

The Yoke of the Jew: Becoming Sholem Aleichem

On the night of September 22-23, 1912, Franz Kafka--who at age 29 was still living with his parents--wrote the story "Das Urteil"--The Judgment--at a single sitting from ten o'clock at night to six o'clock in the morning. Kafka's extended diary entries about this literary breakthrough demonstrate how the ecstasy of writing may prevail over the breakdown that it records. "The Judgment" dramatizes the deteriorating relations between Georg Bendemann and his father, to the point that the father finally sentences his son to death by drowning, and the son complies by throwing himself over the nearby bridge into the river. Kafka was careful to note the connections he recognized between himself and the young man in the story. Yet upon finishing the story, he felt "The fearful strain and joy, how the story developed before me, as if I was advancing over water [advancing over water, not drowning in it]...Only *in this way* can writing be done, only with such coherence, with such a complete opening out of the body and the soul." (p. 276 Diaries) At dawn he read the story to his sister, and exulted in having produced something "beautiful" for his friend Max Brod's forthcoming literary anthology. Acknowledging that he had Freud on his mind, he was obviously thrilled with his *Verkehr*--the ambiguous term with which the story concludes. *In diesem Augenblick ging über die Brücke ein geradezu unendlicher Verkehr*. *Verkehr* is usually translated as "traffic" (At this moment there just happened to pass over the bridge an unending stream of traffic), but in writing to his friend Max Brod about the story, Kafka hinted at another of its meanings, sexual intercourse: The triumphant energy of composition, or the ejaculation of the story, trumped the act of submission that it registered. Indeed, the

literary work seems to have drawn its power from having produced so successful and witty an account of defeat.

In 1886--according to its author, also in a single night--the 27 year old Sholem Aleichem, who was by then already a husband and twice a father, wrote the story "Dos meserl" (The Penknife), the first fruit of his fiction that he chose to include in his collected works. "The Penknife" is likewise a story about the troubled relations between son and father, triggered by the child's desire to own something halfway between weapon and toy. In pre-Freudian Russia, the suggestiveness of "penknife" may not have struck readers as forcefully as it does today to connote the sexual rivalry and aggression implicit in the boy's desire for this instrument. From a present day perspective, the stories of Kafka and Sholem Aleichem appear strangely alike in their nocturnal, guilt-haunted atmosphere, their common preoccupation with illness and death, and their confessional nature. Each turns filial submission into literary triumph.

The late Khone Shmeruk's notes on "Dos meserl" for what was supposed to be a complete variorum edition of Sholem Aleichem's works trace the literary history of this story from its first publication in 1887 through its final iteration as the first among Sholem Aleichem's *Mayses far yidishe kinder* (Stories for Jewish children). The original version, which antedated the concept of children's literature in Yiddish, was bleaker and harsher than the revised version of 1903, though the plot remained essentially the same: The adult narrator relates that as a child, he wanted a pen-knife more desperately than anything in the world, but each time he tried to acquire even the likeness of one, his father got rid of it, angrily charging him to study instead of wasting his time on foolishness. Reinforcing this adamant message is the sadistic teacher who imposes in

cheder an even narrower regimen than exists at home. After a year, the boy has just about given up his desire when the household is suddenly enlarged by the presence of a well-to-do boarder, a clean-shaven Jew with the too-good-to-be-true name, Hertz Hertenhertz (Heart Hartenheart). This gentleman's penknife, left in full view, tempts the boy into theft. At first he exults in his possession, but having to keep it hidden, he is increasingly prey to the compound guilt of lying and theft. The boy is ultimately undone by his conscience and drops his ill-gotten gain into the well by the light of the all-seeing moon. When a fellow pupil is then subjected to a shaming ceremony in cheder for having ^{extracted} ~~taken~~ some coins from his mother's charity box, ^{over her} ~~he~~ is shaken to the core by the "trial" and punishment of his schoolmate, and falls so ill that his recovery two weeks later is taken as resurrection of the dead.¹

