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## The Dark Side of Sholem Aleichem's Laughter

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Let me begin by making my initial point as simply and straightforwardly as I can. Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitch, 1859-1916; the name Sholem Aleichem should actually indicate a literary persona rather than the historical writer<sup>1</sup>), the foremost comic Jewish writer, who offered his Yiddish speaking audience laughter and high spirits as consolation and 'therapy' ('Doctors prescribe laughter', he used to say) in times of stressful historical upheavals, was at the same time also in touch with a dark undercurrent of national rage and nihilism. He is said to have transplanted the traditional Jewish trusting, optimistic view of reality, rooted in religious *bitokhn* (confidence), into a modern secular, nationalistic matrix, where the disheartening reality of the disintegration of Jewish Eastern European *shtetl* (townlet) civilization could be counterbalanced by visions of Jewish regeneration in America and Zion. This view is corroborated by many of the author's writings as well as by his activity as a Zionist propagandist; never theless, it is a partial and limited view which needs to be broadened and complemented by an altogether different, indeed contradictory, one. For in his best works Sholom Aleichem let strong strident and disruptive voices come through; voices negating any official Jewish ethos, be it the traditional-religious one or its modern nationalist and socialist counterparts. These voices – sometimes muffled, sometimes clear and blaring – emanate from the 'dark', anarchistic and occasionally downright nihilistic side of Sholem Aleichem's genius. It is our contention that without that dark side Sholem Aleichem would not have risen to his full stature as an artist and would not have been the author of some of the most memorable texts in modern Jewish writing.

To make full sense of these extraordinary texts and the complex structural tactics that control and form them, one has to view them as at-least double- and often triple-tiered. At their surface level they usually (with the exception of some of the author's very late works)) exhibit bright, funny narrative sequences, informed by humane, non-judgmental understanding and acceptance of human failings and shortcomings, and flowing with warmth and intimacy. However, often this light surface impression is belied by a sense of a hidden lugubrious depth, where fear, pain and grief are the paramount emotions, and the possibility or even inevitability of tragedy is imminent. And if one delves a little further down one may encounter a swelter of a much more negative affect. Here the reigning emotions are hostility or self-abnegation or both. Thus a triple-tiered structural model emerges, one that combines comedy, tragedy and a drama of revenge, or laughter, tears and rage.

This abstract model calls, of course for concretization through illustration. We need to show that it is applicable to specific texts. I shall shortly proceed to do just that, i.e., to illustrate the applicability of the model. Before I do that, however, I need

1. Cf. 'Sholem Aleichem – Person, Persona, Presence', in Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N.Y., 2000, pp. 128-156.

to register two qualifications. One, I shall not directly refer to or comment on the extrinsic circumstances of dire poverty, dislocation, loss, bereavement, and exile, which are every where present in the works of Sholem Aleichem, and which have been traditionally understood as constituting the 'tragic' aspect of his 'world'. Although these circumstances often trigger the negative emotions I shall focus on, they should not be identified with them. We need to differentiate between the social reality that the author's works depict and the affect that emanates from the psychic core of the characters in them and defines these characters' subjectivity. Tragedy like comedy reflects a state of mind (of the implied author and his characters), a response to reality rather than reality itself. As much as the comic spirit is said to have transcended extrinsic reality in Sholem Aleichem's *oeuvre*, so do the tragic one and that of hostile negation. The 'dark' components of the personalities the author created are integral parts of the psychic life of these characters. While comedy gives expression to some components of the personality, tragedy and rage originate in other as intrinsic parts of it.

Another qualification pertains to the group of texts by Sholem Aleichem from which I shall draw my illustrations. Not in all of the author's many works the triple-tiered model can be shown to be fully functional or even to function at all. It is particularly not suitable to the romance-like novels Sholem Aleichem wrote, employing a third person omniscient narrator. Even when the plots of these novels tend to drift – as they often do – toward a closure of downfall, insanity and death, what is achieved is usually neither comedy nor tragedy but rather a lachrymose melodrama relieved by comic interludes. The situation is very different in the author's better texts, which are often (but not exclusively) narrated by a first person 'unreliable' narrator who, characteristically, is either a monologist or a letter writer,<sup>2</sup> and who functions within a genuinely dramatic or epistolary situations, i.e., the narrator pours his heart, or pretends to do so, in the ears of a silent (or almost silent) but sufficiently defined interlocutor, or writes to an addressee, who may or may not respond. Sholem Aleichem discovered the usefulness of these two forms in the two masterpieces he commenced writing in the 1890's (although he had been experimenting with these forms even earlier), once he got beyond the probing and groping of his early apprenticeship phase, in *Menakhem Mendl* (started in 1892) and *Tevye der milkhiker* (Tevye the Dairyman, started in 1894); both works, by the way, stayed with the author for the rest of his life. He kept adding new chapters to them and never brought them to a formal closure. In the first decade of the Twentieth Century, when his creativity reached its peak in both quantity and quality, the author came back to these forms, particularly to that of the monologue, which became his *forme maitresse*.<sup>3</sup>

One can read some of the monological and epistolary narratives, particularly the long sequences, as parodies on the novel form but never as the continuation of the

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2. On this see Dov Sadan's essay 'Three Foundations', *Prooftexts*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (January 1986), pp. 55-63.

3. The monologue form falls in Sholem Aleichem's work into several sub-genres. Here I deal mainly with what I have designated as 'the Bona-Fide Dramatic monologue', which must be differentiated from other kinds of monologue-like sequences in which no genuine dramatic monological situation is established, and the narrator, although he pretends to perform a live, oral speech act, actually addresses the reader directly, often as a self-conscious writer. Cf. The chapter dealing with the monologue form in 'Bouncing Back – Destruction and Recovery in *Sholem Aleichem's Moil Peyse dem khazns*', *The Image of the Shetl*, pp. 204-213. Although much of what I have to say here pertains, at least to some extent, to all the monological sub-genres, it primarily suits the Bona Fide Dramatic monologue.

conventional novels Sholem Aleichem had written before 1890 (and to which he returned toward the end of the first decade of the new Century), because the monological and epistolary sequences produce cyclical plots with no development or closure. In them the characters talk incessantly or write without any stated principle of selection or informative order. The adherence of the writers of letters to conventional preambles and conclusions only emphasizes the disorderly manner of their writing. Thus Menakhem Mendl often remembers to jot down the most important pieces of information his letters include only in protracted *post-scriptum* notes, which he writes a f t e r he has concluded his letter with the habitual good wishes and good byes. Seemingly the monologists or letter writers say or write every thing that comes to mind. Of course, they do not really do that, for they have either an interlocutor or an addressee at the other end of the communication line; and no matter how much they sometimes seem to ignore their presence, they always attempt at manipulating – cajoling, convincing, intentionally confusing, flattering, defying, or even ‘punishing’ (that is often the meaning of the gesture of ignoring) – them. Thus, as speech acts, the letters and monologues are always riddled with ambiguities; and it is exactly the ambivalence emanating from the duality of an above-board free, uncharted narrating and a hidden tension between the speaker or writer and ‘the other’, the silent addressee, that renders the epistolary sequence and the monologue so fertile and subtle forms. The speaker offers a facade-text that always hides a sub-text or resonates with overtones. He often tries to put on things as good a face as possible and present himself in the most favorable light. If this cannot be done or the speaker does not wish to hide a misfortune he would at least justify himself, plead that he is not the one to be blamed for it. Yet this positive self presentation always hits snags. Failings, shortcomings and mistakes on the speaker’s part keep cropping out, and the speaker, to the extent he is aware of them (which is not always the case), tries to minimize or obfuscate them. Besides, he always has a certain agenda – usually undisclosed – which he wants to enhance. All these necessitate a complex and manipulative communication system of revealment and concealment, of overstatements and understatement, of intentional or unintentional repetitions and omissions; a system which is replete with so-called Freudian slips: errors, forgetfulness, slips of the tongue and the pen, unintentional but revealing *double entendres*. It enables the author in his best stories to mix tonalities, let the dark undercurrents of tragedy and hostility infiltrate the stories’ comic textures and stain them. My illustrations will, therefore, be culled only from those sections of Sholem Aleichem’s output, the monological and epistolary ones.

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Let us now turn to the author’s quintessential dramatic monologue, the brilliant ‘Dos tepl’ (The Pot), which, written in 1901, triggered the writing of a series of monological masterpieces such as ‘Genz’ (Geese) and ‘Gimenazye’ (High School) in 1902, ‘A nisref’ (Burned Out) and ‘Me tor nit zayn keyn guter’ (It Doesn’t Pay to be Good) in 1903, ‘An eytse’ (Advice) in 1904, ‘Yoysef’ (Joseph) in 1905, ‘Dray almones’ (Three Widows) in 1907, and *Ayznban geshikhtes* (The Railroad Stories) most of which were written in 1909.

The narrator of 'Dos tepl'<sup>4</sup>, Yente, is a simple woman, a widow in her early thirties. Her husband died of consumption eight years earlier when he was only twenty six years old, and she was left, together with their son, a sickly child, to shift for herself. Not that in his lifetime her husband was much of a breadwinner. "The one which did the toiling was myself"<sup>5</sup>, Yente says. She was and still is making a living as a supplier of poultry and eggs to some of the well-to-do households in town, and she prides herself of being able to provide for herself and for her son, who is now a teenager, and also juggle around the few roubles she makes so as to pay her debts to her own suppliers. She presents herself as hardworking, independent, and resourceful. In one of her less guarded moments she even refers to herself as a male. When faced with a problem she always finds a solution, she says, because 'a learned man, as you say, finds a way ('a yid a lamden, vi ir zogt, git zikh an eytse'<sup>6</sup>). Of course, she is neither man nor learned. She is a perceptive but also judgmental woman, and she does not mince her words. Her self confidence and shrewdness manifest themselves in the incisive rhythms of her folksy speech. Her interlocutor is the local rabbi to whom she has come with a *shala*, i.e., with a question pertaining to the ritual law, to the *halakha*. She needs the rabbi's guidance, she says, in deciding whether the only usable pot she possesses, the one in which she daily cooks chicken soup for her frail son, has been rendered unkosher, since a tenant, living together with her and using the same oven, let a small pitcher of milk capsize in the oven and the spilt milk might or might not have come in touch with her pot, which, covered with ashes, was keeping warm at the far side of the oven's shelf. She fervently wishes that her *fleyshik* (used for cooking meat products) pot is still kosher and usable, since without it, she says, she is like bereft of her right arm. Furthermore, she used to have three pots, but one broke and the other got busted by the tenant, so the pot under consideration is the only one left.

