Yiddish: they either disparage the very object of research (by denying its existence, independence and legitimacy), or, alternatively, they value Yiddish and its older literature as part of 'German culture'; the two ideologically based notions interact in the frequent assertions by these scholars that Yiddish was 'once' German before 'digressing'. A less convincing chapter, 'The New Paradigms' (pp. 165–89), on more recent work in Germany follows. One needs to investigate the degree to which the changes cited are principally terminological, resulting from accommodation to non-German Old Yiddish literature scholars. The book concludes with a table of transliteration and transcription systems (p. 190) and an appendix on these systems (pp. 191–201) which would preferably be integrated into the chapter on text editing.

Frakes is at his strongest demonstrating that the traditional prejudices continue to lurk in much of the work on Old Yiddish, and how they lead fine scholars to bungle the work at hand. He cites, for example, Hans Neumann's attempt to elucidate the vowel system of the Cambridge Codex by way of a study of its rhymes from Middle High German cognates, thereby 'proving', in a case of circularity par excellence, that the text is 'Middle High German' (p. 68). Hakkarainen tries to prove that the Hebrew-derived elements in the Cambridge Codex are a separate text from the Germanic-derived elements in the same document; to see the text as the unified whole it is might somehow imply Yiddish (p. 91). Weinberg views use of the word 'Yiddish' for the western dialects of the language (Western Yiddish) as being liable to charges of 'Expansionspolitik, Sprachimperialismus, Fanatismus und Arroganz' (p. 101). Frakes comes up with dozens of enlightening (and often entertaining) examples which collectively demonstrate the passions unleashed by Yiddish in sober scholars.

The book centres on two debates: (a) the name used for the language of the texts in question, and (b) whether editions of these texts should appear in the original Jewish alphabet or be transcribed in Latin characters, generally on the model of normalised Middle High German, a practice which Frakes rightly condemns, inter alia, as rampantly inaccurate philologically, and, conceptually, for invoking 'an entire mythological system concerning the origin, cultural identity, and literary value

of the text' (p. 3). He frames two camps on both problems: (a) the 'assimilationists' (in the tradition of German and German-Jewish scholars), who 'marginalise' Yiddish, and opt for a variety of concoctions for the disputed linguonym, among them 'Hebrew-German', 'Judeo-German' ('Jüdisch-Deutsch'), or just 'Middle High German (in Hebrew letters)'; and who, as a matter of principle, generally discard the Jewish script text and replace it with one based on Middle High German, often hoping thereby to reconstruct a presumed lost Latin-letter *Vorlage*; (b) the 'Yiddishists' (in the tradition of the East European-based Yiddishist movement), who 'centre' Yiddish, and who generally call all stages of the language *Yiddish* (following standard practice, cf. Old English, Old French, etc.) and who insist on preserving the original script in academic editions. Frakes is on solid ground in directing most of his artillery towards the 'assimilationists': it is they, after all, who have a problem with the existence of Yiddish. Occasionally, Frakes makes a half-hearted attempt at even-handedness (notwithstanding the overtly pro-Yiddish stance announced early on in the book) by noting that the pro-Yiddish ideology also has its pitfalls, which of course it does, but his sample cases do not usually succeed here. For example, by positing phonological forms for Old Yiddish that agree with all known dialects of modern Yiddish (e.g. nominal suffix *-niš* rather than *-nis*, *kum* 'come' rather than *kom*, both p. 119), Matenko and Sloan were using accepted notions of historical linguistics by reconstructing forms that agree with the empirical evidence of all known modern varieties, one of the safest procedures in reconstruction. Frakes is right that Yiddishists are ideologically predisposed to find Yiddish in Old Yiddish texts (just as the Germanists are to see Middle High German everywhere), but to demonstrate ideology leading to fallacious analysis he needs to find demonstrable cases (just as he does in the work of the Germanists).