"Nu my son," says the father, sending him off to the care of a kindlier teacher, "now go back to cheder and clear your mind of penknives and other such foolishness. *Shoy'n tsayt zolst shoy'n onheybn vern a shtikl mentsh. Iber a yor im yirtseh hashem verstu shoy'n bar mitzvah, tsu hundert un tsvantsik yor!*"

The narrator concludes:

With these sweet words father sends me to the new teacher, Haim Naftoli "the handcuffed," (so named because he had been brought from Lithuania in chains because of some matter of a passport). This is the first time I hear such kind words from my angry father, and in a split second I forget all his punishments and forgive him completely. I take the *gemore* and go off to cheder with a pure, light heart, with a clear head, with bright, fresh thoughts, and a great, a great world still stretching before me.

¹ In the final version the sequence of shaming and dropping the penknife into the well are reversed.

The cathartic illness has turned the child into a young adult, expanded his father's sympathies for him, and made allies of ^{these} former adversaries: the clear world the boy is entering is his own version of the one his father bequeaths him. The transformation (no more sudden than Georg's decision to jump into the river) anticipates the narrator who has apparently by the time he recounts this story grown up into a *shtikl mentsh*.

Can one imagine Kafka turning "*Das Urteil*" into a children's story? ^{yet} When it came time to translate "*Dos meserl*" into Hebrew and include it in a collection of his work, Sholem Aleichem had no qualms about trimming it to the gentler requirements of the new genre of children's literature. He opened the new version with one of his trademark salutations--"Listen, Jewish children (or Children of Israel), and I'll tell you a story..." removed an aside to his "brother readers" who had presumably experienced an upbringing just like his own, and toned down the harshness of some of the characters. In this altered version, the boy goes off to his new school clutching his *gemorah*, promising himself "never to steal, never, never to lie, always to be honest, *tomid zayn an erlikher, an erlikher, an erlikher...*" This new conclusion would seem to reinforce the epigraph that was added to the story, "*Loy signoyv*—Thou shalt not steal (From the Ten Commandments)."

But epigraph notwithstanding, this story could never have worked as a homily about the eighth commandment, since its enforcers are an angry parent and a brutal teacher who are trying to steal his childhood from the child. The punishment meted out to the "thief" in the schoolroom by a teacher nicknamed *gazlen* (robber) in one version and "Angel of Death" in the other frightens its witness almost to the point of death. It is they, the adult authorities, who force the child's innocent desire into a crooked path. The story

seems more obviously a Maskilic [Jewish Enlightenment] protest against the crippling effects of traditional Jewish education on the child's innocent nature. Clean-shaven Hertenhertz is the counterpart of Goodheart in an earlier novella by Mendele Mocher Sforim, who rehabilitates an errant boy through the kindness of his instruction.

Thus, Sholem Aleichem's adult narrator describes how, as a child, he began to doubt his teacher's condemnation of modern Jews like Hertenhertz:

At first, I could not understand how he continues to live. Why does God tolerate his existence? How come he doesn't choke on his food? ... From the teacher Moti "Angel of Death" I learned that this German Jew was a *gilgul*, that is, a Jew metamorphosed into a German who may later keep changing into a wolf, a cow, a horse, or even a duck...into a duck?

The absurdity of this *gilgul* explanation triggers the boy's skepticism which eventually turns him into the enlightened adult author of this reminiscence.

Yet, "*Dos meserl*" was never an endorsement of Enlightenment either. The name Hertz Hertenhertz caricatures rather than corresponds to "Goodheart," and in the first version of the story Hertenhertz is in the habit of pinching the maid's bottom, which hardly inspires confidence in his civility. This lecherous *daytsh* does nothing positive for the boy beyond providing the opportunity for his theft, and fails to recognize what is going on in the household. The boy giggles at the German's speech, drawing attention to its artificial presence in the Yiddish-speaking home. Moreover, our narrator is troubled by the way his father defers to Hertenhertz, as if resenting how the interloper with his Germanized Yiddish challenges his parent's homespun authority. The whole episode of

the westernized lodger recalls the painful point of Sholem Rabinovitch's biography, when his formerly well-to-do parents were running an inn and having to wait on their guests.