Yente does not put her *shala* straightforwardly to the rabbi. Instead she inundates him with torrents of irrelevant details and comments. She tells him of her life as a widow, of the business she conducts, of her son (who is an excellent student of the Torah, like his father was, she says), of her neighbors, tenants, and fellow *shtetl*-dwellers (for whom she reserves mostly unkind remarks), and of dozens of other topics, which, seemingly, have no bearing whatever on the purpose of her visit. Meandering between one succulent but quite trivial vignette and another, she weaves a labyrinthine, anecdotal, and constantly digressive narrative-line which slowly and laboriously leads toward her halakhic question. However, she never fully states this question, and, of course, she does not allow the rabbi to respond to it; for before she reaches the conclusion of her story her overwhelmed interlocutor loses consciousness. The story, like many other works by Sholem Aleichem, is left open-ended, devoid of closure; it is cut in the middle, so to speak, with Yente's frantic calls for help.

On its surface level Yente's narrative is superbly comic. Its comic effect can be measured by the progressively widening gap between the narrator's avowed purpose

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3. *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, Folksfond edition, Vol. 25, *Monologn* (Monologues), New York 192, pp. 9-25.
  4. Sholem Aleichem, *Nineteen to the Dozen*, translated by Ted Gorelick, ed. By Ken Frieden, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, N.Y., 1998, p. 3.
  6. *Monologn*, p.21.

and the directions the narrative actually takes. To the same extent this gap indicates the distance between Yente's assertions of self control, efficiency and soberness and the actuality of her formless, associative cognition. Also comedy is engendered by the sudden irrational leaps in Yente's argument, of which she seems to be quite unaware. She is clearly at the mercy of her own torrential flow of words. Thus she beautifully illustrates the comic possibilities of what S. T. Coleridge has described – in his analysis of the folksy, comic characters in Shakespeare's plays, such as Juliet's nurse – as 'the uncultivated mind'; a mind that can be lively and perceptive and yet disorderly and primitive because it cannot 'recall the past by certain regular trains of cause and effect' and is controlled by 'a coincidence of images and circumstances', and thus, devoid of the sense of selectivity it is carried away by whatever train of associations it happens to hit.<sup>7</sup> The gap between the vivacity and shrewdness, on the one hand, and the random progress of the cognition, on the other hand, creates a comic incongruity, which readers and spectators savor. In Yente's case this incongruity is allowed to develop to monstrous dimensions, and her story is therefore thoroughly exhilarating. At this level of the story she becomes, in a way, bigger than life, an archetype. She is the proverbial 'Yente' – a generic name indicating the vulgar and primitive Jewish woman of the *shtetl* (a modernized Jewish lady who has not yet shed her folksy vulgarity is thus 'di zelbe Yente nor andersh geshlayert' – the selfsame Yente only differently attired).

This view of 'Dos tepl', however, takes into account only surface impressions. As we read the story, Yente's upbeat tone sounds less and less convincing. Soon we know that under her bravado painful truths lurk that she needs to verbalize but cannot bring herself to utter. For one thing, there is an unexplained discrepancy between her self presentation as the sturdy and resourceful business woman, who can function as a man and better than one, and her inflated fear over her tainted pot, an inexpensive kitchen utensil, which can be easily replaced. A woman who can juggle around her roubles and afford a daily portion of chicken soup for her son should not be overwhelmed by the loss of a clay pot she probably knows cannot be pronounced kosher anyhow (for who can guarantee that it was not contaminated by the spilt milk?). There are other strange discrepancies which the sheer crudeness of Yente's cognition does not count for. For instance, at the very beginning of her monologue she fails to calculate her husband's age at the time of his death, which she insists on doing although she knows he was twenty six years old at the time. She gets stuck in the computation, strangely adding the eight years which have elapsed since his demise to his age at the time of their wedding (he was nineteen then) and the seven years she spent with him rather as a nurse than as a wife, because he was constantly ailing. Finally, she comes up with a product number which is not even the result of a correct addition of nineteen, seven, and eight. We cannot but wonder: how come this woman, who must compute correctly all the time or she would have gone bankrupt long ago, cannot correctly solve the most basic arithmetic problem?

As we ponder this and other incongruities we realize that Yente's inability to get to the point and tell the rabbi only what is pertinent is not an innocent result of the incompetence of her 'uncultivated mind'. Not only does she, most probably, know in

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7. See Coleridge's discussion of the figure of the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, Vol. II, Everyman's Library, London 1960, p. 100.

advance what the rabbi's response to her *shala* must be, she is really not much interested in it; nor is she so terribly upset by the sheer loss of her pot as she pretends to be. Even if the rabbi pronounces the case one of *botl beshishim* (i.e., diluted beyond recognition; the quantity of the milk that might have touched the pot is too small to count) that would not have made that much of a difference. Yente has other things on her mind – serious things that are neither trivial nor funny. Moreover, she sorely needs somebody – preferably wise and authoritative – who will listen to her tale of misery. The halakhic question she uses as a pretext, since she knows the rabbi must pay full attention to it. So she stretches her circumstantial evidence as much as she can, tantalizing her interlocutor with semi-pertinent but insufficient details and thus postponing as much as she can the moment at which he would have the full information he needs for making his halakhic decision. In the meantime she has him as captive audience, and she makes full use of his unwilling attention. The rabbi, on his part, must be aware of the protracted manipulation to which he has been subjected; hence his growing impatience, anger and frustration, which eventually bring about his fainting.

The most pressing issue on Yente's mind is the condition of her son Dovid Hersh. She would never bring herself to saying it, but she knows he is as sick as his father was, and he has the same pulmonary tuberculosis of which his father died at such a young age; maybe he himself is not destined to a longer life. This fear is what triggers her sudden mental incompetence when she computes her husband's age. In an altogether different part in her monologue we learn that the first two questions the physician she called to her son asked her once he had checked the patient were at what age and of what cause Dovid's father had died. Unwilling to answer both questions, she ignored the first and dodged the second with the intentionally 'dumb' answer: "it was death - - that's what he die of – the death. 'Cos his time come, you see, so he die. Anyhow what's that got to do with anything?"<sup>8</sup> She knows it has everything to do with her son's prospects, and so her mind would not compute correctly. Yente's conversation with the rabbi is replete with references to sickness, incompetent physicians who could do nothing for their patients, deaths of various causes, and even references to encounters with ghostly apparitions of people long dead (thus her son brings her greetings from his father whom he has supposedly met). As much as she would not admit it, ideas of sickness and death possess her mind. She is quite desperate, for although she follows the doctor's orders she suspects they would not do for her son more than they did for his father.

At this level Yente's story is tragic indeed, and her assertions of self sufficiency and resourcefulness sound hollow – a mere whistling in the dark. Also at this level of the story the narrator thinks symbolically rather than deductively. For instance, she keeps coming back to breakable objects, particularly those made of glass and clay. At the very beginning of her monologue she mentions her mother (by the way, Yente never mentions a father, as if she never had one) who was a hard working woman like herself, earning a living by buying from the butchers the fat of slaughtered animals and making tallow candles from it. She compares the candles, which gave all the light one needed in the good old days, with current gas light. In the old days there were no gas lamps 'with the gas mantle over 'em, which they's forever getting cracked anyhow; why, the other week, one of the mantles crack on me when only the week

<sup>8</sup> *Nineteen to the dozen*, p.12.

before another done the same...<sup>9</sup>. While at surface level this illustrates Yente's random, associative cognition, on a deeper one it portends the emergence of the motif of the cracked and busted clay pots which haunts her thoughts and to which she would dedicate lengthy and meticulous descriptive paragraphs toward the 'end' of her monologue. Yenta is as much as saying through this motif: in the good old days people lived their lives from beginning to end – like lighted candles. Now they constantly crack and break and need to be replaced. Of course, she identifies her son Dovid with the last clay pot she possesses and is about to lose. This and not the financial loss is the reason for her agitation. Yente invests much psychic energy in her pot because she relates to it symbolically and in terms that call to mind Biblical metaphors such as ' Shall mortal man be more just than God? - - Behold, he put no trust in his servants - - How much less in them that dwell in houses of clay, whose foundation is in the dust, which are crushed before the moth?' (Job 4: 17-19. The 'houses of clay' refer in these verses to the human body, made of dust and eminently perishable). Through her trivial *shala*, with which she approaches the rabbi, Yente puts a question to God: Would you leave me my son, who is my one and only relative in the world, the only person I still love and who loves me?! Or would you proclaim him unfit to live, a form of fragile clay destined to be 'crushed before the moth' in a not distant future? The identification of Dovid with the clay pot has additional ramifications to which we shall refer later.

Thus far we traced in Yente's story the comic upper level and the intermediate tragic one. Now we need to delve deeper into the underlying swelter of hostility and rage. If pain and fear were the only psychic pressures to which Yente had to give vent, then the convoluted form of a never clearly stated halakhic argument was hardly the proper vehicle she should have used. Would she have chosen to tell her tale of woe straightforwardly she could certainly find an empathic listener. Most probably she could also get the attention of the rabbi, who might have offered advice and consolation. But pain and fear were not the only emotions weighing on her. That is why instead of telling the rabbi her true story, she used the altogether unconvincing story of her clay pot as a cover for attacking the poor man; for that is what Yente actually does. She pushes to rabbi into an impasse, where he cannot hide from her flow of words, which is inherently aggressive. Not only does she aggressively manipulate her interlocutor, she also badmouths almost everybody she mentions – her brother in law Azreel, who did her no harm, her tenant Gnessi, who is quick-tempered but also generous, various people of the town, and particularly the useless and inefficient doctors. Unintentionally, perhaps, she even maligns her son Dovid, her diamond, as she calls him, the only living eye in her head.

