

SHOLEM ALEICHEM AND THE

ART OF COMMUNICATION

by

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Voices, the sounds of recognizable human speech, are heard in the pages of Sholem Aleichem with such liveliness and authority that they won for him the ultimate literary compliment of being taken for real. One of his admirers, the Hebrew writer, Y. Ch. Brenner, said that Sholem Aleichem was not a folk writer, nor even the folk writer; he had transcended all literary genres to become "the living essence of the folk itself."¹ A generation later, the Soviet Yiddish critic, I. Dobrushin, wrote with much the same enthusiasm that Sholem Aleichem's works were actually "life itself; his works transgress the boundaries separating literature from life."² Sholem Aleichem's characters have been accurate embodiments of the typical Jew and enduring images of the "eternal Jewish fate."³ The truth-to-life of those characters who speak in their own voices and are their own story-tellers has almost obscured the

author who created them.⁴

It is true, of course, that Tevye the dairyman, Menakhem-Mendl the speculator, and Motl the cantor's son are surprisingly "real," as are all the innumerable spell-binders of Sholem Aleichem's repertoire. The authentic vivacity of their speech is one of the main reasons that his characters have remained so popular--even in translation. But the emphasis on their expressive realism has obscured other interesting aspects of the work in which they figure. Sholem Aleichem's stories, filled as they are with monologuists and talkers, have also much to say about the delicate art of communication. Not all speakers are as effective as they are entertaining, and even the juiciest vernacular can be applied to wicked ends. There is no automatic correlation between the quality of a person's discourse and its appropriateness, or its ability to realize its own intended aims.

Sholem Aleichem--or Sholem Rabinovitch, the author who created his fictional counterpart, Sholem Aleichem--was writing during an exceptionally turbulent period of Jewish history. While the idiomatic richness of his speakers conveys the brilliant flavor of East European Jewish civilization, their frequent problems of communication, of understanding others and being understood in turn, suggests the break-up of that civilization, sometimes in gentle stages, sometimes with catastrophic

suddenness. To shift our focus from the "folk-voice" of Sholem Aleichem's characters where it has so often rested, to the effectiveness of that folk-voice in its various manifestations, is to appreciate the full artistry of the author, and the cultural complexities of the society he describes.

Whenever there is a speaker there should also be a listener, if only the implied reader, who has to determine the reliability of the narrative.⁵ This is done, in literature as in life, by assessing the storyteller's character and credibility. Within a cohesive community, where people literally and figuratively "speak the same language," this proper identification depends on good judgment in distinguishing rogues from fools, saints from sinners, those who talk to reveal from those who talk to conceal. In a changing or mobile society, in which people cannot be presumed to share the same assumptions or cultural idiom, identifying the quality of a speaker is considerably more complicated. It is necessary first to understand the social, cultural, and even geographic origins and affiliation of the person before one can properly assess his words. In Sholem Aleichem's world, for example, a Russian speaking Russian to a Jew (because it would have been most natural for him to do so) would be quite different from a Jew speaking Russian to a Jew (because it would have been unnatural for him to do so). Character and motive, in

such situations, lies hidden within the folds of social and cultural identity.

The nature of identification is still more critical when actual danger is involved. As in the animal kingdom, there are moments when discovering the nature of the intruder is not merely a matter of interest, but of ultimate importance, requiring an instinct of self-preservation. The sheep had better know whether it is addressing one of its own kind or a wolf in its own kind of clothing.

The literary world of Sholem Aleichem moves through each of these spheres, the benign, the indeterminate, and the malign. Characters and readers are repeatedly invited to participate in the popular literary sport of recognition, whose aim is the identification--as quickly and accurately as possible--of the real nature of the speaker and his intentions. For the reader it is a matter of fun: the sooner he breaks the code, the longer he can delight in the dramatic irony of his privileged angle of insight and savor the anticipated outcome. For the character in the story, however, it is usually a more serious game. His happiness, prosperity, his sanity, and occasionally his life may depend on his skill in deciphering the signs, the semiotic language. There are clues to be found in physical appearance and dress. But since Sholem Aleichem's characters are known primarily through their voices, it is necessary, above all, to

listen.