In fact, this story is in some ways a *revisionist* treatment of the standard Maskilic protest against Jewish miseducation. Although the boy's legitimate desires are wrongfully suppressed, the story does not want to liberate him at the expense of his father's authority. The boy collapses not because his needs are denied, but because he cannot satisfy them within tolerable bounds. The penknife so casually made available to him by Hertzenhertz sets him on a collision course with his parental home. Sholem Aleichem revises the standard narrative of the sons banished (or self-banished) from their father's table, and explicitly sidelines the Enlightener so as to effect reconciliation directly between father and son.

Returning briefly to Kafka's story, "Das Urteil," when Georg Bendemann drops in on his father in his darkened bedroom on the fateful Sunday morning, he is all solicitude for his apparently feeble parent. Reproaching himself for earlier neglect, he carries his father to bed in his arms, and covers him up, even "[drawing] the blankets farther than usual over his shoulders." But as Georg tries to make his father comfortable, the old man accuses his son of wanting him dead. The father mocks Georg's impending marriage, threatens to steal his fiancée away from him, and claims to be carrying on a correspondence with Georg's friend in Russia behind his son's back. "I am still much the stronger of us two," he crows. "All by myself I might have had to give way, but your mother has given me so much of her strength that I've established a fine connection with your friend and I have your customers in my pocket!" Upending the Oedipal scenario,

Georg is outwitted, deceived, and outmanned. "So you've been lying in wait for me!" he cries in defeat, fleeing headlong toward the river.

Georg Bendemann lacks the hard-won strength of his father who fought his way to respectability. Kafka blamed his father's inauthenticity for the failed connection between them:

It was...impossible to make a child, overacutely observant from sheer nervousness, understand that the few flimsy gestures you performed in the name of Judaism, and with an indifference in keeping with the flimsiness, could have any higher meaning. For you they had meaning as little souvenirs of earlier times, and that was why you wanted to pass them on to me, but since they no longer had any intrinsic value even for you, you could do this only through persuasion or threat: on the one hand, this could not be successful, and on the other, it had to make you very angry with me on account of my apparent obstinacy, since you did not recognize the weakness of your position in this.

Franz Kafka and his character George Bendemann are alike in feeling that their fathers' potency has left them weaker, that they are unable or unwilling to join the society that their fathers brought them into.

Sholem Rabinovitch's situation was just the reverse; the Jewish father of "*Dos meserl*" is sick for real, greatly complicating the boy's rebellion. "I was accustomed to seeing my father always angry, irritated and always pale...He may have been suffering from some kind of illness, or maybe his business affairs were not going as well as he would have wished...I remember him always either angry or in distress." This passing explanation of the father's condition becomes a full-blown motif of the revised version,

where the father coughs every time he ventures to speak. “What’s that...you’ve got there?... khe khe khe,” he challenges his son over the first make-believe pen-knife. “Look how he’s bloodied himself, your precious kaddish, khe-khe-khe!” he taunts his wife when the boy improvises a pen-knife from a piece of metal boning in her corset. A page later, “Father sits, with a yarmulke on his head, studying and coughing, coughing and studying.” When the boy finally secures a pen-knife in a schoolyard swap, the father shouts, ‘What a snot of a boy!...khe khe khe-khe! Would it hurt you to pick up a book? An eight year old boy! I’ll give you pen-knives, you empty-headed rascal!...khe-khe-khe!...’ So it goes, until finally, after the boy’s recovery, the much-softened father expresses the hope that his son will reach bar mitzvah and live to a hundred and twenty—“khe, khe khe.” That cough was not contrived: father was ill, and father’s world was going under. The boy’s guilt over the theft may have been the more debilitating because it included the suppressed wish to rid himself of the sick father. Although the boy beats the father at his own game of illness, engendering more fear and guilt in the parent than the parent had instilled in him, he comes to realize that release from the father’s authority would have set him freer than he ever wanted to be.