Clearly, underneath her understandable apprehension and panic Yente hides another layer of emotions, which within the context of the culture she has been brought up on are unacceptable, even inadmissible. First and foremost, she bitterly resents men, including those she loves, and perhaps her husband and son more than all the others. Have not these two weaklings betrayed her? One abandoned her, leaving her in the lurch; the other one is about to abandon and drain her of whatever sap of life she still possesses. In essence, most men, at least most Jewish men, are like her husband and son. Yente feels betrayed and abandoned by them all. The civilization of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jewry was based, as we know, on a

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

strictly patriarchal male-oriented hierarchy. It allotted the lowest rung in its socio-cultural ladder to people like Yente who was both female and a widow, i.e., not represented by a male. A civilization whose highest goal – that of achieving closeness to God – could be reached only by a lifelong study of the religious law, an activity reserved for men only, landed people like Yente where they actually found themselves, i.e., in the position of ‘voluntary’ servitude. Yente’s mother was a willing slave, and so is Yente herself. As long as her husband lived she was his servant, tending to his ailments, earning a living, raising a child, keeping up a household, while he was studying the Torah. Now she is doing the same for her son – only with more love and devotion. Of course, having internalized the precepts and values of this civilization, Yente would not have it differently. When her son suggests that he may help her carry the heavy baskets full of poultry from the marketplace home, she recoils in horror. ‘The very idea, carrying my basket!’ she protests; ‘well, I should hope none as hates me – and rest assured they’s plenty as does – well, I hope they may never live to see it!’<sup>10</sup>. No, Dovid should keep to his studying and eventually he may become a rabbi like the one she faces. And yet Yente is clear-sighted enough to see that whatever high status the tradition confers on men in general and of learned men in particular, that does not render them worthwhile human beings, for they are weak, ineffectual and parasitic. All the men she mentions are either boorish and stupid or helpless and dependent. Azreel, her brother in law, who happens to make a good living by selling fish, cannot make an intelligent statement (Yente illustrates his ‘dumb’ reasoning) or take care of practical matters such as the thatching of their joint roof, which is long overdue. Other men, including those who are genuinely learned and pious, are like ‘newborn babes’ without their womenfolk. Here is how Yente sums up her bitter experience:

Let menfolks come on hard times, and they will lose their bearings nor ever find’em nuther. And what more proof you want of it but there Reb Yosi what’s Moishe Abraham’s Yosi, which as long as Fruma Nehama his missus was alive he bore up just fine, but no sooner she was gone, poor thing, well, preserve us if he didn’t go all to pieces on account of it and couldn’t no more fend for himself than was a newborn child... “Why, bless you, Reb Yosi,” I says to him, “but what’s become of you! I mean a man’s wife die on him, well and good, ‘cos it ain’t only God’s doing anyhow.”... Yes the Lord taketh away what the Lord giveth. For what’s is say in our Holy Scriptures? Only I don’t reckon you wants telling of such things by the likes of me, sir, ‘cos you knows better nor I, most like...<sup>11</sup>

Yente defers to the rabbi’s better knowledge of scripture, and yet, at the same time she throws scripture in his face. Reb Yosi, who certainly is more learned than she, nevertheless could not face up to what she has been facing up to for the last eight years, and scripture was of little help to him in a real-life trial.

As much as she is the child of the system which subjugates her, Yente also – half-knowingly but intensely – rejects it. Hence her strange ambivalence *vis a vis* the rabbi. On the one hand, she chose him as an ideal listener because he incorporates the system and is seen as the official custodian of whatever wisdom and guidance it can offer. On the other hand, knowing beforehand what the rabbi’s response might be – a hollow consolation in the form of a quotation: the Lord taketh away what the Lord giveth – she also chooses him as a victim. There is in this context a very interesting

<sup>10</sup> . Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>11</sup> . Ibid. p. 8.



nuance in her narrative. She probably knows that by now her son is not the innocent and 'kosher' student of the Torah he used to be. As much as his studying of the ritual law is the official justification of her servitude, she suspects that the books he now so avidly reads are secular books. She expresses this suspicion through her repetitive juxtaposing of the Hebrew word *seforim* (books) and the Yiddish word *bikhlekh* (little books, booklets). Both terms are culturally significant. The Hebrew *seforim* indicate holy books of traditional religious contents; *bikhlekh* are modern secular books of belles lettres or popular science. Yente pretends not to know the difference between the terms and insists on putting them on the same level, i.e., she juxtaposes the terms and then pretends that they are identical; but she does that too often and with too much emphasis for her pretense of ignorance to be unconvincing. Also she repeats a remark the doctor made after he had glanced through one of Dovid's *bikhlekh*. The doctor said that the lad wanted to become a doctor himself. To repeat all this in front of the rabbi, who must be sensitive to the difference between holy and secular books and to its implications with regards to Yente's son, can mean either (or both) of the two: the woman fearfully inquires whether her kosher son, for whom she sacrifices her life, has already been tainted and rendered unkosher – very much like her kosher pot; or she aggressively tells the rabbi that she is aware of the changes taking place in her son's intellectual development, and she does not care. For her *seforim* and *bikhlekh* are really identical because they amount to the same arcane stuff men invest themselves in at the expense of their women. The authority they draw from them – whether traditional or modern – is used to safeguard their protected status and to keep those who cannot possess it under their thumb. We are not surprised when we read in the monologue 'Genz', which in more than one way is the sequel of 'Dos tepl', that Yente's Dovid Hersh, sick as he used to be and still fully supported by his mother, has left the *besmedresh* (house of learning) and is now preparing himself as a high-school student for matriculation and academic studies.

Although she is not angry with any man in particular, Yente rages against the system by which she is trapped, and she finds strange solace in her fierce disrespect for Jewish manhood. She thoroughly enjoys, for instance, the scenes of cruelty between her tenant Gnessi and her husband Oyzer, the underbeadle, which she reports to the rabbi with unrestrained relish. In a way she likes the man, his wit and his composure when attacked by his wife. She also pretends to disapprove of the woman hitting her husband, slapping his face every now and then, and she repeats, for the benefit of her interlocutor, the sanctimonious admonitions she offered her quick-tempered tenant in the wake of one of these family scenes. At the same time, however, she identifies with Gnessi's aggression. We sense this as we read her humorous description of Oyzer, who supposedly had sniffed in his far away synagogue the smell of the milk gruel his wife was cooking at home for their five children and stealthily presented himself at the family's table, ready to partake of the unexpected meal. The description is laced with fine venom and is informed by contempt. Jewish men deserve to be slapped in their faces.

Of course, Yente's rage is not openly admitted. Nor is it fully conscious. It is certainly not acknowledged with regards to the rabbi, who is a holy man. And yet, it is the driving impetus behind the monologue as a whole, and it is undoubtedly aimed at the rabbi and all he represents. Like all other men the rabbi is frail. He cannot stand even listening to the facts with which Yente has to live day in day out. While she is talking he faints, i.e., he abandons her by succumbing to weakness, exactly like her

husband and son. Now she must scream and alert the *rebetsin* (the rabbi's wife), for whose business is it to revive a sick man if not his wife's? Frail as he is, he nevertheless represents the authority of a harsh system to which she must defer. He is the system, at the same time weak and dominant, ineffectual and prescriptive. His hallowed Jewish erudition, like all book learning, is all important and yet of no use in the actual existential whirlwind in which Yente and her kind learn to survive. So she shoots at him – instead of slapping his face – the corrosive spurts of her endless monologue, reducing him to a death-like state. Thus her brilliant loquacity, as much as it realizes the comic potential of the 'undeveloped mind', actually emanates from a dark resentment, which is that much darker and more visceral because the speaker cannot afford to be fully aware of its meaning or even conscious of its mere existence. Yente must play her drama of revenge without really knowing that that is what she does.

It is not difficult to show how similar triple-tiered structures (comedy/ tragedy/ hostility) function in many if not in all of Sholem Aleichem's successful monologues. In all of them the bright comic surface hides not only the possibility of tragedy but also a strong undercurrent of rage. In monologues such as 'Gimenazye' and 'Me tor nit zayn keyn guter' the tragic aspect is manifested in both the disintegration of the protagonists' family life, which brings about their utter loneliness, and in the unspeakable difficulty and degradation a Jew must experience when he comes in contact with the representatives of an openly antisemitic Russian society. Yet the hostility in both stories is aimed at the protagonists' respective wives whom they both love and hate, and whom they view as responsible for their emasculation. In 'An eytse' and particularly in 'Dray almones' the comedy and the tragedy inhere in the protagonists' interaction with women: in 'An eytse' the protagonist is an unloved husband who cannot decide whether he wants or does not want to divorce his wife; in 'Dray almones' the narrator is a lifelong bachelor, living alone with his cat, but at the same time developing a symbiotic relationship with three women – a mother, her daughter, and grand daughter – all of whom he thinks he loves and wants to marry but ends up by marrying off to other men he initially likes, then he is intensely jealous of, and finally he mourns as each husband dies in tragic circumstances not long after his wedding. The rage, however, is aimed in both these extraordinary stories not at the 'culpable' women or the men they marry or flirt with but rather at the Sholem Aleichem persona, i. e., at the writer and, by inference, at the institution of literature with its claims to superior wisdom and spirituality. Clearly, writer and literature stand here for what rabbi and Torah stood in 'Dos tepl'. Again, a spiritual authority is being assailed in the name of existential reality and defied by those who feel excluded by the hierarchy this authority imposes. In 'An eytse' the young man is out to prove to the writer that would he have been in his position, he too, for all his pretensions to pure spirituality, would have not been able to decide whether to end a humiliating but lucrative marriage or to suffer, stay it out, and reap its financial benefits. In 'Dray almones' the narrator, probably a closeted homosexual, is out to show the writer that his literary penchant for 'psychology' would not give him a key to his 'riddle', which he himself cannot solve. Furthermore, it turns out that the narrator himself is an aspiring writer, who, however, suspects that his writing would never receive recognition, so he hides it, swears never to show it to anybody, and, in the meantime, denigrates literature as pretentious and vacuous, and lashes at Sholem Aleichem, its representative.

We should turn now to an example culled from an epistolary narrative. Our text will be Menakhem Mendl's first letter;<sup>12</sup> the letter he writes from the city of Odessa to his wife, Sheyne Sheyndl, who resides, according to the first version of the story, in the provincial town of Mazepevke. In the later versions this town is replaced by the tiny *shtetl* Kasrilevke, the epitome of small-town back-water traditional Jewish existence in Sholem Aleichem's works. When he writes this letter Menakhem Mendl is a young man in his twenties, already a father to two or three children. He left Mazepevke or Kasrilevke, where together with his family he still lives under the roof and at the expense of his in-laws, a few weeks before the story starts, and made the long journey from the heart of the Ukraine (the vicinity of Kiev) to Kishinev, the provincial capital of Moldavia, where his 'rich' uncle Menashe lives. The journey had a quite specific purpose: upon his wedding, a few years earlier, Menkhem Mendl received a modest, middle-class dowry of fifteen hundred roubles, which he deposited with his uncle, a business man, so that as long as the young family did not need the money it would accrue interest. Now Menakhem Mendl needs his dowry money, since his years of *kest* (bed and board) with his in-laws (which were also considered as part of the dowry) have elapsed, and the young man is expected to become independent, i.e., to start a business of his own – probably that of a shopkeeper, like so many other *shtetl*-dwellers. The modest capital he possesses must be carefully used. It has to suffice for the rental of a shop as well as for the purchase of the supplies with which the new business would be launched. But first Menakhem Mendl has to extricate the money from the clutches of his uncle, which, everybody fears, would not be an easy operation. Undoubtedly, the entire family has been eager to learn what the results of the crucially important visit in Kishenev have been. Menakhem Mendl is young, unexperienced, and not particularly assertive. Would he be able to convince his cunning uncle to give him all of his fifteen hundred roubles; and if he is, would he spend the money wisely, purchasing the right stuff for a successful shop in a small-town environment? The tension must have mounted considerably, since for a long time no news came from the young traveler. From what we learn from Sheyne Sheyndl letters we can imagine what the atmosphere at home was at that time: the wife herself was sick with worries (not only about the dowry money, but also about her husband: was he sick? was he robbed? was he alive?). Her domineering mother, a *shtetl* harridan with a rich stock of sarcastic epigrams ready for all occasions, probably made no secret of her low opinion of her son in law, who had either never received the money or already foolishly spent it. Suddenly a letter arrives – from Odessa of all places, the proverbially frivolous and sinful city, around which, according to the Hassidic saying, the fires of hell burn throughout an area of forty by forty miles. What brought Menakhem Mendl to Odessa, which was never part of his itinerary? What happened to the precious dowry money?