In the benign world

Sholem Aleichem's work was thought to represent an intimate linguistic community whose flavorful Yiddish draws vertically from the deep intellectual and folk traditions, and extends horizontally to simulate a quasi-national Jewish territory.⁶ Much of Sholem Aleichem's fiction does indeed reinforce the notion of cultural continuity and cohesion. The monologues of Tevye, to bring but the most obvious example, show a simple folksmentsh, a Jewish villager,⁷ who barely worked himself up to the status of dairyman, entertaining a sophisticated urban writer on many successive occasions. The very first words Tevye is seen to address to Pani Sholem Aleichem, when he learns that the author has "written up" his story, refer to their shared language, and to the oddity of direct communication between two such disparate Jews:

"I am not worthy!" --This is what I should tell you in the language that our patriarch, Jacob, uses in the portion, Vayishlokh, when he sets out against Esau . . . but in case I haven't got it quite right, please forgive me, Pani Sholem Aleichem, because I am just a simple being--you certainly know more than I do--no question about it! In a village you grow coarse; who has the time to look into a book, to study a portion of the Torah with Rashi's commentaries. . . .⁸

Drawing attention to his ignorance, Tevye nonetheless uses and creatively misuses all the more accessible Jewish sources--prayers, psalms, parts of the Bible that are read during the year in synagogue, homiletic books and midrashic stories. Tevye's extraordinary verbal agility, the degree to which he has integrated the full spirit, if only the broken letter of Jewish tradition, stands, as we shall see, against the many social and political forces that are ranged against him. The presence of "Pani Sholem Aleichem" as Tevye's appreciative listener throughout the various Tevye episodes confirms the common culture that these two men share despite the social chasm that divides them.

Of course, even within this cohesive Jewish world of the author's where everyone "speaks the same language," communication sometimes breaks down. When Tevye, for example, is summoned by the well-to-do butcher, Leyzer Wolf, to discuss an important matter, Tevye enters the conversation on the assumption that they are talking about his cow, whereas the butcher is actually in pursuit of Tevye's daughter. This kind of lapse in mutual understanding is a staple of comedy, used here to underscore the different priorities of the two characters.

Sometimes, however, the joke is not quite so funny. Sholem Aleichem has a short story called "Tsugenumen" (Taken) that describes several Jews coming together in

a railway compartment. Two of the men are discussing how many young Jews were "taken" in their particular towns, when a third man breaks in with the remarkable news that in his little town of Pereshtshepene eighteen Jews had recently been taken. The conversation is spirited and homey until, inevitably, they discover what the good reader has known all along; that though they appear to be addressing the same topic, they are sadly estranged. The first two men are hopeful that their children will be among those "taken" into the local gymnasium despite the quotas that discriminated harshly against Jews; the third man is mourning his son's forced conscription into the tsarist army. The story ends in mutual shame:

It was remarkable how these three men suddenly turned into utter strangers. Not only do they not say a word to one another, they don't even look one another in the eye, as though they had committed an ugly crime. . . .⁹

Meeting as Jews, and therefore presumable equals, as their shared language entitles them to do in an otherwise unfriendly train, they are embarrassed to discover that they are not, after all, equal. While the first two are aspiring to social advancement, the third man has already lost his hopes. Against the tsarist repression they are indeed intimately united, but within their subject community, some remain far better off than others.

Here the increasing mobility of the Jews, represented

by the train that has taken them out of their respective shtetlakh, becomes a source of internal divisiveness. The sense of wrongdoing which concludes the story derives from their unspoken awareness that the outside world with its lures of advancement has begun to encroach on their erstwhile unity.

If the train is a sign of Jews on the move, Sholem Aleichem's fictional shtetl of Kasrilevke, which means something like "town of jovial paupers," seems to be a charmingly self-contained unit, soundly fixed in its values and traditions, and unshaken by the unfriendliness and evil that lurk all around it. In many stories it assumes just this role of cultural haven that withstands outside dangers and threats. Yet according to Sholem Aleichem's subtle vision, it is also possible to be too self-contained. The author himself spent most of his life at a considerable remove from the small Jewish towns in which he had been raised, and though he delights in recreating them as wholesome strongholds of faith, he also admits a note of anxiety about their insularity. A community may feed too securely upon itself, drawing back into an ever-narrowing circle. This kind of danger finds its literary representation in his famous monologues.