In real life, it was Sholem Rabinovitch’s mother who died shortly after his bar mitzvah, effectively ending his childhood. Though he had reason to blame his father for hastily remarrying and bringing into the home a stepmother straight out of Grimm’s fairy tales who made room for her own children by driving out her predecessor’s, he seems to have sublimated his sense of loss in concern for his father’s fragility rather than his own. He felt he was his father’s favorite child and the repository of his literary ambitions, but this election meant that he was expected to grow up all the faster in order to look after his

siblings. And so he did. When Nahum Rabinovitch died at age 58--the same age as *his* father--he made Sholem his sole heir from among over a dozen children, saddling him with the responsibility for his brothers and sisters, step-mother, and step-siblings he scarcely knew.²

For you, my beloved son, I prepare a few words before taking my final leave of you, because God has graced you with a full measure more wisdom and knowledge than all your brothers.

What shall I tell you, my beloved son? What do I know that you do not? Therefore, my dear son, continue with your strength on the path you have paved for yourself, but let pure and refined Jewishness as *you* understand it be carved on the tablet of your heart and may it guide you in the paths of righteousness all the days of your destined time on earth.³

Here the father (unlike Bendemann's) ascribes great strength to *his son*, entrusts his legacy to the Joseph among his children, and defers to his son's sense of what it means to be a Jew. Sholem's decision to write in Yiddish rather than in Hebrew as his father might have preferred was one of the ways in which he took Jewishness in his own direction and in a way that his father quickly came to admire. When it came to writing his own will, Sholem Aleichem (who died at age 57) relayed almost the identical message of Jewish transmission to his children, minus the singling out of a designated heir. Jewishness is the legacy of the father to the child, the child's inheritance from the father, and the only non-negotiable family bond.

² Sholem Aleichem's son-in-law and literary executor I.D. Bercovitch reports that Sholem Aleichem kept in his drawer in a special black-rimmed envelope containing Nahum Rabinovitch's Hebrew will which his son translated into both Russian and Yiddish:

³ Sholem Aleichem buk 33-34.

Written the year before his father's death, "The Penknife" proved the artistic breakthrough for Sholem Aleichem that "The Judgment" was for Kafka, casting up in dreamlike fashion the dramatis personae of his mature art—the spirited child who submits to the authority of the weakened father, voluntarily, without forfeiting his liberated spirit. Sigmund Freud could have been defining Sholem Aleichem when he described the original situation in humor as one in which a man adopts a humorous attitude toward himself in order to ward off possible suffering. Freud writes, "Is there any sense in saying that someone is treating himself like a child and is at the same time playing the part of the superior adult in relation to this child?"⁴ In this story Sholem Aleichem shows how it was both necessary and possible for a man to play the part of the superior adult in relation to the child—necessary because the father was too weak to enforce his authority, and possible because the father's weakness left the child simultaneously burdened and free.

The Child

Few writers have managed to keep faith with the child in the process of becoming an adult more completely than the Sholem who metamorphosed from Rabinovitch to Aleichem. The emergence of the new genre of children's literature perfectly suited his need to keep summoning up childhood as a way of momentarily bringing its sovereign selfhood back to life. Love, envy, happiness, yearning--the child is extreme in his affections and desires, whether for a new suit for Passover, a flag for Simchas Torah, or the freedom to frolic with a calf.

From "The Dreydl":

⁴ "Humor" Collected Papers, vol. 5 (218)

More than all my friends in cheder, more than all the boys in town, and more than all the people in the whole world—I loved my friend Benny Meir Polkovoy's. This was a kind of love of strange attachment and fear combined. I loved him because he was handsomer and smarter and abler than all the boys, and because he was loyal to me and stood up for me, fending off all the boys who had it in for me. And I feared him because he was big and got into fights.

From "Hannukah Money"

Can you guess, children, which is the best of all holidays? Hannukah of course. You don't go to cheder for eight days in a row, you eat latkes fried in ~~chocken fat~~ ^{shmatz} spin your dreidl to your heart's content, and from all sides Hannukah money comes pouring in. What holiday could be better than that?