One would expect Menakhem Mendl's letter to immediately address all these legitimate concerns he knows are on the minds of his addressees and supply the

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12. *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, Vol. II, *Menakhem Mendl*, New York 1918, pp. 11-13.

pertinent information they so eagerly expect; but Menakhem Mendl, it seems, had no intention of doing that.<sup>13</sup> Rather he starts his letter with a paean to Odessa and its nice people, not even bothering to tell how and why he has arrived there in the first place. Then he mentions all kinds of merchandise, which, he says, he could have bought there at a discount. He makes a full list of these supplies (wheat, bran, wool, flour, salt, feathers, raisins, sacks, herring), which are exactly the kinds of stock his addressees expect him to buy; but having whetted their appetites, he then tells them he has decided not to invest in any of these familiar and desired commodities. Instead he chose to purchase at the Odessa stock-exchange something they know nothing about: stocks and futures. Of course, Menakhem Mendl himself knows very little about these 'abstract' commodities, and is completely ignorant in the ways of the stock-exchange. When, at the request of his wife, he attempts, in his following letters (for in his initial letter he does not bother to explain the nature and purpose of stocks), to explain the transactions he is making, we realize how inadequate his grasp of speculative commerce is, and we know he is bound to lose every penny he invests in it. This, however, does not restrain him from waxing lyrical about the wonders of the stock exchange and from dedicating a good part of the balance of his first letter to an enthusiastic prognosis regarding the riches which are coming his way. Already, he says, he has earned hefty sums of money. Only at the end of the letter Menkhem Mendl relates how in spite of his valorous efforts (he quotes verbatim the 'assertive' discussion he had with his uncle, in which the word 'money' was repeated five times, mostly together with the words 'if only': '*abi geld*', i.e., let the uncle do whatever he wants, send Menakhem Mendl wherever he wants him to go, as long as he, Menakhem Mendl, gets back his money) he managed to get out of his uncle only a very small amount of money in cash and the balance in promissory notes to be paid after five months and in a draft that could be immediately cashed if presented to a certain firm in Odessa with which the uncle has business ties. Only in the *post scriptum* note at the very end of the letter Menkhem Mendl tells how when he arrived in Odessa and presented the draft it was not respected, for his uncle had yet to send the merchandise which would pay for it. It is therefore only in the *post-scriptum* that the this letter writer indirectly explains why he is staying in Odessa: he is waiting for his uncle's draft to be cashed. In the meantime he has invested the very small amount of money he had in the stock exchange.

Again, we encounter the characteristic procedure we have already traced. Menakhem Mendl's letter looks like a semantic jumble. It adds up to such a convoluted, irrational and non-informative sequence, that we must assume its writer is a person completely at the mercy of his fantasies and out of touch with reality – either the one his addressees perceive or that in which he himself operates. Not only is he an inexperienced and ignorant provincial, who has just thrown away whatever scanty capital he managed to receive from his uncle, but he is also a person who cannot tell what happened to him 'by certain regular trains of cause and effect'. He is so taken up with his dream of speculative earnings, that he is unable to explain himself and to take into account the fact that his addressee does not know what he is talking about and still does not understand what brought him to the place from which he writes and why he is still there. In short, Menakhem Mendl is another example of Coleridge's 'uncultivated mind', for his cognition is controlled by 'a coincidence of images and circumstances' as well as by a strictly self-centered sense of priorities bordering on

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13. On the disorderly and non-informative nature of Menkhem Mendl's writing see my 'A Dash for Freedom – Sampling *Menakhem Mendl*', *The Image of the Shtetl*, pp.157-178.

autism. The discordance between his paean to Odessa with its stock exchange and the pathetic situation he got himself into (being stranded in a foreign city without money, waiting, who knows how long, for a draft to be cashed) makes for a comic incongruity of the first order. Of course, the fact that Menakhem Mendl's utterly muddled letters, where no argument is ever brought to its logical conclusion (because, as the writer says, he is too busy, and he will do it in the following letter; he never does), are framed by formal, protracted series of the conventional florid greetings and good wishes prescribed by the old *brivnshtelers* (model letter writers), renders them, as already said, even more comic than they would have otherwise been. The provincial 'respectability' and stylistic pomposity of these beginnings and endings serve as a foil for the letters' flighty and crazy garrulity.

However, rereading Menakhem Mendl's letter, or coming back to it after having read some of the ongoing correspondence between him and his wife, we soon see how his enthusiasm is sheer bravado. Actually Menakhem Mendl is fully aware of the fact that he has just bungled the first serious business he was entrusted with as a *pater familias* and a prospective business man. He did not manage to extricate his money from his uncle, who was neither frightened by his blustering demands ('I, when I say money, money it must be') nor impressed by his threatening post-cards. Menashe succeeded in getting him off his back and stranding him in a far away city. His voyage to Odessa was, as he himself reports, the proverbial voyage of the fool, who, in order to be gotten rid of, was sent to find a *suke-sheer* (tabernacle shears, a non-existent item). Instead of getting the fifteen hundred roubles in cash, which would have enabled him to go home with the stock necessary for starting a business of his own, he has only promissory notes and a dubious draft to show. With the fraction of the dowry he got in cash he, of course, can buy nothing at all. The money would hardly suffice for his travel expenses. He also knows fully well how the news of his failure would be received at home: his wife would be sick with grief and his sententious mother in law would wax eloquent telling all and sundry how she always knew the son in law she was stuck with was a fool, a ne'er-do-well, a *shmegege* (dawdler), and how she was never in doubt with regards to the outcome of his journey to his thief of an uncle. Afraid of such reactions, and himself, stranded in Odessa, in the lowest of spirits, he could not bring himself to write home. Only now, once he has discovered, he thinks, the path to easy riches, he can put pen to paper. Of course he does not want to tell about the debacle in Kishenev before flaunting his imaginary success. That is the reason for the convoluted order of his letter. Menakhem Mendl cannot afford to write his letter along the train of cause and effect. Kishenev, uncle Menashe, promissory notes, the draft that could not be cashed, etc.. He therefore must evade all these as long as he can and also obfuscate the causal order of this trail of failures by as assertive a language as he can master as well as by references to the will of God and to his secret ways of uplifting the downtrodden to the pinnacle of success. Then he would squeeze all the unpleasant information into the conclusion of the letter, after the news of Odessa, the stock exchange and the imaginary success there, touted with great fanfare throughout the main body of the letter, have softened and mellowed the addressees and blunted the edge of their criticism.

Thus underneath its zany, autistic and exhilarating surface, Menakhem Mendl's letter reveals a crestfallen, miserable person who knows he would never become the hardened, practical and successful merchant or the masculine and resourceful head of a family he is expected to be. If at this level the letter does not present a tragic

situation in existential terms similar to those of Yente's monologue at its intermediate level, it is still a story of dire straits and deep unhappiness. This is indicated by Menakhem Mendl's too many references to providence, which supposedly watched over his steps and lead him, according to its own secret plans and intentions, to a place where he could earn much money and become rich. Menakhem Mendl is not a person steeped in religion, and in his following letters he would hardly refer to God's good will. The fact that in his first letter he uses more than once the conventional formulae of Jewish *bitokhn*, employing the phraseology of a traditional *magid* (preacher), clearly tells us of his awareness of the deep trouble in which he is mired.

But forlornness, shame, and fear of failure and effeminacy are not all the emotions Menkhem Mendl hides under the gushing enthusiasm of his letter. Something else, which he may not even be fully aware of, lurks there, raising its head here and now in seemingly trivial remarks such as the one he makes when he wants to emphasize or illustrate what great expectations the stock exchange holds for him. He says: 'Ot iz nit lang aroysgekumen aher eyner, epes a shames, un hot gekhapt in eyn shma-yisroel draysig toyzend, un horkht zey haynt alemen mit'n koter.'<sup>14</sup> Every word counts in this sentence, which in a quite inadequate translation reads: See, not long ago someone came out here, a beadle of sorts, and caught in one breath thirty thousand, and now he listens to them all as if they were a tomcat in heat. The key terms are 'epes a shames' – in an earlier version: 'epes a Hershele' – and 'horkht zey haynt alemen mit'n koter'. The 'epes a shames' overflows with contempt. It evokes the figure of a mousy, anonymous, penniless beadle, whose name does not matter – or he is a mere Hershele, a generic name indicating the clown, who can be referred to with derisive intimacy – as he crawled out of his back-water hole of a *shtetl* (he 'came out') and took his place in the Odessa stock exchange. This is clearly a figure out of a vaudeville comedy. Of course Menakhem Mendl knows that he himself cuts exactly the same figure, and that there is hardly a difference between 'epes a Hershele' and 'epes a Mendele' (by the way, the name Mendl is also generic. As a diminutive of the word man it means: just a little man like anyone else, a stereotype of the mundane, inconsequential Jew. The proverb says: 'oyb er heyst Mendl, meg ikh esn fun zayn fendl' – If he is called Mendl, I may eat from his pot – i.e., he is kosher Jew with whom one does not have to stand on ceremony). The expression therefore conveys self-contempt, even self abnegation. Then comes the miraculous and sudden success, for which Menakhem Mendl himself strives, and by which he as much as says: even I, as lowly and as contemptible as I am, can make a killing in the stock exchange, since it has been done by a creature similar to me. Most important is the comparison of 'them all' to a tomcat on heat, whose passionate and seemingly tragic mewling and wailing can be safely ignored. In the context of Menakhem Mendl's style this comparison is particularly noticeable, since as a person who is completely unrelated to nature, to animals, and who also meticulously refrains from any reference to sexuality, his mentioning of the wailing tomcat, no matter how conventionally idiomatic, stands out. We ask ourselves: who are the 'zey alemen'? Are they the experienced and cynical Odessa speculators who made fun of the provincial beadle and now they have to eat up their own words of derision? Or maybe they are his relatives at home and the householders in his synagogue who were shocked by their beadle's giving up of his lowly, servile, but secure post? In any case, we know who are the 'them all' as far as Menakhem Mendl himself is concerned. They are not the Odessa speculators whom

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14. *Menakhem Mendl*, p. 12.

he idealizes, wishing with all his might to become one of them (his favorite expression is 'un ikh besoykhem', and I too among them). They are his carping and critical relatives, particularly the two women, his sharp-tongued mother in law, and her daughter, his wife Sheyne Shyndel, who keeps quoting her as an authority.