The monologues are the most admired instances of Sholem Aleichem's juicy "flavorful" Yiddish. They are also, less obviously, examples of total self-isolation. In "The Pot," a housewife comes to the rabbi to ask him

a question, ostensibly about the kosher status of her meat pot into which a drop of milk may have fallen. But so caught up is she in the tangle of her problems that she doubles back into her story again and again, telling a story within a story, until the poor rabbi faints from the onslaught. In a second monologue, a woman sets out to tell a story; she becomes so caught up in the description of who she is and what she does for a living that we never get to hear the story behind the introduction. In a third monologue, a young man comes to the author, Sholem Aleichem, to ask his advice: should he stay with his wife, despite the fact that she appears to be infatuated with the local doctor, or should he leave his wife, despite the fact that he wants her and has no other place to go? No sooner does the author propose one solution than the young man protests Sholem Aleichem's inability to understand the other side of the case. The see-saw continues until the author attempts to strangle the young man in exasperation.¹⁰

A study of these monologues has described them as solipsistic vehicles, "a way of talking about oneself to oneself, the verbal epitome of isolation."¹¹ The monologists are trapped within their own, self-referring consciousness, oblivious to the reaction of the listener with whom they are supposedly making contact. Here the vigor of the speaker's Yiddish does not testify solely to the wholesome vitality of shtetl culture, but to a

subjectivity so extreme that it becomes a form of assault. The comedy of these monologues has its basis in their isolation from the reality they are presumably addressing. Individuals and communities can be too confined; they may indeed stave off the unwelcome influences of the outside, but in doing so they may sink totally into themselves, almost to the point of madness.

In the indeterminate world

The history of modern fiction has its roots in the breakdown of feudal society, when new possibilities of individual mobility were created in a changing social order. The same holds generally true for Yiddish fiction, though at a much later date, and in clearly modified circumstances. Without here attempting an analytic comparison between European and Yiddish fiction, one point of difference is immediately apparent. In an English or French novel, when an Oliver Twist or Julien Sorel tries to find his desired niche in society, the many levels of society within which he moves are all English, or French, respectively. Accents and manners may change from one rung of the ladder to the next, but the component properties of nationality remain constant.

This was not the case in East European Jewish society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Social mobility for the Jew demanded and elicited modifications of language, cultural affiliation,

and often religious conversion. Though there was also a good deal of change going on internally, within the Jewish society,--as enlightenment spread new secular ideas, as the towns emptied into the cities, as the economic consequences of industrialization widened the gulf between the Jewish rich and poor--behind these relatively minor changes lay the more decisive choice between Jewish and Gentile identity. This awareness of the ultimate implications of "mobility" permeates modern Yiddish writing, and always lies very close to the surface of Sholem Aleichem's work.

Returning once again to the Tevye stories, Sholem Aleichem's best known and probably greatest work, we recognize in the nature of communication between the father and his daughters their increasing alienation from his traditionalism, and his mounting opposition to their defection.

With Tsaytl, the eldest daughter, Tevye engages in full-bodied discussions of their differences. Motl, the tailor, her choice over Leyzer-Wolf, the butcher, introduces the language of Russian Positivism with its emphasis on direct production of goods and idealization of manual labor. At first Tevye tries to impose his own traditional Jewish ideals of status, but when he gives way, he argues himself down in the very same words that the young couple had used against him. "So maybe Motl is only a tailor, but at the same time he is a good man,

a worker, he'll be able to make a living. And besides, he's honest, too. So what have I got against him?" The fact that Tevye has no semantic difficulty in understanding this daughter is a sign of their relative cultural proximity.

But with Hodl, the second daughter, the cultural distance grows. From Tevye's first encounter with Feferl, the revolutionary on the road, to the final leave-taking from Hodl when she goes off to join her husband in Siberian exile, there is a gap of understanding that no amount of affection can bridge:

I talked to her about Feferl, and she answered me with the "cause of humanity" and "workers" and other such talk. "What good is your humanity and your workers," I say, "if it's all a secret? There is a proverb: where there are secrets, there is knavery. But tell me the truth now. Where did he go and why?"

"I'll tell you anything," she says, "but not that. Better don't ask. Believe me, you'll find out yourself in good time. You'll hear the news-- . . . maybe soon--and good news at that."

"Amen," I say, "from your mouth into God's ears! But may our enemies understand as little about it as I do."

"That," says she, "is the whole trouble. You'll never understand."