Frakes tends to be somewhat dismissive of historical linguistics, or, as he would have it, the 'historico-philological school' (p. 205), which is too 'positivist' and 'empiricist' for his taste, but still the book should not have failed to take more notice of Yiddish linguists whose work was crucial precisely for the very 'demarginalisation' and 'centring' of Yiddish which is his own goal; in an intellectual history of modern Yiddish studies one cannot just atomise out the textual scholars of Old Yiddish, leaving by the wayside the inseparable aspects of the same debates that focus on the language itself, on non-literary monuments or on later stages of both. Shiper's 1934, 1935 and 1938 pieces on Old Yiddish literature are cited, but it was his 1924 and 1933 pieces on the origins of the Yiddish language that are seminal documents in the history of modern scholarly thought and method on Yiddish. The great Alfred Landau is not even mentioned. Matthias Mises's revolutionary paper on the history and structure of Yiddish at the 1908 Chernowitz conference, in essence a reply to the same anti-Yiddishists who constitute Frakes's corpus, is mentioned (p. 35), but no reference is made to its contents. Someone as intimately aware as Frakes of the potent role of the alphabet in Jewish cultural history would surely make fine use of Mises's massive treatise on writing in civilisation, *Der Gesetze der Schriftgeschichte: Konfession und Schrift im Leben der Völker* (Braunmüller, Vienna and Leipzig, 1919). The most unforgivable omission is of Ber Borokhov's 1913 *Ufgabn fun der yidisher filologye* ('Tasks of Yiddish Philology'), the work that in a single master stroke 'centred' Yiddish as a self-contained academic discipline, and that set the path for the rise and development of twentieth-century Yiddish studies in linguistics, literature, folklore, bibliography and more. To people in the field, it was in fact Borokhov's *Ufgabn* that launched the distinction in Yiddish between *germanistn* ('those who study Yiddish from the vantage point of

Germanic studies') and *yidishistn* ('those who study Yiddish as a subject in its own right'), a definition supplementary to the more frequent sense of 'those who value Yiddish', although *yidishistn* in the academic sense were generally also *yidishistn* in the popular sense.

There are additional difficulties with Frakes's focus upon 'Old Yiddish'. Solomon Birnbaum was for him 'the doyen of Old Yiddish studies' (p. 53). Delete 'Old'! Although he does not define the term 'Old Yiddish' temporally or linguistically (varying definitions have been proposed), one is rather left with the impression that he would define it as the *literary* language of the specific *texts in dispute*. In fact, Old Yiddish works (especially the ones adopted from European knightly epics) pose the added difficulty that it is known beyond doubt that many of their authors consciously aimed at a German-based standard (which means that by definition their works represent varying mixtures of Yiddish and German), whilst there is massive evidence (from non-literary documents, comments by medieval rabbinic authorities, Christian studies and the results of historical reconstruction) that the contemporary language of Ashkenazim was unambiguously Yiddish. In the great Weinreich–Marchand debate over language and literature, Frakes does not seem to allow for one to, say, agree in part with Marchand about the non-Yiddishness of the Codex, but to agree with Weinreich about the existence of Yiddish at the time the Codex was penned. The debates on Old Yiddish language (e.g. Süsskind versus Weinreich, Marchand versus Weinreich and Birnbaum) are rather more meaningful than the vacuous question of whether the language of the Cambridge Codex is called 'Yiddish', 'Hebrew-German', or for that matter 'Codexese'. As for the literary quality of the works in question, I would argue that most of the literary genius of Old Ashkenaz went into Hebrew and Aramaic legal treatises, and I hope that this belief would not make me an 'anti-Yiddishist' in Frakes's eyes. To comment on the quality of Old Yiddish *literature* is not necessarily to challenge *Yiddish* of any variety.

The obsession with the name of the language of the Codex, which Frakes so masterfully debunks as vacuous, is one that he too has myths about. He would like to see the 'rules changed' for Yiddish, and proposes that in looking at the language of the Codex 'one would be tempted to claim that such factors [sociological and historical, i.e. extra-linguistic] are of more than usual importance in the analysis of Yiddish as a fusion language' (p. 217). Frakes's efforts to counter the 'anti-Yiddish' forces reach an absurdity in his substituting *Dukus Hurnt* for *Dukus Horant* because it is 'more accurate and appropriate culturally', even as he acknowledges that his version 'is with near certainty phonetically inaccurate (but probably [according to Frakes!] no more so than *Horant*)' (p. xv). Still, one has to grant that even this exaggeration helps Frakes to make his splendid epistemological case dramatically against the automatic Germanisation of names, titles and languages by the Germanists.