For Menakhem Mendl success in the stock exchange means therefore much more than financial freedom. The freedom he aspires to would deliver him from his hen-pecked existence in the shadow of these two women as much as it would set him free from the miserable existence of an unsuccessful *shtetl* shopkeeper. What puts him down is not so much the criticism and complaints he is exposed to, but the self-contempt which is the inevitable result of his internalizing the family's view of himself. The 'epes a shames' or 'epes a Hershele' tell us that the internalization of this image has already occurred; but they also tell us that Menakhem Mendl wants nothing more than to free himself of it. If he can do it (by making a killing at the stock exchange) he would have no need to listen to his relatives or take them seriously. His success would reduce them to the insignificance of a tomcat in heat. The reversal of fortune is thus connected in Menkhem Mendl's mind with a reversal of gender., which would somehow confer ridiculous maleness on those women at home. This is highly indicative. Up until now Menakhem Mendl's sole advantage was his being a normal male. His only achievement – the siring of two or three children. No one could find fault with him as far as his sexual functioning was concerned. Furthermore, from Sheyne Sheyndl's letters we indirectly learn, that he was rather an ardent husband, who as much as he was not yet in a position to pay the two first of the three debts a Jewish husband owed his wife according to the law of Moses – that is, feed and cloth her – was certainly up to mark in regularly paying the third one: having sexual intercourse with her once she underwent the proper ablutions and cleansed herself of her menstruation blood. We learn this from the fact that Sheyne Sheyndl cannot believe in her absent husband's celibacy. She never doubts that he has extramarital sexual attachments in Odessa, Kiev, and the other places he takes himself to. She constantly looks for the clandestine affair he must be conducting, and perks her ears whenever he mentions women or the name of one, even when it is only the name of a famous Odessa ice-cream parlor. That, however, only shows how little she knows about her husband, and explains why she would never understand that Menakhem Mendl had abandoned her and their children for good. But Menakhem Mendl is quite ready to give up his sexuality, for it only means to him dependence and captivity. His proper sexual functioning paradoxically emasculated him, for the more intercourse he enjoyed and the more children he sired the less of a 'man' he became. He would therefore maintain his manhood by renouncing his virility. Never again would he allow himself to play the tomcat, begging for the female's sexual favors. He would not view women even as sexual objects that are enjoyable in themselves and would relegate to them only the usefulness of status symbols that can be shown to others. When Menakhem Mendl promises Sheyne Sheyndl to bring her to wherever he happens to be, as he does several times in their ongoing correspondence, the avowed purpose is never the renewal of intimacy and family life but rather the usage of a wife, properly attired and covered with expensive jewels, as a token of financial success. To the same extent, when he reports about the mistresses rich and powerful men keep, he completely instrumentalizes them as proof of success devoid of all sexual or moral implications. Menakhem Mendl himself actually opts for the role of a neuter. He would let his wife assume the entire burden of both female and male sexuality and wail in her loneliness. What he wants is freedom and the

exhilarating loneliness which comes with it. His letter is a declaration of independence, of renunciation of responsibilities and ties. He will never come home again and rejoin his family. No matter how hard hit by his unsuccessful business transactions he is and how many times his truly dedicated wife comes to the rescue and sends him the funds he needs for finding his way home, he is never going back.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, he would put more and more distance between himself and his family, going to Warsaw, to America. He would never stop writing home because writing letters, in which he can freely entertain his fantasies, has become the true element of his psychic reality (he writes in order to exist rather than communicate); but the tone of his letters would become remote, unrelated. Menakhem Mendl rejects home, family, *shtetl*, women, and shuts his ears to their pleading voices. He had enough of 'them all' and he would just not be bothered by or with them.

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Space does not allow for even the most cursory treatment of some of the many other texts by Sholem Aleichem to which the triple-tiered model could be usefully applied, as, for instance, to many of the author's so-called children stories, including the well known cycle *Motl Peyses dem khazns* (Motl the Son of Cantor Peyse).<sup>16</sup> There is, however, one more sequel of monologues that must be taken into consideration, albeit summarily, *Tevye der milkhiker* (Tevye the Dairyman), which is often regarded as the author's supreme achievement. The stories of Tevye are, among Sholem Aleichem's creations, the most complex and misleading, and they have been traditionally reduced to sentimental pulp not only in their various stage adaptations (such as *Fiddler on the Roof*), but also by a score of simplistic critical misinterpretations. The model applies to these texts as much as it does to all the others, but in a much more complex and indirect way, which we shall have to chart. Before we do that, however, we can benefit by dwelling shortly on three generalizations that can be deduced from our observations so far.

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15. Sholem Aleichem did write (in 1900) one Menakhem Mendl letter (to the persona Sholem Aleichem; the two exchanged several letters) in which a visit home, for the week of passover, is described at length. However, he carefully kept this letter out of the *Menakhem Mendl* versions which appeared in book form. He must have realized that it undermined the logic of the entire sequence: Menakhem Mendl must keep away from home. The letter is nevertheless significant in its negative portrayal of the famous mother in law, who at this juncture appears as less of a mother in law and more of a castrating wife who completely dominates her husband Borekh. This, by the way, is the only time we hear about Sheyne Sheyndl's father, who other wise is mentioned only as *shver* (father in law) in the conventional greetings and good-buys with which Menkhem Mendl's letters are started and concluded. Clearly Menakhem Mendl, having fled the coop, pities the man who stayed. The letter, under the title *Bekhipozn* (Post Haste), was collected by the editor of the 'Foksfond' edition of the author's works. Cf. *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, Vol. XVII, *Lekoved yontev* (For the Sake of the Holiday), Part One, New York 1921, pp. 19-31.

16. A detailed analysis of this work is included in my 'Bouncing Back - Destruction and Recovery in Sholem Aleichem's *Motl Peyse dem khazns*', *The Image of the Shtetl*, pp. 179-255.



First: in almost all of the author's stories narrated by a first person narrator what is left unsaid or half-said is as (and even more) important as what gets said. We can always assume the presence in these stories of a covert message, which is at odds with the overt one. Often the so-called *baredevdikeyt* (garrulity), which is so characteristic to these stories, hides more than reveals. The texts produce a barrage of words under which the narrator can bury some painful or unsavory truth. The truth will, however, come out through what we take, at face value, for an unrelated, trivial piece of information, an aberrational or random speech act, which we ascribe to the primitive, 'uncultivated' thinking of the narrators. In reality it is these semiotic aberrations which reveal the emotional depths that are hidden underneath the communicative surface. They also reveal in Sholem Aleichem's main characters features which do not tally with our nostalgic, sentimental, and unhistorical view of *shtetl*-life and *shtetl* people.

Secondly, the movement and rhythm of a spoken or written speech in the texts under discussion, let them seem at surface level as comically random and disorderly as they may, are actually of a steady, orderly and rotary nature. Their rotary quality subsists in the self-contradictory dynamics of flight and pursuit that informs these speeches. On the one hand, the movement, which can be fierce and very noisy, is generated by a not-always conscious flight from shame and pain. On the other hand, it is motivated, even when it is mild and relaxed, by a much less conscious wish to attack, to punish, to pounce on some objectionable object: a person, an institution, a symbol of authority, of dominance, and the ethos that justifies them. Pulled in these contradictory directions the stories are actually at a stand still. They do not really develop, for they cannot tear themselves from the fixed axis around which they rotate. Hence their repetitive and 'endless' structure. They can be endlessly continued (and thus, one can say, be left at the author's death 'unfinished'), but every one of their new sequels must be a mere variation on a theme set by the old ones.

Thirdly and most importantly, all the narrators we have in mind clearly position themselves in what we may designate as a minority. The term must, of course, be understood not in its quantitative sense but rather in the qualitative one. Being in the minority does not necessarily indicate that one belongs to a group which is numerically smaller than the majority group. It more often indicates an experience of marginality and the sense of alienation which accompanies it. In Sholem Aleichem's stories narrated by a first person narrator we find the most poignant expressions of the sense of marginality – both of the individual and of the collective – and marginality induced shrinkage. While Menakhem Mendl is the hen-pecked unappreciated man, his wife Sheyne Sheyndel emerges in her letters as the embittered abandoned wife. At the root of their respective experiences we find the common sense of being unfairly excluded, left out. Menakhem Mendel is excluded from the community of competent, successful, 'masculine' businessmen he so eagerly wishes to belong to. Sheyne Sheyndel, who is, for all practical purposes, an *aguna* (a deserted wife who is barred from remarrying), is excluded from the circle of respectful middle class married women, to whom, she feels, she belongs. Tevye is excluded because he lives in a village, among gentiles, peasants, and not in the heart of a Jewish community, where his 'Jewish learning' (actually he is cognizant of little more than of the prayers he recites on weekdays and on Sabbath and the holidays, the book of Psalms, the portions of the Bible which are read in the synagogue on Sabbath and

some of the simpler tractates of the Mishna) would have been acknowledged and his witty misquotations from the sacred texts would have found an appreciative audience.

Children are represented in the author's works as perennially marginalized and often abused. They cannot even rebel against the oppressive system which subjugates them, because, in most cases, they have internalized its values, so the moment they do rebel – as in the case of the boy who stole the penknife he coveted in the short story 'Dos meserl' (The Penknife), or that of the child who could not resist biting off the small protuberance at the head of his father's *esreg* (the citron, used for ritual purposes during the holiday of Tabernacles) in the story 'Der esreg' (The Citron) – their own sense of guilt and self defilement triggers a crisis, both physical and spiritual, which leads to total surrender. What is left is often only shame and hostility, as is the case in a masterpiece such as 'Tsu der sude' (To the Purim Feast), where a poor boy survives the humiliation of attending a Purim feast at the table of his rich and patronizing uncle only by feeding himself, piece by piece, exquisite morsels of visceral hostility for the uncle, whose every pretentious gesture he observes and records. Many of these children would like nothing better than to see the entire oppressive system inside which they are trapped disintegrating, even when this involves pauperization, death, destruction and exile, as it does in the case of that 'happy orphan', Motl the son of the cantor Peyse. Of course, many of the stories deal with the more easily recognizable forms of social and political exclusion – that of the poor by the rich, and particularly that of Jews by powerful non-Jews – bureaucrats, school principals, attorneys, etc

Often exclusion goes hand in hand with deterritorialization, such as Tevye's triple exile, first from the community of the Jewish *shtetl* to that of the gentile village, then the expulsion from the village by the Russian authorities, and finally his 'gentle' expulsion to *Erets yisroel* (Palestine) by his successful, 'aristocratic' son in law, who would not allow his reputation to be tarnished by the presence of a common relative such as Tevye. Menakhem Mendl drifts from one place to another; Motl and his impoverished family must leave the *shtetl* and emigrate. The works of Sholem Aleichem teem with people who live and make one's another acquaintance for a short while in train compartments, with travel agents, with Jews who seek legal or medical advice in foreign places, with distressed travelers who leave their towns because of legal entanglements, or because their sons are being drafted to the Russian army, or because they want to collect funds for rebuilding a burnt-down synagogue or *mikve* (ritual bath); people who spend too much time in cheap hotels and in train stations. The persona Sholem Aleichem itself is projected as constantly in motion, a deterritorialized being in more than one sense. Not only does it lack a locus of its own and is often met in train compartments or as an uninvited guest; it also does not really belong – mentally and linguistically – neither in the society which it uses as an artistic object nor in that which it wants to count as a subject. Why, its very name, Sholem Aleichem, which is nothing more than a greeting such as 'How do you do' or 'Hello', indicates a situation of perennial dislocation; for one does not confer a *sholem aleichem* greeting on one's neighbors or local acquaintances. It is a greeting reserved for a new face, for someone who comes from afar.

