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### Reading and writing Tevye's story

Throughout *Tevye the Dairyman*, the central character, Tevye addresses himself to Sholem Aleichem, the author of his story. In speaking to Sholem Aleichem, Tevye acknowledges his own position as a potential character in a book, and therefore creates himself as a text. At the same time as he defines himself as a text, Tevye constructs the author of this text by the way in which he speaks to Sholem Aleichem. Tevye's awareness of himself as the object of another's text coupled with his construction of his own author raises the question of how he conceives of text and of the place of the author and reader in this conception.

We can begin to understand Tevye's relationship to his own text by examining the way in which he relates to external texts, specifically the traditional Jewish sources to which he continually refers. Tevye's speech consists of a constant interweaving of quotations from Jewish text with commentary on these quotations and on the events of his life. To a large extent, Tevye defines himself by his ability to cite Jewish text. He repeatedly refers to his penchant for quotation as differentiating him from others. In describing his conversations with Ahronchik, the young man whom Tevye takes under his wing, and who eventually falls in love with Tevye's daughter, Shprintze, he says, "So from time to time I sat down with him and told him a story, fed him a parable, slipped him a verse from the Bible, even let him have a midrash or two, as only Tevye can do" (85).

Because of the importance he places on his ability to cite Jewish text, Tevye judges others according to their ability to do the same. In considering the local matchmaker's proposal of a groom for one of his daughters, Tevye muses:

Efrayim tells me, his man can parse a verse with the best of them, he knows how to read the small print--and that's no trifle with me either, because I'd sooner eat a buttered pig than sit down to a meal with an illiterate. A Jew who can't read a Jewish book is a hundred times worse than a sinner. I don't give a hoot if you go to synagogue or not; I don't even care if you stand on your head and point your toes at the sky; as long as you can match me quote for quote and line for line, you're a man after my own heart (59).

This comment is significant for its ultimate prioritization of the ability to quote text over the ability to read it. Despite Tevye's expressed admiration for those learned enough to "read the small print," what matters most to him is the ability to cite text, not to study it. Presumably, the potential groom's ability to "read a Jewish book," will only be sufficient if he can also "match [Tevye] quote for quote and line for line." Indeed, though Tevye quotes text in almost every utterance, we never see him sitting down to study.

The way in which Tevye uses text offers insight into his emphasis on quoting, rather than reading text. For Tevye, the fixed text is only the starting point for discussion. He accords far less significance to the precise meaning of the written text than to the way that he interprets it. In "Tevye Strikes it Rich," he says:

A man slaves, works himself to the bone, is ready to lay down and die--it shouldn't happen to the worst enemy of the Jews. Suddenly, don't ask me how or why, it rains gold on him from all sides. In a word, *revakh vehatsoloh ya'amoyd*

*layehudim*, just like it says in the Bible! That's too long a verse to translate, but the general gist of it is that as long as a Jew lives and breathes in this world and hasn't more than one leg in the grave, he musn't lose faith. Take it from my own experience--that is, from how the good Lord helped set me up in my present line of business (3).

Tevye's comment that the verse is "too long" to translate is particularly instructive. The issue is not that the verse is too long, for Tevye's explanation of the verse is longer than any translation would be. Rather, the precise translation is irrelevant. The general idea of the verse--that the Jews will receive divine help--justifies Tevye's assertion that his own good fortune comes from God, but neither the exact language nor the original context is significant. Tevye divorces the verse from its context, extracts a general principle, then applies this principle to his own situation. He does not seek to explicate the verse, for the verse is the starting point for discussion, not its object. Furthermore, Tevye presents his expansion of the verse more as a translation than as a *d'rash*. In offering the "the general gist" of the verse, he suggests that his interpretation is not original, but is present in the verse itself. This "translation" effectively replaces the written text and serves as the next starting point of discussion. When Tevye offers his own experience as proof of the principle that one "mustn't lose faith," he presents his life as proof of the "translation" he has just provided. At this point, the verse itself has essentially disappeared.

At times, Tevye's use of Jewish text serves a primarily structural function. The periodic use of the biblical phrase "*vayehi hayoyim*" as a transition strengthens the sense of connection between Tevye's life and biblical text; however, the specific words of the

quotation do not have bearing on the story line. When Tevye says "In a word--*vayehi erev vayehi voyker*--one afternoon as I was making my rounds of the Boiberik dachas, someone hailed me in the street," (58) he uses the verse and its logical conclusion, "*vayehi tzaharayim*" as a transition rather than as a unit of meaning.