"Why not?" say I. "Is it so complicated? It seems to me that I can understand even more difficult things."

"These things you can't understand with

your brain alone," she says, "you have to feel them, you have to feel them in your heart."

Tevye is certainly not without empathy, but Hodl knows she has moved beyond her father's range of options. No wonder there is such pathos in their leave-taking from one another. It is final not only because father and daughter may not see one another again, but because they no longer bear primary allegiance to a common community or set of values.

The pathos increases in ratio to the threat that each daughter poses. With the third daughter, Chava, all communication is severed. Chava's decision to marry a non-Jew necessitates her conversion to Christianity. At this point, the very act of speaking to his daughter would imply a measure of acceptance that would undermine Tevye's essential being. When he sees his daughter on the road, wanting to explain herself, Tevye, one of the greatest talkers in literature, elects to keep silent as the only possible means of self-preservation.

Throughout these and the later Tevye stories, though the father's communication with his children is increasingly flawed, his own narrative ability is both the instrument and symbol of his authentic resilience.

In dozens of other stories, Sholem Aleichem plays variations on this same theme. Sometimes traditional Jewishness triumphs over its defectors; at other times

it falters; at still other moments it fails. Every time a parent finds it hard to understand his child, the humor is a warning of cultural danger. In the story, "Keyver-oves" (Parental Graves), a father does not understand his daughter's interest in Artzybashev. The only Artse-Bashe's he knows, a local teacher who was blind, has long since died. But the same process of estrangement that causes this mirthful mistake leads to the daughter's suicide. Permeated by the pessimism of the Russian writer, Artsybashev, and unable to sever herself from her parents (because her love for her Russian tutor would "kill" them) she kills herself instead. Her Yiddish suicide note is the sign of her utter resignation to a world she was powerless to leave though unwilling to join.¹³

Elsewhere in Sholem Aleichem's fiction, an indigent father places all his hopes in his brilliant son whom he dubs his "Lottery Ticket." By the time the boy goes off to yeshiva he has already surpassed his father, who cannot even write properly, and must appeal to a more learned neighbour to send his letters. As the son becomes progressively estranged from the shtetl he left behind, the communication between father and son grows clumsy and more opaque. Finally word is sent--in Russian, to the local constabulary--to strike the son's name off the local Jewish rolls. The son's letter explaining his conversion is so ambiguous that the father

needs help in deciphering its message. He is literally the last to know. Ultimately, of course, comprehension dawns: the message is death. The father sits shiva and becomes as silent as he was once garrulous and boastful.¹⁴

The parents who can no longer understand or be understood by their children are only one small symptom of an entire Jewish world in this state of violent transition. In Sholem Aleichem's stories, characters are often on the move, and as they leave the confines of their comprehensible shtetl, they make mistakes of identification. They are like the proverbial country bumpkins, an easy prey for swindlers who use the common idiom of "fellow Jews" to lull them into a false sense of security. The family of Motl, Peysi the cantor's son, is taken in by a woman with a bright red wig, an advertisement of her supposed piety.¹⁵ Sholem Aleichem "himself" is almost picked clean by a jovial Jew sharing his train compartment who tries to lure him into a game of cards by telling him of all the occasions on which he was fleeced.¹⁶ These skilled con-men and women flash the signals of piety and propriety in order to disarm their victims, using the disorientation of Jews in a changing world to ply their ancient, unchanging trade.

In the malign world

Oddly enough, in semiotics, the language of signs,

the most direct threats are the easiest to identify and to confront. At least so it is in the world of Sholem Aleichem. The anti-semitic with his edicts, insults, and pogroms, declares himself hostile, and it only remains to try to outwit or escape him. In the final episode of the Tevye stories, when the neighbors come to throw him off his land, Tevye confounds the peasants with the unpronounceable word, "vekholaklakoyts," which he takes, with characteristic appropriateness, from Psalm XXXV, one of the psalms of distress, that inveighs against the enemy, "Let their way be dark and slippery." Unable to pronounce this word in a challenge that Tevye throws them, his would-be persecutors must let him pack up, undisturbed. This is almost a magical use of language to confound one's foes: because of this verbal victory, Tevye seems to be leaving his village on his own "terms."