From "At King Ahasuerus's":

When I was a small boy, do you know whom I envied? Ahasuerus. Not the Ahasuerus who ruled from India to Ethiopia, over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, but the tailor with the gilded crown, the one with the paper hat and the long yellow broomstick.

From *Motl Peysi the Cantor's Son*

I'll bet you anything that no one felt as good in the warm, bright days after Passover as me and the neighbors' calf Menye. By me I mean Motl, Peysi the cantor's son. Menye was the name I gave the calf.

While the adults in all these stories tend to deride or dampen the child's enthusiasms, the narrator exults in his boyhood passions, and laments the inevitable loss or sacrifice of them. ~~Occasionally, the fictional child wants what the adult artist has attained.~~

In "*Afn fidl*" (1902) a boy slightly older than the one in "*Dos meserl*" undergoes an almost identical experience of desiring, being deprived of, and tempering his desire. The implied author is called Sholem Nahum Vevik's, heightening the story's personal aspect.

Today, children, I'll play you something on the fiddle. It seems to me that there is nothing better or lovelier than being able to play the fiddle. I don't know about you, but as for me, as far back as I can remember I was dying to have a fiddle and I loved musicians above everything else in life.

The boy is determined to have an instrument, in this case a fiddle rather than a knife. He, too, when thwarted in his ambition by the father at home and the teacher at school, tries to make a primitive version of the object, in this case, from a warped piece of an old sofa. The would-be violinist looks for musical instruction among a family of musicians, then from a Gentile retired colonel who lives on the outskirts of town, in each case offending his father's sense of respectability, since a clever Jewish boy of good stock should not be fraternizing with riffraff or visiting goyim on Saturday afternoons. Inevitably, the creative passions of the boy come into conflict with the demands of Jewish propriety. When the boy's engagement is arranged, and to a bride of his liking, he gains new status as a budding householder, but you can't have it all--he is caught sneaking to his music lessons, the engagement is broken, and he feels the full brunt of his parents' shame. Once again, to win back his parent's approval he surrenders the instrument he has tried so valiantly to master.

This later version of the plot of "*Dos meserl*" is more comforting in its resolution, since the narrator "who will play you something on the fiddle" has become something of

a musician after all. If “I’ll play you something on the fiddle” is merely a metaphoric way of saying, “I’ll tell you a story,” then fiddling may have been all along only a metaphor for creative self-expression. And if the narrator is merely being ironic at his own expense, then he has mastered the art of Sholem Aleichem, which means outgrowing childhood without smothering its playful spirit. The child has apparently preserved the right to fiddle—but why then did he give it up in the first place?

More [my father] could not say because his voice became choked with tears and he was seized by a fit of coughing. This was the first time in my life that I had seen my father cry. My heart ached and my soul went out to him. I stood staring out the window, swallowing tears. How I regretted the trouble I had caused!

In that moment I reproached myself with all my heart and swore to myself never, never to anger my father, never to cause him grief, never, never. No more fiddle!

Did I neglect to say that the chronic cough of “*Dos meser!*” has by this time weakened the father’s heart? The narrator here makes the connection explicit between surrendering the fiddle and refusing to hasten his father’s death. The reader who sees no essential conflict between playing the violin and being a good Jew may protest that such a choice was forced on the child by an unnecessarily restrictive set of expectations. The narrator has evidently come to this conclusion himself, since he purports to be enjoying the instrument that he once surrendered. But the later balancing act of the mature humorist cannot retroactively change the point at which the Jewish boy became a man. That point assuredly *did* require the sacrifice of whatever childhood may have meant to the child.