Tevye sometimes goes beyond imposing new meaning on the texts he quotes and actually reverses the meaning entirely. When he says "*Al tiftakh peh lasoton*--just suppose my enemies got wind of it. . .," (77. Ellipses in text) he transforms a warning against permitting evil to enter one's mouth into a caution about letting anything *out* of one's mouth that might reach the wrong ears. Similarly, he tells us that "*Yo'oh aniyuso leysisro'eyl*, not even God likes a beggar. And the proof of it is that if He liked them, He wouldn't make them beg. . . ." (59. Ellipses in text) Here, Tevye takes a verse proclaiming the fitting nature of poverty, interprets it as condemning poverty and then offers a logical proof for his interpretation. This instance offers a striking example of Tevye's willingness to allow his own interpretations of texts to supplant and subvert the texts themselves. Once Tevye has offered his interpretation of the verse as the reverse of the apparent meaning of the text, this interpretation becomes akin to a text and therefore is itself subject to interpretation and proof. By the time Tevye offers proof for his interpretation, the original verse is all but forgotten.

Tevye offers additional support for the reader's ability to govern text in his application of parshat *Lekh Lekha* to his own expulsion from his home. In a twist on the tradition of deriving commentary on current events from the weekly Torah portion, Tevye allows the events of his life to determine the portion to be studied:

In a word, what Bible reading are you up to in the synagogue this week, the first chapter of Leviticus? Well, I'm a bit behind, because I'm still back in the third chapter of Genesis. That's the chapter of Lekh-Lekho, you know, where God shows Abraham the door. *Lekh-lekho*--get thee out, Tevye--*meyartsekho*--from your land--*umimoyladitkho*--and from the village you were born in and lived in your whole life--*el ha'orets asher arekko*--to wherever your legs will carry you (117).

Here, both the interpretation of the text and the very choice of text are subject to Tevye's needs rather than to written rules. In Tevye's hands, this text ceases to be a story about a biblical character who lived thousands of years before and becomes instead a living text directed at Tevye himself.

Thus, Tevye offers us a picture of text as something that begins in written form, but which comes to life only when interpreted by its reader. Once the reader has taken hold of the text, the text in its original form all but disappears and is replaced by the reader's interpretation or application. The reader's power over the text is sufficiently strong to warrant blatant imposition or even reversal. Furthermore, interpreting text is primarily an oral activity. As noted earlier, Tevye prioritizes the ability to quote text over the ability to read it and does not, during the course of the book, sit down to study.

Wolfgang Iser's theory of reader response, or even more precisely, John Miles Foley's adaptation of this theory for oral traditional literature offers a helpful model for understanding Tevye's interaction with text. In Iser's conception, the reader, guided by authorial signals, interprets and thereby actualizes the text.<sup>1</sup> Foley, studying the relationship between oral poets and their audiences, modifies this theory to represent an

"interpretive agreement" between poet and audience. In Iser's model, the text and the reader are present and the author is absent. In the oral performances that Foley studies, the author and the audience are present and the text is absent. The success of the oral performance depends on the audience's willingness to accept the presented version as authoritative, as well as on the audience's familiarity with the conventions of the genre:

We shall find that oral traditional texts or performances also serve as libretti for audience realization, that these "scores" imply readers or listeners as participants in a process, and that the oral performance or oral-derived text also consists of a "map" made up of explicit signals and gaps of indeterminacy that must be bridged in accordance with certain rules and predispositions.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, Tevye's interaction with Jewish sources appears to be that of a reader interpreting written texts. However, the way in which he interacts with these sources more closely resembles the relationship between an audience and an oral "text." As previously noted, Tevye prioritizes the ability to quote text over the ability to read it, and does not, during the course of the book, sit down to study the sources he quotes. Furthermore, as soon as he quotes a text, he almost always offers a "translation" that effectively replaces the original source and becomes the new authoritative text which is now subject to further explanation and interpretation. In this way, Tevye's reception of the text displaces the trace of the original text.

Foley argues that much of the distinction between the reader's reception of a written text and the audience's reception of an oral performance rests on the distinction between conferred and inherent meaning. In Iser's model, the reader fills in the gaps of

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<sup>1</sup> Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1974. 57-80 and 274-294

indeterminacy in a text by conferring meaning. The reader does not have free reign to confer meaning on a text because s/he is guided by the author's explicit signals, by outside knowledge, and by his/her own desire to bestow consistency on the text. In contrast, the success of an oral performance depends on the audience's familiarity with the inherent meaning of the text. The audience interprets authorial signals based on knowledge of an outside tradition. Because each signal is based more firmly in tradition than in the context of the particular telling, there is not an audience imperative to create consistency within a particular performance. Whereas Iser's implied reader must interpret details in relation to a linear story, Foley's audience interprets details in relation to a tradition and therefore is not troubled by inconsistencies within the performance itself.

