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Sholem Aleichem
& the Comedy of Dissolution
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Does He or Doesn't He?
The Failure of Anagnôrisis in Sholem Aleichem's
"The Man from Buenos Aires"

The big mystery surrounding Sholem Aleichem's "The Man from Buenos Aires" is not how Yiddish literature's most beloved storyteller could create such a thoroughly venal character. After all, Kivke, the villain of "Baranovich Station," is nearly as black-hearted and morally corrupt in his own way. And the character of Motek, the Man from Buenos Aires—like most of Sholem Aleichem's characters—is drawn, if not from a real-life model, at least from real historical circumstances (quite well-known circumstances, in this case). The biggest mystery, rather, is whether or not the traveling salesman-narrator ever recognizes Motek for what he is—and if not, *why* not? Furthermore, how can we ever trust the salesman as a narrator again, if he really has proven himself so unreliable? And why would Sholem Aleichem so deeply undermine his own surrogate, his stand-in narrator?

First the big question: does he or doesn't he? The most definitive answer I can offer is maybe, maybe not. I would not consider the text in any way conclusive, despite Hillel Halkin's assertion in his introduction to *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* that

the commercial traveler...is simply someone to whom his fellow passengers can tell their tale, at times revealing to the book's readers aspects of themselves that he himself is naïvely unaware of. (Such as the fact, for example, that the "Man from Buenos Aires" is really a rich pimp engaged in the white slave trade, the shanghaiing of girls to Argentina to work as prostitutes there.)
(SA, xxxiii)

At the same time, however, we can weigh the available evidence and see whether the scales tip in one direction or the other.

There are a few tantalizing clues hinting that, perhaps, the traveling salesman *did* eventually, after the fact, come to recognize Motek as a white slaver. To me, the most compelling piece of evidence is the narrator's interjection into his own musings Motek's occupation: "But let's leave the telling to him, because he does it so much better..." (171) It is exactly at the moment in the salesman's retelling that he begins speculating as to Motek's real business that he interrupts himself and turns the reins back over to Motek himself. We could interpret

this as his attempt to keep from spilling the beans to us, the readers, too soon—an attempt to give us the same experience of confusion and uncertainty that he himself went through. This explanation would also neatly (*too neatly?*) explain Sholem Aleichem's demolition of his narrator's reliability: in fact, the narrator is playing coy, but is still essentially reliable.

Another hint comes at the very end, when the narrator looks back on his encounter with Motek and can still see Motek laughing at him: "Even after I was through the door with my luggage, I still saw him before my eyes, the man from Buenos Aires, with his satisfied, smooth-shaven face and the fat cigar between his teeth, his laughter ringing in my ears..." (177) Even if the narrator has not realized the full import of Motek's sly explanation that he deals "Not in Hanukkah candles, my friend, not in Hanukkah candles" (177), it still seems clear that the narrator has finally, belatedly, realized that there is something not quite right about Motek.¹

On the other hand, there is an extraordinary wealth of clues laid out before the narrator, who claims to be an astute observer of human types but seems to be amazingly obtuse in this situation. It is very clear that Sholem

¹It seems to me that Motek's statement is even more telling in the original, in which he tells the narrator that his trade is not in "esrogim," a word which could be taken to refer to esteemed people. Motek's trade, in other words, is not in respectable folk.

Aleichem intends his readers to realize (at least by the end) exactly who and what Motek is. Yet the narrator seems willfully blind to the hints that he himself conveys to us.

For example, the narrator, right from the start, describes Motek as somewhat unusual-looking:

No matter how much I looked at him, I couldn't for the life of me guess his age. He might have been about forty and he might have been still in his twenties. His face was round, [over-]tanned by the sun, and smooth-shaven, with no trace of whiskers or a beard; his small, beady eyes had a twinkle; and—a short, plump, good-natured, quite vivacious fellow—he cut a sharp figure... (167)

The overall impression given here, combined with a description of Motek's dandyish clothing, is of an ageless, effeminate, eunuch-like man of somehow repulsive sensuality. The narrator's inability to determine the age of his new friend is our first indication that the salesman might not be entirely reliable; at the same time, Motek's ageless appearance marks him out as "different."