These common characteristics – marginality, exclusion and deterritorialization – suggest the applicability of the concepts of the current Minority discourse and Minor literature theories to the works of Sholem Aleichem. Those concepts developed first,

within a philosophical and psychological framework, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their monograph *Kafka – pour une littérature mineur* (1975), and subsequently, within an ideological-political one, by David Lloyd in his *Nationalism and Minor Literature* (1987), offer, if applied with some modifications,<sup>17</sup> important and useful insights into the entire array of modern Jewish literatures, and, in particular, into modern Yiddish literature. This, of course, calls for a separate discussion. Here we shall limit ourselves to some remarks concerning their applicability to the works of Sholem Aleichem.

Sholem Aleichem found himself in the 1880's, rather against his family's as well as his own expectations, writing in a language devoid of even the vestiges of cultural status or the sheer consciousness of a literary tradition (in spite of the fact that a Yiddish literature had been written since the Middle Ages). In his intellectual world Yiddish occupied the lowest rung in Henri Gobard's tetralinguistic ladder, that of the despised vernacular, the idiom of the country side, which is sharply differentiated from the 'vehicular' urban, bureaucratic, and governmental language (in Sholem Aleichem's case: Russian), the 'referential' language of common sense, culture and cultivated discourse (either Russian or Hebrew), and the 'mythical' language of religion (Hebrew). For reasons he himself failed to conceptualize (he often said Yiddish had 'bewitched' him, that it became his *meshugas*, madness) he committed himself, as an artist, to this 'lowly' language which was the spoken idiom of those he described and addressed. Like most writers writing within the context of Minority discourse and from the vantage point of the marginalized he faced than a choice: embracing and deepening the minority's sense of cultural and linguistic marginalization, thus achieving both expressive intensity and a politico-cultural independence through defying and undermining the 'colonizing' culture of the majority, or internalizing the norms of the major culture, but 'realizing' them by activating the minority's own cultural resources, thus developing through them 'an autonomous ethical identity for the subject'.<sup>18</sup> This is a choice between a rejection of the major culture's concept of universal humanity (because it, presumably, 'universalizes' only that culture's own identity) or acceptance of that concept with the intention of making it one's 'own' through a synthesis between it and some of the minority's own traditional norms. The philosopher Ahad Ha-am, the major

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17. These would have to do primarily with freeing the concept of Minor literature from the limitation, super-imposed by Deleuze and Guattari when they defined minor literature as a literature written in a deterritorialized major language, such as the German spoken by Prague Jews or the French spoken and written by francophone writers from the erstwhile French colonies. We believe the term should also include literatures written in languages such as Hebrew and Yiddish, provided they give expression to communities which, due to ethnically, socially, and culturally-determined factors, experience marginality and exclusion, and consequently often exhibit fractured identities. What should be of paramount importance is the cultural experience of marginality and exclusion *vis a vis* a 'colonizing' culture and not the condition of linguistic marginalization as such. See also Chana Kronfeld, 'Minor Modernisms – Beyond Deleuze and Guattari', *On the Margins of Modernism*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1996, pp. 1-17.

18. Cf. Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Kafka – Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986, pp. 16-24; David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987, pp. 1-26; the quotation is from Lloyd's book, p. 19. The term ethical identity indicates a sense of separateness or distinctiveness supported by an ethos. If identity as such subsists of differentiating qualities or traits which set an individual or a collective apart, 'ethical identity' emerges when these traits are regarded as justifiable, valuable, and worthy of preservation and cultivation, even of active defense against possible erasure or dilution.

spokesman of cultural Zionism in Sholem Aleichem's day, analyzed the second option in his essay 'Imitation and Assimilation' (1893), contending that Jewish creativity always – or at least since Jewish culture had outgrown its Biblical beginnings – opted for 'imitation', i.e. for absorbing foreign cultural norms and models, but internalizing them through a synthesis with traditional Jewish ones.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly Sholem Aleichem, like most of his contemporaries, chose the second option, which served as the basis for the entire project of the so-called modern Jewish Renaissance: the cultivation of a modern Jewish culture based on current European cultural ideals but also retaining a Jewish 'continuity'. He did every thing in his power to 'gentrify' Yiddish literature and enrich it with as many trappings of a 'major' (i.e., European) literature as possible. He founded and edited 'thick' Yiddish literary journals in which he published the work of writers he pronounced 'canonical' (like the Russian 'thick journals', in which the works of the major writers of the day were serialized); he published in these journals his own so-called 'Jewish novels', *Stempenyu* and *Yosele solovey* (Yosele the Nightingale), which, he thought, synthesized the novel form as practiced by Turgenev with the realities of Jewish traditional life; he engaged in a multi-frontal critical campaign, in which he elevated some of the older Yiddish writers, particularly Sh. Y. Abramovitsh and Y. Y. Linetski, to the status of *klasiker* (classics) while combating Yiddish 'Schund' (trash) and its chief proliferator, the popular fiction writer N. M. Shaykevitsh. His great ambition was to endow Yiddish literature with the halo of a national institution. However, throughout this period of heroic attempts to achieve canonicity for Yiddish writing, he himself remained largely an unrealized artist, whose potential was by far bigger than his achievement. Would he have remained the writer he was in 1889, he might have been by now forgotten or relegated to the history books.

The realization of his potential became possible only in the 1890's, after he, for reasons into which we cannot go here, had undergone a crisis and a change of heart of sorts. Thus he discovered, as already said, his two great characters, Menakhem Mendl and Tevye, and the possibilities inherent in writing stories narrated by a first person 'unreliable' narrator. He then gave up the good services of the witty third person omniscient narrator he had employed in his earlier novels, and with it – the pretense of epic objectivity. Thus he had to put to rest, at least for the time being, his ambition of writing the 'great' Jewish novel, which, as he understood it, was to be mimetic and panoramic, presenting a wide, inherently coherent, social-historical picture, and mediated through the ministrations of the omniscient epic narrator. Ideologically and artistically this meant disregarding, if not negating, the ethical norms of the modern-secular Jewish culture of the day. As said before, Sholem Aleichem was a professed Zionist who wrote Zionist propaganda. However, such works as *Menakhem Mendl* and *Tevye der milkhiker* could not have been embraced by the spokesmen of Zionism, or, indeed, of any other brand of modern Jewish nationalism, and included by them in the new Jewish canon, for they were essentially non-canonical or even anti-canonical.

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19. Cf. Ahad Ha-am, *Selected Essays*, trans. Leon Simon, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia 1912, pp. 107-124.

This is not easy to grasp after we have been accustomed for such a long time to regard Sholem Aleichem as one of the three great Yiddish *klasiker* (classics). It is important, therefore, to remember that this elevation of the author up to the very top of the canon took place largely after his death in 1916, or at the earliest after the publication in 1911 of his selected works in Russian translations and his 'discovery' by contemporary Russian critics and writers as 'the Jewish Dickens'. The Yiddish pre-World-War-I intelligentsia, which venerated the two other *klasiker*, Sh. Y. Abramovitsh and Y. L. Perets, and elevated the latter to the status of a literary superman, despised Sholem Aleichem as a vulgar comedian who pandered to the uneducated plebs; and this was as it should have been; for Sholem Aleichem, in his successful creations, did not serve the interests of this intelligentsia, which in 1908, in the so-called Tshernovits Conference, celebrated the coronation of Yiddish as a 'national' Jewish language (some of the delegates insisted on it being the national languages of Jews), while he was pushing it back into its back-water *shtetl* origins as the spoken idiom of ignorant women and men.

While the Yiddishist establishment strove to ennoble the language and raise it from vernacularity and dialectism to the level of a genuinely referential language, he pulled it down into the bog of 'vulgarity'; when young writers such as the group of modern poets in America who called themselves 'Di yunge' (The young ones) or the very talented fiction writers Dovid Bergelson and 'Der Nister' (P. Kahanovitsh), did everything they could to differentiate, both lexically and syntactically, the literary idiom they employed from the spoken idiom as practiced either in Eastern Europe or in America, he, with frenetic energy, burrowed himself as deeply as he could into the spoken language with all its blemishes (including Americanisms). Doing that he endowed it with what Deleuze and Guattari call 'tensors', unprecedented intensities. At the same time, while the Yiddishist literary establishment expected from Yiddish writers well-rounded novels and short stories with a well-rounded, 'three dimensional' psychological characterization as means of producing 'an ethical identity for the subject', he retreated from psychologically coherent characterization (which he had attempted in his earlier novels) to those strange psychological creations which Deleuze and Guattari designated as 'assamblages' (in French: *agencements*), collections of characteristics and psychological insights (often far-reaching) that somehow did not add up to a fully realized character as it was defined by traditional Nineteenth Century realist fiction, i.e., as characters whose inherent essence realized itself through change, and whose continuity depended not on repetition but rather on the process of becoming. The assamblage characters, such as Franz Kafka's K., are typical of fiction written within the framework of a minor literature in the current sense of the term, because they express by their very fractured being the refusal of such literature to buy into the assumption of an 'ethical identity for the subject', the creation of which is the main task of every 'major' literature, either in its fiction (particularly in the *Bildungsroman*) or its poetry with its lyrical 'narratives of transcendence'.<sup>20</sup>

Sholem Aleichem certainly aspired to write novels and short stories with fully realized fictional characters like those he found in the works of the Russian masters of realist fiction. He more than once attempted the writing of a *Bildungsroman* in which the full trajectory of the protagonist's development would be delineated (his

most ambitious and relatively successful attempt at that was made in his autobiographical unfinished novel *Funem yarid*, Back from the Fair). He also venerated poetry informed by nationalist 'narratives of transcendence' such as the Hebrew poetry of Kh. N. Bialik. However, at his best he created characters that were 'assamblages'. I have shone in considerable detail how the character of Motl, the son of the cantor Peyse, forms an entity which is not fundamentally different from Deleuze and Guattari's *agencements*. Motl is an ageless being, who cannot develop or change, whose characterization is devoid of what realist fiction regards as essential components, and whose existence can hardly be imagined against a winter-like backdrop, because he is a spring and summer creature, a Jewish Peter Pan, a mythological essence.<sup>21</sup> It is not hard to show how Menakehem Mendl and even Tevye also amount to such assamblages and therefore all attempts to read and interpret their stories as containing realist character portrayal must lead in wrong directions.