Like all works that adhere strictly to a classificatory paradigm, *The Politics of Interpretation* occasionally errs in its zeal to make everything fit. The pre-Enlightenment position of Yiddish in Ashkenazic Jewish society was not that of 'margin' or 'other' (cf. pp. 23–4), but rather part of the uniquely Ashkenazic phenomenon of internal Jewish trilingualism (in increasing order of prestige of knowledge of the relevant language, and decreasing order of universality of knowledge: Yiddish, Hebrew, Aramaic). The 'Yiddish role' of everyday vernacular was not the same as the 'Aramaic role' of Talmud and Kabbalah but such dichotomies have nothing to do with 'centre' and 'margin'.

Scholars, too, are occasionally force-fitted into paradigm drawers. Leo Wiener's internal contradictions on the value and history of Yiddish and its literature in his 1899 work result from his being a transitional figure between German-Jewish attitudes and the emergent Yiddish movement in the East; unlike Mises and Borokhov, Wiener was not a 'paradigm creator', but made reference to his own internal conflict. Edward Sapir's 1915 study of historical Yiddish phonology has, for Frakes, 'the most consistently Haskalah bent' (p. 32). For me it does not; by calling the language 'Judeo-German', Sapir was only using *then*-accepted usage (as did Alfred Landau, in his reference to Yiddish as 'Jüdisch-Deutsch' in German philological publications); by stressing the value of Yiddish phonology for elucidating problems in German historical linguistics, Sapir was only thinking of a goal for Germanists like himself, and hoping thereby to interest other Germanists in Yiddish. Frakes seems to refuse to fathom the possibility of addressing a certain aspect of a problem for a certain audience, in a certain discipline without necessarily being an ideologue or anti-anything. Frakes repeatedly takes Germanists to task for seeing Yiddish studies as a repository of data for their own field. From the point of view of their discipline, that is true, so why not? This is not to be confused with Frakes's correct and often brilliant exposé of the same scholars' latent or not-so-latent anti-Yiddish bias (i.e. one can respect the existence, integrity and value of a language and culture, but still happen to work only on one aspect of it that touches one's own extraneous discipline). On the 'Yiddishist' side of the coin, Shmeruk is seen as being out of touch with reality for praising a Jewish-alphabet edition of an Old Yiddish text on the grounds that it will in that form reach 'a wider circle of readers and scholars' and 'any interested party' (p. 168), forgetting that Shmeruk wrote this in a piece published in a modern Yiddish literary journal for modern Yiddish readers, in which context it is wholly reasonable. These lapses of perspective on peripheral points notwithstanding, Frakes's main argument of massive ideological input in the works of German and German-Jewish scholars is unassailable.

The book suffers from slips in modern Yiddish transcription (e.g. *yubl* for *yoyvl*, p. 237); an overdose of 493 footnotes, many of which should have been woven into the text; and, in one instance only, a lapse in the dignity of the historian of ideas: James W. Marchand is wrongfully branded 'an insignificant scholar' (p. xiv) suffering from 'lack of linguistic sophistication' (p. 58). Among the book's substantial gaps is the failure to address the equally complex set of problems of ideology in the work of many Hebraist and Israeli scholars on Old (or any kind of) Yiddish, although he is not unaware of hatred of Yiddish from those quarters (pp. 18, 207–8).

Faults notwithstanding, this fine volume, massively documented, well organised and convincingly argued, catapults Jerold C. Frakes to the forefront of historians of Yiddish studies. Moreover, the book will enhance the future of the field by helping to debunk some of the myths and prejudices which continue to plague it, some two centuries after the Berlin Enlightenment. As for method, Frakes is guided by Ecclesiastean pessimism: 'All is interpretation and interplay between interpretations, and all explanation is ideological' (p. 9).

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