The older Sholem Aleichem grew, the more freedom he claimed for the child in his fiction, ridding Motl — the last of his major heroes--of the weight of *his* ailing father the cantor. “*Mir iz gut, ikh bin a yosem*” may be the most seditious slogan in modern Jewish culture, implying that civilization is possible without its discontents, without guilt, without sacrifice—all gain, no pain. Dan Miron has noted how Motl hardly ages, never reaching the frontier of guilt, unlike the protagonist of “*Afn fidl*” whose responsibility to a still living father propels his submission at age thirteen. Motl is spared the guilt of Sholem Nahum Vevik’s because he loses his father preemptively. The father dies before the child must submit to his authority. There may have been an inverse relation between how much Sholem Aleichem the author felt he had to bear ^{and} the liberties he afforded his child here. The harder things became for him and for the embattled Jewish public, the more carefree Sholem Aleichem made the child.

At the same time, the child was father to the man—not merely in the sense that Wordsworth conceived it, but father to the man who became a father in an unbroken chain of national transmission. One of the problems of literature in a time of revolution is the reluctance of sons to take on the burdens of fathers—in art as in life. Among the masterpieces of modern Jewish literature, from Feieryberg through Bialik, Kafka through Appelfeld, Ab Cahan through Philip Roth, restive sons greatly outnumber sober fathers. Sholem Aleichem is unusual in providing, alongside the eternally adolescent Menahem-Mendl, as many responsible fathers as rebellious children—and as much cultural and moral stability as art can bear. Treating himself as a child enabled him to assume as well the literary responsibilities of an adult who is so mature that he can muster sympathy and understanding for wide-ranging deviance. One is repeatedly surprised by the generosity

of Sholem Aleichem's humor. Some of his characters stretch generosity beyond the point where we may wish it to go—Reb Yosifl, for instance, who assumes the guilt for the sinners in his community. Slapped across the cheek by an irate contractor whom he has come to ask for a donation, Reb Yozifl says, “That was for me. And now what will you give for the *moyshev zkeynim*?” Reb Yozifl's temperance conciliates the contractor as Sholem Aleichem may have hoped his humor would conciliate every kind of Jew.

Yet there are exceptions to Sholem Aleichem's generosity. The catalyst for this paper, at least as far as I can reconstruct my own thinking, was not the father-son connection that became its topic, but a story so nasty that I had trouble understanding how it fit into the rest of the author's work. On the whole, Sholem Aleichem's humor seems to me almost preternaturally kindly in its treatment of even its scoundrels. Kivke the blackmailer in the story, “Baranovitch Station,” Dodi the Tavernkeeper in “The Enchanted Tailor,” Ivan Poperrille the county official who gives Tevye his marching orders, come off not much less humorously than the poor souls they drive to distraction or off their land. The exceptions to the humorist's encompassing sympathies are Jews who ^{remove} ~~exclude~~ themselves from the community. Mockers are mocked, and rejecters rejected. No one fares worse than the son who thinks himself too good for the Jewish father.

“Der tsender,” (The tenth man) of 1910, situated as penultimate among the railroad stories, is one of the meanest of Sholem Aleichem's stories. It opens in standard fashion and strings together three jokes on the way to nailing its target.

There were nine of us in the car. Nine Jews. And we needed a tenth for a prayer group.

In fact, there was a tenth person there. We just couldn't make up our minds if he was a Jew or a Christian. An uncommunicative individual with a gold pince-nez, a freckled face, and no beard. A Jewish nose but an oddly twirled, un-Jewish mustache...From the start he had kept his distance from us. Most of the time he just looked out the window and whistled. Naturally, he was hatless, and a Russian newspaper lay across his knees.

The narrator plays around for a bit with the riddle of the stranger's identity, but the exigent need to know sobers up the story. A minyan is needed for a mourner who must say kaddish on a *yortsayt*—and no ordinary *yortsayt*--the *yortsayt* for a son. The son had been hanged as a revolutionary in a trial the father swears was rigged. The mother had died of grief. The father shows the effects of his losses.