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This brings us back to Tevye. Who actually is this half-erudite and half-ignorant country Jew who happens to be a born raconteur and a witty manipulator of words in general and of texts, whatever scanty Jewish textual reserves he possesses, in particular? How does the subtle and ambiguous interaction between him and his interlocutor, the persona Sholem Aleichem, function, and what are its implications? Tevye's tales present us with many overt themes: an anatomy of the 'new times' in contemporary Jewish life, the new developments (each represented by one of Tevye's five daughters), which carry the young Jewish generation away from the traditional way of life as represented by Tevye himself; a direct and indirect commentary on Jewish suffering in Czarist Russia at the turn of the Nineteenth Century and throughout the first decade of the Twentieth Century (the 1903 and 1905 pogroms, the 'constitution' of 1905 and its aftermath, expulsion of Jews from the countryside); Jewish faith, *bitokhn* and religious optimism; a parody on the book of Job which renders a tragedy in terms of comedy; a parody on Jewish scholasticism, etc. While these themes, which have been endlessly discussed by critics and commentators, are related to each other historically and sociologically, other, more important ones, that have been rarely mentioned, do not seem to directly belong within the turn of the century historical context. These are the themes of Jewish passivity in general and of the problematic passivity of the Jewish male in his role as a *pater familias* in particular. These two themes not only complement each other but also, when comprehensively understood, subsume all other themes and establish both the historical and the suprahistorical thematic unity of the work as a whole. By their combination the comprehensive, unifying theme of *Tevye der milkhiker*, which organizes all the others in groups of ancillary motifs, is established; and this overarching theme can be conceptualized in generalizations such as: because the Jewish male has been reduced to passivity, he is unable to properly play his role as a father, although he possesses all the appropriate fatherly instincts and attitudes; or because the Jewish male can be fully active only in the realm of language and texts

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21. *The Image of the Shtetl*, pp. 179-255.

(which he can dexterously manipulate), he is unable to function successfully not only where action is needed but also where speech acts, linguistic interventions that can change reality, are called for; or: because the Jewish male cannot or would not act, or he acts out without being aware of the meaning of his actions, he must vitiate the concept of religious *bitokhn* as much as he must distort the sacrosanct texts.

Our illustrative text will be Tevye's fifth tale, 'Shprintse'<sup>22</sup>. We could have chosen any other of the eight tales, including the better known 'Chava', which is the one Sholem Aleichem himself as well as those who followed him chose for dramatization;<sup>23</sup> 'Shprintse', however, highlights important issues that are not as fully presented in the other stories. In the summer of 1905, at the time of the widespread pogroms triggered by the abortive socialist revolution and the 'constitution' which was granted in its wake by Nicholas II, Tevye found himself busy and sought after. His dairy business flourished, because many rich Jews flocked from all over the Jewish pale to the resort town of Boyberik (where, they thought, they would be safely distant from the areas of the pogroms), not far from Tevye's village, and his wares became extremely popular with them. One rich widow from Yekaterinoslav became particularly attached to Tevye. Not only did he supply her household with fresh dairy products but he also became to her a mentor of sorts, or so he thought. When he tried to impress her with his quotations from the midrash, she said she was only a woman, a widow, and would he rather talk not to her but to her fatherless son, Arontshik, who was a handsome strapping, and quite wild young man, who instead of preparing himself for the serious task of a business man, for which his father's large estate entitled him, thought only about horses and bicycle riding, about fishing and other sports. Tevye took upon himself the task of reining in the boy and in the process he half fell in love with him. He invited him to his cottage for the holiday of Pentecost, promising him the best blintzes he had ever tasted, sizzling hot, direct from the frying pan. Arontshik and his friends rode on their horses to Tevye's village and partook of his wife's blintzes. However, Arontshik's appetite was whetted by Tevye's beautiful daughters, particularly by the soft spoken and gentle Shprintse, far more than by Golde's blintzes. He started frequenting the cottage on a regular basis, openly courting Shprintse, who fell in love with him. When Arontshik brought up the topic of marriage Tevye dismissed the suggestion, saying that his rich relatives would never agree to the match. However, he did almost nothing about putting an end to the relationship. When his daughter refused to heed his weak warning, he let things run their course, until the boy, whisked away by his mother, stopped coming, and Shprintse's pregnancy became evident. Even then he did not initiate an encounter either with the boy or with his relatives, until he was invited by them - not as a prospective in-law, as he secretly hoped, but as a beggar who might hush up the unsavory affair if offered the proper amount of money. Tevye refused the offer, of course, but he would still do nothing for his betrayed and humiliated daughter, who,

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22. *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, Vol. I, *Gants tevye der milkhker* (The Complete Tevye the Dairyman), New York 1918, pp. 143-163.

23. Also it is questionable whether 'Chava' is a genuinely original story. Two years before its writing and publication (in 1906) a short story, under the title 'Der farshterter shabes' (The Disrupted Sabbath), was published in a small, quite overlooked collection of short stories by the American Yiddish dramatist and fiction writer Leon Kobrin (Cf. L. Kobrin, *Ertseylungen*, A Hillman, New York 1904, pp. 7-39). There can be little doubt that Sholem Aleichem read it and borrowed from it not only the story's  *sujet* but also an array of descriptive details. Indeed 'Chava' can be regarded as an unacknowledged 'adaptation' of Kobrin's story.

he clearly saw, 'flickered out like a candle'<sup>24</sup>. As much as he shared her pain and consternation ('because I was a father and a father knows in his heart') he would not openly commiserate with her or say one word which could stave off her suicidal intentions, of which he must have been aware. The garrulous Tevye who never shut his mouth, suddenly, when his word could have saved a life, became speechless. Thus when he came home one evening he found his daughter dead. She had drowned herself in the nearby river.

What we find interesting about this rather banal village tragedy is not the conventional story about the poor country girl seduced and abandoned by a rich city boy but rather the role Tevye plays in it. This role clearly underlines his insecure position as a male. He is the father of a large family but he is surrounded by women and also his profession as a supplier of dairy products brings him into contact mainly with women (such as the widow from Yekaterinoslav). This, on the one hand, renders his pretensions to Jewish learning (such learning being the prerogative of the Jewish male) somewhat ridiculous. Tevye is exposing his intellectual virility to those who cannot appreciate it, or, for that matter, see through it and call his bluff. On the other hand, this underlines Tevye's loneliness as a male bereft of male company. This is why Tevye is so immensely impressed with Arontshik, a 'charlatan' as he dubs him, but at the same time a figure of unquestionable virility. His description of the young man is informed by a strong erotic vein. Tevye's acceptance of the role of this young man's mentor is completely foolish. It can be explained only by his need to be recognized as a male (a wise Jew, who can replace the boy's missing father and, as a man, do for him what his mother, being only a woman, cannot do) as well as by his being attracted to Arontshik, the son he never had. Of course, Tevye is unable to influence the boy's behavior one way or the other (Arontshik takes his barely understood admonitions for a huge joke), but he can bribe him, which is what he does by inviting him to his cottage and arranging for his meeting with his daughters. There can be little doubt, that Tevye, in his secret heart, wills the love affair of Arontshik and Shprintse, and allows it to progress and develop although he fully knows that the match is socially unacceptable and that the results of the affair can be tragic. Between this knowledge and his half-conscious wishes he chooses a passive wait-and-see attitude, which is nothing less than courting disaster. He tells himself he would like to see the match take place because the boy is rich and a rich daughter may be able to free him and her mother from hard, physical labor and take care of their old age. Tevye, like so many other characters in Sholem Aleichem's stories, often wishes for miraculous riches, a windfall which would come his way without an effort on his part. But he is not a Menakhem Mendl (who is a relative, through Tevye's wife), and the money motif always functions in his thinking as a veil, under which non-financial needs are hidden. Rather than financial insecurity it is his insecurity as a Jewish man that makes him smart. That is why he parades his pseudo-learning, ever spreading his peacock's tail, whether his audience is appreciative or not (mostly it is impatient with him), and that is why he is taken with Arontshik to the point that he unconsciously is conducting a love affair with him through his daughter. Too often does Tevye refer to himself (in the third person) as 'not a woman' ('Tevye iz dokh nisht keyn yidene', But Tevye is not a woman) for the mantra to be convincing. He is throughout his sequel of tales an insecure man and a non-functioning father who does not set limits and who can in no way change the fate

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24. Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye The Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin, Schocken Books, New York 1987, p. 96.



of his beloved daughters. His insecurity paralyzes him. When trouble comes he reacts only when it has already taken its toll and claimed its victim. This is particularly clear in Shprintse's case, where Tevye, half-knowingly, invites trouble and is very much aware of its brewing. He knows it is his task, as a father, to abort his daughter's love affair with the unsuitable young man he himself brought home, but he prefers, first, not to face up to it, and then to relegate the blame to his wife, who should have taken better care of her daughter, or even to God.

Throughout his career Tevye does not evince volition of any kind. The only time he asserts himself is after his daughter Chava's conversion to Christianity. Then, as a good Jew, he severs all ties with her; but this too is a reaction to a *fait accompli*, by which he will not abide when Chava decides to rejoin her family. Even his profession as a dairyman was forced upon him by an auspicious accident. There is only one realm in which Tevye is acting of his free will, and that is the realm of linguistic signification, of using language in all its forms for the purpose of asserting himself and even of forcing himself on others. Tevye's talk is calculated and manipulative. Like other flows of speech in the author's works it exhibits a rotary movement, and is at one and the same time dynamic and static. Relaxed and delectable, studded with funny remarks and exhilarating misquotations and wrong translations (almost all of them intentional, aimed at charming and entertaining the listener), it is nevertheless characterized by the panic of psychic flight: Tevye needs to flee his own sense of impotence. It is enough to read his own description of how instead of taking his sick wife to a doctor, when medicine could still be of help, he attempted to revive her spirits by quotations and hair-splitting arguments in order to realize how clearly aware he is of his inability to do the right thing at the right time. If his self awareness is not sharp enough, his dying wife, who for a long time has had no use for his talk, further sharpens it by cutting him short with a direct question: 'Oh, Tevye, I'm dying. Who'll cook your supper when I'm gone?'<sup>25</sup> to which, being 'no woman', he answers with one more midrash, further refusing to engage in the serious dialogue which poor Golde, for once, is trying to initiate. This and similar refusals, with the sense of guilt they involve, are what Tevye wants to escape, seeking sanctuary in loquacity. At the same time, Tevye is in hot pursuit. He seeks listeners, and especially listeners who, he knows, would enjoy his pseudo-scholastic *bavardage*.