The anti-semitic is not a pleasant presence, but the threat he poses has the advantage of being utterly clear. There is a priest in the story, "The Miracle of Hoshano Rabo" who refuses to recognize the real identity of the Jew, Berl Esigmakher, calling him "Moshke" and "Yudke" and other stereotypic Jewish names, and denying him his own. While Berl and the priest are exposed to physical danger, there is no dangerous ambiguity in their relations, and Berl is able to turn the tables on his oppressor.¹⁷ Sholem Aleichem's major work is less an

account of action than of action filtered through speech. Thus acts of interpretation and verbal mastery take precedence over the drama of actual events. In this kind of literary atmosphere the Jew has an even chance, if not the advantage. In Sholem Aleichem's work, Jews repeatedly "win" the situation they were historically losing in fact.

The atmospheres I have here separated into three degrees, benign, indeterminate, and malign, of course coexisted, both in Sholem Aleichem's society, and in his work. Because the process of modernization occurred so rapidly, transitions that would normally have taken place over several generations were here compressed into one; because these changes were accelerated by the repressive measures of the tsarist regime, that had as its goal the virtual elimination of the Jews from Russia, they affected an exceptionally large portion of the population, and affected them deeply. The shtetlakh in which the author grew up were still rooted in a system of order and law that was as firm as it was comprehensive. More than any other writer of his time, Sholem Aleichem appreciated the quality of this civilization that Jews had created on what they were now being made to feel was foreign soil. But his affection made him all the more aware of its precariousness. His characteristic theme is the encounter of the traditional Jew, rich in the language of his culture, with the varying forces that were de-

manding of him new accommodations and a new posture.

The story, "Oylem Habe" (Eternal Life), based on an incident in the author's life, provides a piercing--and very funny--picture of the Jew setting out into the world. In this work, we see only the faint beginnings of the process. The hero is still a sheltered young man who does not go all that far from his original point of departure. Yet in his brief adventure, and particularly in the changing forms of his communication with those around him, we trace the full range and intensity of his required adaptation.¹⁸

This is an initiation story in which a young Jew sets out on his first journey and achieves maturity by painfully mastering a system of languages and signs. Noah, the protagonist of this tale, moves from innocence to experience, learning how to understand each successive aspect of the surrounding world and how (not) to deal with it.

The adult narrator, looking back at his voyage de passage, tells us of the trip from Zvihil to Radomishli that marked his transition to manhood. The occasion for this adventure was a summons to register in his home town of Radomishli for the draft, or for deferment if he could show cause. Noah, who had been selected as a bridegroom by his mother-in-law, and was being maintained according to the dowry system of kest at his in-laws' home, sets out on this first independent journey in a

sled, propped up by three cushions, and accompanied by his mother-in-law's warning that the trip was ill-fated.

The first stretch of the story leads through a forest--the literal forest that often separated towns from one another, and the literary forest, primitive and ominous, where the natural man is unmasked and the flaws of civilization revealed. Noah's driver is a suitable version of the "natural man," a singularly taciturn gentile who responds to his eager attempts at conversation with a dry negative "ba-nee" or affirmative "ehe". Noah wishes he were in more familiar company, with a Jew, lehavdil:

He'd have told me not only where the inn was, but who was the owner, what he was called, how many children he had, how much he had paid for the inn, how much he earned by it, how long he's been there, and whom he had bought it from--he'd have recited me an epic. A strange people. Our Jews, I mean, God bless them.

Afraid of the forest, chilled by the cold and the silence, Noah dreams of at least a touch of the familiar, a wayside inn with a Jew and a samovar. When he comes upon it, however, he gets rather more than he had anticipated. A bereaved innkeeper and his weeping orphans ask Noah to help them bring the dead wife to proper Jewish burial, appealing to his nascent manhood and to the Jewish values they share. In sharpest con-

trast to the stillness of the sleighride, the torrential pleading of the innkeeper has a jarring and uncomfortable effect: "What should I do? What should I do? And what's to be done?" His repeated wails, and promise of "Eternal Life! As I am a Jew, you will win Eternal Life!" sweep up the young man to a dangerous pitch of daring. The cushioned, over-protected, and wholly inexperienced boy undertakes to become a hero, a savior, "ready to move mountains, overturn the world."

