Arresting Stories: The Austrian Imperial Code and the Beginning of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature (1811-1820)

The rise of modern Jewish literature in Eastern Europe is usually studied as an exclusively Jewish story, as part of an inside scramble for dominance in the Jewish community. Scholars have conventionally interpreted the advent of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature in Eastern Europe as an internal Jewish response to Hasidism, and, more specifically, to the 1815 publication of two collections of Hasidic stories: In Praise of the Besht [Shivhe ha-besht], the hagiography of the Ba’al Shem Tov, and the Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslev [Sipure ma’asiyot]. The fact that Hasidic doctrines were delivered not only in sermons or homilies, but also in stories, was seen by Galician maskilim as a threat, so this argument goes. For this reason, contends Dan Miron and others, maskilim themselves turned to stories, which enabled them to fight Hasidism … and fend off its widespread literary influence.” Narrative, in other words, constituted a way to disarm the Jewish reader and introduce anti-Hasidic ideology in an attractive way. This scholarly interpretation of the turn among maskilim to literature aligns with reigning views of Galician Haskalah, enlightenment, whose “raison d’être” was, according to Emmanuel Etkes, “the struggle against Hasidism”. Fittingly, the scholarly interest in the body of literature produced by maskilim was devoted almost exclusively to the exploration of how these texts parodied Hasidic practices.”

[i] Shivehei Ha-besht, sipurei nifla’ot me-israel besht (1815) and Sipure ma’asiyot, ma she-zakhinu lishmo’a mipi rabinu ha-kadosh or ha-ganuz ve-hatsafon moharan zutsakal (1815)
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