Tevye's wit is simultaneously his narcotic pain killer and his weapon, the net he casts. By telling his tales of disaster in his peculiar comic manner he assuages his own pain by performing the humoristic procedure which Freud described as the withdrawal of 'the psychic accent from the ego', transposing it onto the super-ego, and thus minimizing the ego's suffering and maximizing the ability of the super-ego to play down the ego's concerns. Through this 'new distribution of energy' a defense mechanism is erected aimed at protecting oneself against one's own sense of failure and insufficiency. As Freud said, the humorist celebrated 'the triumph of Narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability'<sup>26</sup>. But for this triumph to take place Tevye needs an appreciative audience, i.e., an audience willing to disregard the horrific aspect of the tale and focus on its aesthetic merits, thus allowing for the sublimation of the painful affect through humor. Tevye's immediate company, particularly the members of his family, do not count as such audience. Being

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25. Ibid. p. 98.

26. Sigmund Freud, 'Humour', *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Trans. James Strachey, The Hogarth Press, London 1975, Vol. XXI, pp. 162-164.

themselves the victims of the tragedies he unfolds, they hardly appreciate the artistic rendering of their travails. They are, in fact, frustrated by and perhaps even disgusted with Tevye's raconteurism, the manipulative and self-serving qualities of which they could not have failed to detect. What Tevye really needs is a literary audience who seeks aesthetic pleasure and who is quite willing to relate humoristically to someone else's troubles. That is why with all his avowed religiosity he seeks not a rabbi or a traditional *lamden* (learned man), but rather a modern, secular writer. The latter, he hopes, would not only listen with pleasure to his tales but actually work them into publishable works of art; for Tevye strives for publication. As much as he warns Sholem Aleichem not to make his shameful defeats known (at least not under his real name), he wants him to do just that, going sometimes as far as demanding for himself a part of the author's honorarium, when the story he tells him is ready for the printer.<sup>27</sup> That is the real contents of Tevye's interaction with the Sholem Aleichem persona, who plays the double role of the catalyst (who by his empathic listening helps Tevye tell his stories) and of the spiritual authority, who, after hearing Tevye's confessions, gives him absolution. The Sholem Aleichem persona gains, through this empathic interaction, the raw material it can sublimate into art. We, the readers, join this pact because it grants us both pleasure and catharsis. We love Tevye both for his vibrant emotionalism, which deeply touches us, and for his comic narrative manner, which counterbalances it, and this love makes us completely oblivious of what Freud exposed as the 'regressive or reactionary'<sup>28</sup> aspect of the otherwise ennobling sense of humor. This obliviousness (which, in theological terms, is the outcome of absolution, the erasure and annulment of sin) is exactly what Tevye, in his calculated way, was trying to achieve. By succumbing to his manipulation we gain pleasure and lose the psychic energy which could have expressed itself in protest and criticism (including self-criticism). Thus the Tevye tales have become Sholem Aleichem's best liked creations: they give so much and demand so little. While the duality Comedy/tragedy clearly manifests itself in them, the underlying drama of hostility usually remains undetected, because Tevye so brilliantly succeeds in repressing his self criticism, in convincing both himself and us that his failure is not as severe as it really is. Tevye's stories are tragic not in the conventional sense of the term, i.e., because the disasters they portray were ordained by an inimical fate or by merciless historical processes, but rather in the sense that Tevye is unable to accept responsibility for them and thus achieve *anagnorisis* (recognition) and catharsis. Tevye's - like Isaac Kumer's in S. Y. Agnon's *Tmol shilshom* (Only Yesterday) - is a new kind of tragedy, one of insufficient consciousness: a tragedy with no recognition leading to a change of heart. The entire rhetorical machinery in Tevye's tales is programmed for the purpose of eliminating a self-knowledge which would approximate a genuine tragic recognition.

By focussing on Menakhem Mendl and Tevye Sholem Aleichem definitely turned toward the possibilities of minor literature in its 'radical' form, i.e., the minor literature which does not strive to grow into an 'alternative' major one by swelling itself up through 'all the resources of symbolism, of oneirism, of esoteric sense, of a hidden signifier'<sup>29</sup> (to use Deleuze and Guattari's description of the way many German Prague writers, with the exception of Kafka, chose; a way which also happened to be chosen by Y. L. Perets for achieving majority for Yiddish writing),

27. See the untranslated letter of Tevye to Sholem Aleikhem, which was published (in 1895) under the title 'Kotonti' (I Am of No Importance!), *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, Vol. I, pp. 9-11.

28. *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI, p. 163.

29. *Kafka - Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 19.

but rather a minor literature which, embracing its minority status, focussed exactly on those of its components or characteristics that were viewed as the origins or causes of its minority, such as: giving up the use of highly developed genres and artistic manners (the well rounded psychological novel with its epic, omniscient, Tolstoyan narrator, or the the *Bildungsroman* of becoming with its sophisticated use of the first person narrator who tells the story of his youth from the vantage point of mature adulthood), hankering back to such 'primitive' forms of recorded speech or letters quoted verbatim, and above all else adhering to the spoken idiom (albeit in an idealized form), insisting on the vernacularity of the language. Dov Sadan, in an essay already mentioned,<sup>30</sup> pointed to all these as indications of Sholem Aleichem's turning his back on 'modernism' and retreating to the early 'foundations' of modern Yiddish literature, i.e., the recited monologue, the epistolary narrative, and comedy. For this generalization to be fully usable we must add to the 'regressive' aspect of Sadan's brilliant diagnosis the complementary progressive one. By retreating toward what could look like the past Sholem Aleichem was actually pushing Yiddish literature toward a modernism (and even post-modernism) no contemporary Yiddishist could even imagine. That included Sholem Aleichem himself, who, in his literary ideology, was very much of his time, while in his artistic practice could be ages ahead of it.

Thus, Sholem Aleichem was writing within the framework of a minor literature not only without the support of a conceptualized notion of such literature, but also in ideological opposition to such a notion, could he have been aware of one. This did not make his task easier, and it may be one of the main reasons for his output being so uneven and inconsistent in terms of both purpose and achievement. At the same time he was not so different in this from other early masters of minor literature before Kafka and Beckett. Interestingly, the only Jewish writers who had a real appreciation for his genius (before the Russian critics forced upon the Yiddishist establishment some recognition of his greatness) were major Hebrew writers such as Kh. N. Bialik and particularly M. Y. Berditshevski. Both were at the time making highly important contributions to the elevation of their own literature to the status of a major one. However, exactly because of that, i.e., because of their Zionist belief that a major Jewish literature could be written only in Hebrew, they could understand and appreciate Sholem Aleichem's usage of Yiddish in a different, and, indeed, a contradictory manner. Berditshevski went so far as to pronounce Sholem Aleichem (as early as 1902, with the publication of monologues such as 'Dos tepl') 'the one and the only writer who knows Yiddish and who has created the Yiddish language'. Sholem Aleichem was to Yiddish, Berditshevski said, what the great medieval commentator (on the Bible and the Talmud) Rashi (Shlomo Yitskhaki) had been to Hebrew<sup>31</sup>. Berditshevski, it seems, did not believe in the relevancy of a Yiddish literature which did not adhere to the spoken idiom and attempted to reinforce it. In other words, he did not believe in a Yiddish literature that was not, by definition, minor. This led him not only to some extraordinarily perceptive remarks about the characteristics of Yiddish writing<sup>32</sup> as well as to a fierce opposition to all attempts to erase the borderlines separating Hebrew literature from its Yiddish counterpart (by writing simultaneously one work in both languages), but also to the writing of his own

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30. See above, note No. 2.

31. See his Yiddish article 'Vider vegn Sholem Aleichem' (On Sholem Aleichem - Once Again), M. Y. Berditshevski, *Yidishe ksovim* (Works in Yiddish), Yikuf, New York 1951, Vol. II, pp. 189-190.

32. See Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised - the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*, Schocken Books, New York 1973, pp. 76-80.

Yiddish works in a tone and manner completely different from those of his Hebrew ones. If anybody was, at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, on the verge of conceiving of a theory of Yiddish literature as a minor literature in the current sense of the term it was M. Y. Berditshevski, who, not surprisingly, was also Sholem Aleichem's greatest admirer and the one who also taught others (such as his disciple Y. Kh. Brenner) to admire Sholem Aleichem for the right reasons.

Bialik and Berditshevski could see what the Yiddish intelligentsia could not because they did not want Yiddish writers to do what they were doing, i. e., producing 'autonomous ethical identity for the [Jewish] subject' in psychological fictions of crisis and change and in lyrical poems containing narratives of national symbolism and transcendence; and, to be sure, Sholem Aleichem was not doing that at all. In *Menakhem Mendl* and *Tevye der milkhiker* he was not producing works of literature which presented Yiddish readers with characters who could unify a universal ideal with ethnic and historical specificity. What could be the 'ethical identity' inspired by a Menakhem Mendl or a Tevye, the first taking leave of reality and responsibility, and the latter hiding his impotence in the face of a catastrophe, behind the well wrought shield of comic narration? Both *Tevye* and *Menakhem Mendl*, lets not forget, were written and published against the backdrop of a nationalist renaissance, the very gist of which was an ardent call for Jewish activism, for shaking the Jewish people out of what was regarded as a long historical torpor or mere 'vegetation', make them face up to historical reality and plunge into its stormy waters. The Tevye tales amounted to a down right negation of this new Jewish ethos, while Menkhem Mendl's letters could be read as a bitter parody of it. As far as this ethos was concerned both works together with the later monologues were in essence anarchistic and disruptive, opposed to any ideology and at the same time manipulating a wide array of ethical norms and values, such as religious *bitokhn*, Jewish learning, the Halakha, Nationalism, Jewish activism, the institution of literature, the concept of a quintessential Jewish art and the value of art in general, etc.. Sholem Aleichem, as much as he paid his debt to the current nationalist ethos which synthesized all these values, also undermined it. If we need to canonize him, we should, therefore, not do it for the wrong reasons, reading *Menakhem Mendl* as a satire (which it is not) and succumbing to Tevye's sentimentalist and manipulative playing with religion and religious icons (such as the Biblical Job). Rather let us confer on Sholem Aleichem's best works the prestige and centrality they deserve by reading these masterpieces as the subversive statements they really were within the context of contemporary Jewish ideology, and still are within the more general context of minor literature, the expression of the marginalized and the excluded.