In this, the enchantment scene of many a forest tale, the innkeeper-magician works a rhetorical spell over the boy and sends him out on his mission, to bring the dead woman with a message of instruction to the Burial Society of the nearest shtetl. The innkeeper also gives him what is equivalent to a magic formula of safekeeping, namely the dead woman's full Jewish name, Chava-Nechama, daughter of Raphael-Michel. When Noah resumes his wintry journey he repeats the incantation, but as his heroism gives way to panic he begins to garble the terms. He has been distracted from his original, modest goal by an appeal to the noblest of missions, the mythical quest for immortality, in its domesticated Jewish version of eternal life. But as the magical spell of the heightened Jewish rhetoric wears off, the young man turns back into the inexperienced provincial that he is.

The midwinter forest journey reaches its climax in

a heavy snowstorm in which the horse loses its way, the driver his temper, and the boy his last ounce of courage. When horse and driver finally do come through the storm, and discern in the distance a glimmer of light, Noah is overcome with affection for the gentile driver whose every "ehe" and "ba-nee" are now as dear to him as his life. For the first time he asks after the driver's name, and repeats it warmly. The storm in the forest, exposing everyone to the same creature level of existence, has shown the similarity of Jew and gentile, forging a human bond of mutual acceptance. No longer is the driver's taciturnity a hindrance to communication and interaction; its simplicity now connotes qualities of strength and endurance that exert over Noah a special charm.

And then they are in town. This is merely another Jewish shtetl, but since the young hero has just passed through a chastening experience, he sees the familiar in a different light. When Noah is refused help by the first Jew to whom he turns, he feels ashamed before the gentile beside him:

"What," I asked myself, "must he be thinking in that head of his about us Jews? How must we look--we the merciful and sons of the merciful--to peasants like this, coarse and boorish, when one Jew shuts the door against another and won't even let him in to warm himself on a freezing night?" It seemed to me then that our fate, the fate of the Jews,

made sense after all. I began to blame every one of us, as usually happens when one Jew is wronged by another. No outsider can find more withering things to say of us than we ourselves. You can hear bitter epithets among us a thousand times a day. "You want to change the character of a Jew?" "Only a Jew can play such a trick." "You can't trifle with a Jew." And other such expressions. I wonder how it is among the gentiles. When they have a falling out, do they curse the whole tribe?"

The code of the forest, where all men have just been proven brothers, comes into conflict with the code of his own people, leaving Noah in a crisis of doubt. He questions both the nature of group loyalty and its absence. Noah's sympathy for the gentile places him in a more critical relation to his own culture.

As Noah meets one after another of the leading citizens of the "Sodom" among shtetlakh, his anger grows. The good Jews are generous with their solicitude, but offer no assistance. They are particularly unresponsive to Noah's promise of eternal life, which he is prepared to share with them. Instead, since he cannot even remember the woman's name (the formula that would have granted him safety) he is blackmailed by the community into paying heavily for the good deed of burial that was to have brought him such spiritual reward.

Ironically, the strongest contempt for the promise of eternal life comes from the most devout Jew of all,

Reb Shepsel, whom Noah interrupts at prayer. When he first sees Reb Shepsel, wrapped in his prayer shawl and with tears of fervour in his eyes, Noah is delighted by this show of religious ecstasy. As in the case of Mikita, the driver, he is taken in by false appearances. Reb Shepsel's conversation, like Mikita's, is curt and halting, but here it is the studied counterfeit of holiness, not the simple reticence of a holy man. In order not to interrupt his prayers, he motions to Noah and grunts, "I-yo; nu-o?" This broken language, supposedly a means of sustaining the purity of a spiritual moment, is actually a perfect vehicle for hypocritical posturing. Behind the mask of piety, Reb Shepsel's pickings are more plentiful. He who only pays "lip service" to eternal life may plow more fertile the resources of this life.

Penetrating the unfamiliar in the first stage of the journey, Noah recognized the universal language of a common humanity. In this second stage, behind the familiar assumptions, he recognizes the imperfections of his own community, particularly of those who merely pretend to be acting for the sake of heaven.

But the social education of an East European Jew could not be complete without exposure to the source of power and authority--the Chief of Police, or local representative of tsarist might. Here the problems of communication are menacingly direct. By the time the

elders of the Burial Society agree to bury the corpse for a fee, word has gotten around that a rich young stranger is interring his mother-in-law (the subconscious has evidently made its statement) and the crowd of beggars accompanying the funeral procession strips the boy of his last penny. It also attracts the attention of the police and Noah is hauled in for questioning.