While his eyes were young, his hair was gray. His heavily lined face seemed on the verge of either laughter or tears. There was in fact something strange about his whole appearance. He was wearing a smoking jacket that was much too long for him, the hat he had on was pushed way back on his head, and the beard on his chin was an oddly rounded goatee. And those eyes of his...ah, those eyes! They were the kind that once you've seen you'll never ever forget: half-laughing and half-crying they were, or half-crying and half-laughing...if only he would unburden himself and let the tears out! But no, he insisted on being the very soul of gaiety. A most peculiar fellow.

So we have two passengers who are hard to make out, one at the tragicomic heart of Jewish experience and the other whistling at its margins. The problem posed by the plot is very simple—can the father get this young man to join the minyan? Will a son of his

people allow himself to be counted in to help compensate—however ritualistically—for the Jewish son who has been permanently counted out? In the terms of the story, the tenth man can either help alleviate the father’s pain or exacerbate it. What he says is, “*On mir!*” namely, Count me out!

The bereaved father does not appear to take this rejection too badly, telling the young man that he deserves a gold medal. When the young man asks why, the father promises an answer in return for allowing himself to be counted in as the tenth. This is the kind of bargain Hershele Ostropolier is wont to make when he is refused a hand-out, for instance, promising the unwilling donor that wealth that will remain in the family generation after generation, and demanding that his palm first be greased when he is asked to account for this splendid prediction. So too, the bereaved father requires that the young man first join the minyan in order to learn why he deserves a gold medal. The bereaved father then leads an “afternoon service to remember,” with a kaddish that could have moved a stone.

The explanation Hershele offers his mark once the money has crossed his palm is as rude as he can make it:

Say a pauper enters a privy and, if you will pardon me, accidentally drops a penny into the shit. Would he stoop down to retrieve it? Poor as he is, he’d most likely forfeit the money, wouldn’t he? The same goes for a workingman who would drop in a dime, or for a wealthy man who would let fall a dollar. Of God it is said, All the silver is mine and the gold is mine (Haggai 2:8) So having dropped a pile of money into you, would he risk the filth involved in trying to retrieve it?

The bereaved father in the Sholem Aleichem story is crueler than Ostropolier. For one thing, he renders his insult in public. For another, he draws out the torture, telling three stories in place of one, one about a coachman who saves the day because happens to be a Jew, a second about a goy who prevents a fire on the Sabbath because he is not a Jew, and a third about the only son of a rabbi who escapes the draft because he has open sores on his head. “And now tell me, my dear young friend, do you understand your true worth? You were born a Jew, you’ll soon be a goy, and you’re quite a running sore already. Don’t you think you deserve a gold medal?” The bereaved father’s revenge is a dish served cold, making the narrator’s tag line almost redundant: “At the very next station our tenth man slipped away.”

It was this story--too contrived to be amusing, more appropriate for Hershele Ostropolier than for Sholem Aleichem—that set me to thinking about his approach to fathers and sons. The young man with the pince-nez is the antitype of the boy who gave up knife and fiddle to reassure the father that his legacy would be maintained. When asked why he will not join the minyan, the whistler explains, “I am a Jew. I just don’t happen to believe in such things.” One may ask, what’s wrong with that? Should a person not stand on his principles? If he does not believe in God, should he dishonor his intellect—and perhaps the act of prayer itself—by faking the act? One can understand that the father in the story might resent the recalcitrant Jew, but why does ~~Sholem~~^{the author} ~~Aleichem~~ take the father’s side? If his child-heroes are entitled to challenge the adult Jewish world, why not the young man?

Nor is this the only case of its kind. In the opening episode of what became the *Railroad Stories* an argument breaks out in a crowded train car over the plight of a

peddler between “a thick bass voice” and an “intellectual-looking young man with party cheeks, a yellow pointed beard, and [the obligatory] pince-nez on his nose.” The thick bass attacks the way Jews make a living and the intellectual defends it, but when the older man begins to take up a collection for the peddler woman the younger man refuses to contribute.

“I’m not giving,” said our intellectual.

“Why not?”

“Because. It’s a matter of principle with me.”

“You didn’t have to tell me that.”

“Why not?”