Though Tevye clearly confers meaning that is not inherent to the texts he quotes, he does so in such a way as to suggest that the meaning *is* inherent. He does not introduce his interpretations with phrases like "I think this means," or "The significance of this is," but rather presents his readings as if they were inherent to the text at hand. Furthermore, he is not concerned about consistency, even within individual quotes. He often bases an interpretation on a single word or phrase from a quote and ignores the rest of the quote, even when it contradicts his interpretation. Therefore, he can explain "*ka'asher ovadeti ovadeti*" as "you're up the creek this time for sure" (33), although this interpretation ignores the uncertainty of the original.

Tevye does not, however, advance the view that anyone is capable of interpreting text authoritatively. When he says "I sat down with him and told him a story, fed him a parable, slipped him a verse from the Bible, even let him have a midrash or two, as only

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<sup>2</sup> Foley, John Miles. *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1991. 42

Tevye can do," (85) he indicates a conviction that not everyone is capable of providing an authoritative reading of the text. This sense of Tevye's privilege in interpreting texts is strengthened by the absence of textual quotes by other characters. Tevye is qualified to be an oral audience, capable of making an "interpretive agreement," but not everyone is equally qualified.

Using what we have learned about Tevye's relationship with text, as well as Foley's audience response model, we can now begin to understand the relationship between Tevye and his author. Just as, in Tevye's view, traditional sources can only be understood by means of their audience, Tevye's own story can only be understood by means of the other. At times, Tevye explicitly asks Sholem Aleichem to fill in the gaps in his story:

You've been wondering, have you, Pan Sholem Aleichem, where I've been all this time? Tevye's changed quite a bit, you say, grown suddenly gray? Ah, if only you knew the troubles, the heartache, that I've been through! It's written that *odom yesoydoy mi'ofor vesoyfoy le'ofor*, that a man can be weaker than a fly and stronger than steel--I tell you, that's a description of me! Maybe you can tell me, though, why it is that whenever something goes wrong in the world, it's Tevye it goes wrong with (53).

This exchange is reminiscent of the direct author-reader addresses that figure prominently in Iser's consideration of 18<sup>th</sup> century novels. In discussing the directives to the reader in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, he writes, "This system of control might be called the explicit guidance of the reader; its function is to allow the implicit guidance to take its full effect" (47). Here, too, Sholem Aleichem's participation is not meant to be



limited to the times that Tevye directly requests input. The difference between this technique as manifested in *Tom Jones* and in *Tevye the Dairyman* is that in the first case, the author addresses his reader by means of the text, while in the second case, a fictional character addresses his author. While we, Tevye's readers, are presumably supposed to put ourselves in the place of Sholem Aleichem and interpret the text accordingly, the surface meaning suggests that only character and author are present. By feigning the absence of a text, the interchange between Tevye and Sholem Aleichem mimics the relationship between poet and audience in Foley's model.

Just as not everyone in Tevye's world is capable of interpreting text, not everyone would be capable of reading/writing Tevye's story. It is only because Sholem Aleichem shares Tevye's interpretive system that he is qualified to hear the stories. Tevye says, "And yet to tell you the truth, when I think the matter over, the real guilty party may be me. Why, there's even a saying in the Talmud. . . but it's a pretty pass we've come to, Reb Sholem Aleichem, when I have to quote the Talmud to you!" (100). Tevye can only speak to someone who is familiar with the texts that form the backbone of his communicative system. This address to Sholem Aleichem is particularly significant because it asks for a double interpretation. First, it consists of Tevye's self-evaluation, which demands authorial interpretation. Second, it asks Sholem Aleichem to interpret a Talmudic text which is not present in the statement itself. Here again, the relationship between Tevye and his author resembles that between oral poet and audience in that the audience is asked to interpret a text that is absent and whose existence is represented only by the speaker.

The ambiguity about the possessor of greater authority in the Tevye stories offers additional support for this audience response model. In his statement, "*hamekhaseh ani mey'Avrohom*--do you and I have any secrets between us?" (70) Tevye portrays himself as God and Sholem Aleichem as Abraham, thereby suggesting that the character has authority over the author. However, as the reader recognizes, and even Tevye acknowledges, the writer ultimately has authority over the character, and the eventual reader has authority over the writer. Similarly, in both Foley and Iser's models, one might think that the poet/author has authority over the audience, but ultimately, authority lies in the hands of the audience/reader.

The double relationship between Tevye and traditional Jewish text and between Tevye and his author provide a model for how we, as readers, should interact with the text. The oral nature of what appears to be fixed text emphasizes the responsibility of readers to enter into an interpretive agreement with the author and character. Though the text is present, our responsibility is perhaps to pretend that it is not--that is, to cast ourselves in the role of the oral audience who listens to a story conscious of the responsibility to interpret and actualize it.