The encounter between Noah and authority is predictably disastrous. The form it takes, of abrupt question and defensive answer, is the clearest verbal manifestation of power challenging powerlessness:

"Your name?"
"Moishe."
"Your father's name?"
"Itzko."
"Age?"
"Nineteen."
"Single?"
"Married."
"Children?"
"Children."
"Occupation?"
"Merchant."
"Who is the corpse?"
"My mother-in-law."
"Her name?"
"Yente."
"Her father?"
"Gershon."
"Her age?"
"Forty."
"Cause of death?"

"Fright."

"A fright?"

"Yes, a fright."

"What sort of a fright?" he said, putting down his pen, smoking his cigarette, and glaring at me from head to foot.

Weaving his network of lies, Noah finally stumbles over the truth; he is dying of fright. But there is no room for truth in the strained, unequal relation between the Chief of Police and the Jew, and a single hopelessly honest word triggers his downfall.

When Noah lands in prison, the author sends in an ironic deus ex machina, the boy's mother-in-law, to bail him out. As Sholem Aleichem has so often explained, he does not like unhappy endings. Though this twist of the plot saves the hero, it does not affect the predicament of the story. In the final analysis, the Russian Jew finds himself in a world he is unable to negotiate because no level of language, no system of signs is effective when one party has the power to impose or change them at will.

Having passed then, through the three major stages of instruction, the speaker resolutely concludes, "From then on, when anyone mentions Eternal Life, I run."

The appeal to "heroism" is just too inflated for the psychological reality of a little man like Noah, or for the socio-political reality of the shtetl, threatened by overt aggression and imperfect in itself. Better a

limited approach to survival than aspirations that soar too high and flop too low. The story exposes hypocrisy within the shtetl as a calculated cynicism about its own stated ideals. Noah's flight from "eternal life" is a flight from rhetorical hyperbole to a lower, ironic usage that accepts the gap between human aspirations and human potential. His comedy of quixotic idealism ends with a narrator who "knows his proper place."

This story contains a certain biographical strain. When the young Sholem Rabinovitch brought his wealthy father-in-law to the neighboring town for burial, he was forced to pay a heavy extortion tax to the local Burial Society before he could see the duty through. No doubt some of the story's fire was fueled by that unpleasant memory. It is also likely that the author's travels through Russia in 1904, the year the story was written, dictate its wintry tone and landscape. In the wake of terrible pogroms, and in the grip of great impoverishment, Russian Jewry was then at a bleak impasse, not unlike the hopelessness of Noah through most of the story.

In testing the possibilities of human interaction, Noah, the young hero, ultimately adopts a level of irony that is somewhere between Reb Shepsel's cynical self-interest and his own early inflated idealism. The voice of the adult narrator, who begins his story by admitting, "If I were clever, wouldn't I be rich?"--finds in this

self-deprecating humor the perfect balance between goodness that is unattainable and evil that is inadmissible. This is a way of committing oneself to communicating with the world while shielding oneself from its worst blows. The adult speaker's voice in the story bears an unmistakable resemblance to the literary voice of "Sholem Aleichem" himself.

Sholem Aleichem's will, published immediately after his death in the local Yiddish and English New York newspapers, is often quoted for its democratic sentiment and generosity.¹⁹ Sholem Aleichem asked to be buried among the poor and common folk so that their graves should brighten one another's. Instead of the formal Kaddish of remembrance, he allowed his children and grandchildren to read among themselves one of his stories in whatever language they best understood. He particularly enjoined his children to look after one another, and he left part of his royalties to a fund for his fellow Yiddish writers. But there is also a less frequently remembered clause in the will. While allowing his children whatever religious convictions they may or may not hold, he bids them remain Jews. "Those of my children who cut themselves free from their roots and cross over to another faith have thereby severed themselves from their roots and from their family, and erased themselves from my will, and they shall have no share or portion among their brothers."