“Because *vedno’ pana po kholavakh*—[you can tell a squire by his boots] that means, according to Rashi, that you can tell a rotten apple by its peel.”

Here, too, the fatherly Jew gets the better of the intellectual whose crime seems to be that he stands on principle. As it happens, the thick bass has his ideas, too. He is critical of the Jewish economy, yet he literally takes off his hat and passes it around to help a fellow Jew in need. The Sholem Aleichem villain is the intellectual who puts his ideas ahead of familial obligations, the child who has never learned to subordinate its cleverness, creativity, and desires to the needs of the community.

Childhood is precious to Sholem Aleichem *because* it yields to the exigent needs of a Jewishness that is beleaguered and fragile and in need of its children’s loyalty and support. Childhood has to be celebrated *because* it ends at bar mitzvah age and the rest of life is filled with the business of caring for others. The Sholem Aleichem child inherits Pesach and Purim and Hanukah, and languages and traditions, and along with all this the

expectation that he will grow into an upstanding celebrant of said holidays and writer in said languages and keeper of said traditions, while accepting his share of disappointment, challenges to faith, crippling restrictions, and onerous duties that come with being a Jew. The Sholem Aleichem son transforms *khe khe khe* into *khi khi khi*—illness into laughter that soothes if it cannot heal—out of the knowledge that the child is father to the man who must in short order become a Jewish father. Sholem Aleichem has no patience with the rotten apple, with the running sore—with the guy in pretentious glasses whose “principles” exacerbate Jewish grief.

What Sholem Aleichem called laughter through tears Freud called civilization and its discontents, Nahum Vevik’s called Jewishness “as you understand it, carved on the tablets of your heart.” This did not imply standardization, but it did require submission to standards—standards one might easily resent and try to escape. If Sholem Aleichem understood the bereaved father in the train compartment, he also appreciated what drove away the wicked son. Precisely because he knew what it cost to bear the burdens of a Jew, Sholem Aleichem had no sympathy to spare for those who justified their defection by appeal to a “principle.” A blackmailer he could smile at. An enemy he was prepared to confront. The intellectuals who advertised their superiority he wanted to squash.

It is in reading Sholem Aleichem, of all things, that I am most reminded of T.S. Eliot’s essay on Tradition and the Individual Talent that left me untouched when I first read it as a student. Eliot writes, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.” Eliot posits an aesthetic-historical continuum that we call “tradition,” but adds that this tradition is not one-sided: “what happens when a new work of art is

created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it.” In this view, the past is altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. Kafka, who envied the cultural intimacy of Yiddish, made me better appreciate how Sholem Aleichem forged that cultural intimacy.

Kafka wrote out of a sense of deprivation, and it may be that he directed at his father some of the resentment he felt as a writer in German. The Jewish writer in the German language may have felt permanently disadvantaged and outmaneuvered by its Gentile authors who seemed to have an inside track that he, as literary parvenu, would always lack. Perhaps Kafka blamed his parvenu father for condemning him to live as a writer under a state of permanent suspicion. Georg Bendemann feels sentenced to death by an authority that enjoys belittling him.

Sholem Aleichem inherited from the Haskalah a no less substantive sense of abuse and deprivation. He was engulfed by a culture of protest that expanded and diversified with each passing year. What seems to have held him back was the “ailing father,” or perhaps he attributed to the father’s weakness his unwillingness to quit the intimate world where he could remain a favored son. He, too, may have attributed to his father responsibility for his literary predicament, which happened to be the opposite of Kafka’s—consignment to a community of exceptional intimacy, impossible to escape without a feeling of betrayal. The genius of each writer was to exploit the ~~limitations of~~ alienation ^{of situation} ~~in one case and potential~~ solipsism ^{of} ~~in~~ the other.

The main difference between the two signature stories with which I began is that the protagonist of one drowns himself, while the protagonist of the other drowns the weapon of cultural patricide. I am not prepared to say that Sholem Aleichem perceived the dangers represented by the *daytsh*, but reading him in the light of Kafka casts the boy’s submission to parental authority in a clearer light.