Here Sholem Rabinovitch, the celebrated author, places himself within the tradition of his own characters. Having shown himself capable of infinite adjustments, adaptable to geographic, social, economic, political, and cultural upheavals, and able to forge an artistic language that recognizes the common human denominator within arbitrary national distinctions, he stops short, like all the many fathers of his stories, at the point of "conversion," of becoming not a Jew. The process of Jewish modernization, which he so brilliantly interpreted, had, according to his judgment, a distinct cultural limit. Within the process of change, Sholem Aleichem appreciated and developed the art of communication as no Yiddish writer before him or since. This art has an almost infinite range of adjustment, but also recognizes a very finite boundary: in learning how to address others, it is nevertheless necessary to remain oneself.

FOOTNOTES

¹Y. Ch. Brenner, "For Sholem Aleichem" (in Hebrew).

²I. Dobrushin, "Reading Sholem Aleichem" (in Yiddish), Sovetish, 12 (1941) 72-94.

³I. I. Trunk, Tevye un menakhem mendl in yidishn velt-goyrl (Tevye and Menakhem Mendl as Expressions of Eternal Jewish Fate) (New York, 1944).

⁴Dan Miron, Sholem Aleykhem: Person, Persona, Presence (New York, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1972). In tracing the development of the Sholem Aleichem pseudonym, Miron analyses its exact origins and literary functions.

⁵A full discussion of the problem of narrative reliability was introduced by Wayne C. Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago, 1961). My discussion here deals, for the most part, with problems of communication and reliability within the narrative itself, among the characters and the social roles they represent; the reader's role in deciphering the trustworthiness of the narrative is only implied.

⁶Borukh Rivkin, Gruntshtrikhn fun der yidisher literatur in amerike (Characteristics of Yiddish Literature in America) (New York, 1948), p. 15.

⁷Tevye is not a shtetl Jew, as is often mistakenly assumed, but a villager, farther removed from the centre of Jewish communal culture.

⁸Sholem Aleichem, "Kotonti" (I am not worthy), in Gants tevey der milkhiker (The Complete Tevye the Dairyman) in Ale verk fun S. A. (All Works of S. A.) (New York, 1917-1925). 28 volumes. All references are to volumes in this edition.

⁹_____, "Tsugemumen" (Taken) in Ayzenban geshikhtes (Train Stories), Ale verk.

¹⁰_____, Monologn (Monologues), Ale verk.

English translation of "The Pot" by Sacvan Bercovitch in The Best of Sholem Aleichem, ed. Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse (Washington, 1979), pp. 71-81.

¹¹Victor Erlich, "A Note on the Monologue as a Literary Form: Sholem Aleichem's 'Monologn' - a Test Case," For Max Weinreich on his Seventieth Birthday (The Hague, 1964), pp. 44-50.

¹²Sholem Aleichem, "Hodl" in Gants tevey, op. cit. English translation by Frances Butwin, Tevye's Daughters (New York, 1949) pp. 63-64. Most of the Tevye stories, though not all, are included in this volume.

¹³_____, "Keyver oves" (Parental Graves) in Ayzenban-geshikhtes, op. cit. English translation (A Daughter's Grave) by Julius and Frances Butwin, The Old Country (London, 1958), pp. 287-296.

¹⁴_____, "A vigrishne bilet" (The Lottery Ticket) in Oreme un freylekhe (The Poor and Jolly), vol. II, Ale verk. English translation by Julius and Frances Butwin, The Old Country, pp. 239-259.

¹⁵_____, Motl peysi dem khazns (Motl the Cantor's Son), Ale verk. English translation (Adventures of Mottel the Cantor's Son) by Tamara Kahana (New York, 1953).

¹⁶_____, "A zeks un zekhtsik" (A Sixty-Six; Game of Cards) in Ayzenban geshikhtes, op. cit.

¹⁷_____, "Der nes fun hoshano rabo" (The Miracle of Hoshano Rabo) in Ayzenban geshikhtes, op. cit. English translation by Julius and Frances Butwin, The Old Country, pp. 260-269.

¹⁸_____, "Oylem Habe" (Eternal Life) in Oreme un freylekhe, vol. I. English translation by Saul Bellow in A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. Irving Howe and

Eliezer Greenberg (New York, 1954). I have relied on Bellow's translation except where it abbreviates the original.

19 _____, Last will, dated September 19, 1915, New York (in Yiddish). Reprinted in Tsum ondenk fun Sholem Aleykhem (In Memory of Sholem Aleichem), ed. Sh. Niger and Y. Tsinberg, (Petersburg, 1918), pp. 13-15.

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