But this unpalatable character is dignified, for the narrator, by his "spiffy" clothing—surprisingly, the narrator believes that clothes make the man: "There's no one I admire more than a spiffy dresser...I can even tell by his clothes if a man is a decent sort or not" (168). And though he goes on to add that while there are some people

who do not put such stock in outward appearances, who say that "you can dress like a count and still be the worst sort of bounder," he completely fails to connect this bit of advice with the present situation. It is a very strange moment in the text: the narrator himself states an obvious clue and proceeds to ignore it completely.

Nor is it the only such moment. Motek describes his abuse at the hands of his stepfather, including a dislocated arm: "Do you see this arm? It's not right to this day" (169). He shows the arm in question to the narrator, who describes it as "a soft, pudgy, perfectly normal-looking arm" (169). The narrator sees that there is a discrepancy between Motek's self-description and reality, but does not comment on it or analyze it. It a crucial piece of knowledge that apparently, maddeningly, does not sink in.

Then there are the clues that Motek himself deliberately provides. It seems clear that he is not trying to hide his unsavory occupation from his new friend, but rather is trying to state it obliquely (whether out of delicacy—his own or Sholem Aleichem's—or because he is playing some sort of duplicitous game is unclear). Motek makes no bones about his willingness to sink to any level at all to make money.

"Never...ask yourself, can I stoop this low or not? You have to learn to stoop to anything. Waiting on

customers in a restaurant? Do it! Selling in a store? Do it! Washing glasses in a bar? Do it! Dragging a pushcart? Do it! Hawking papers on a corner? Do it! Washing dogs? Do it! Feeding cats? Do it! Catching rats? Do it! Skinning them for their fur? Do that too! In short, do everything." (171)

This litany makes no apparent impression on the narrator, other than to puzzle him. Even later, when Motek tries to be more explicit—"I provide a commodity that everyone knows about but no one ever talks about" (171)—the narrator is completely befuddled: "I...wondered, good God, what on earth does he do?" (172) He considers asking but something inside him prevents him. Perhaps it is because, at some level, the narrator does not want to know. He is protected and insulated from the horror of reality, at that deep level, by his very provincialism. The white slave trade is quite simply outside his moral imagination.

And this failure of (im)moral imagination, I think, is what ultimately tips the balance in favor of the idea that the salesman never really recognizes Motek for what he is. The salesman's basic decency and fundamental provincialism is such that even with all the evidence staring him in the face, he will—he *must*—fail to recognize it. He is fully equipped to cope with the miseries and scandals of Russian Jewish life, the "[b]lackmail, suicide, bankruptcy, police raids, draft exemptions, and draft quotas" (Roskies, 178); but the white slave trade is beyond his ken.

David Roskies writes about the train on which this tale is told, "This chunk of moving metal was as far removed from Kasrilevke, from the community of the faithful, as a Jew could go" (178)—but it isn't, not quite. Buenos Aires is even farther, its exotic pampas and landscapes utterly foreign to the salesman's experience. This is one of the very few comforts Sholem Aleichem offers us in the midst of all this horror: at least the man from Buenos Aires is so foreign, so *Other*, that an ordinary wholesome Jew like our narrator cannot be touched by his filth.

Terence Cave, discussing *anagnôrisis*—what Aristotle describes as the shift from ignorance to knowledge—notes that this shift is also

a shift *into* the implausible: the secret unfolded lies beyond the realm of common experience...*Anagnôrisis* links the recovery of knowledge with a disquieting sense...that the commonly accepted co-ordinates of knowledge have gone awry. (Cave, 2)

Rather than face a world in which Jews run the South American white slave trade and sell innocent *yiddishe maidls* into sexual bondage—something far beyond the common experience—the salesman retreats into the comfort and safety of continued ignorance.

But even this comfort is tainted: for although the narrator is innocent enough in mind and spirit to remain

ignorant of Motek's true profession, he nonetheless gets taken in by him. The narrator is so easily bought that it takes no more than some hors d'oeuvres, beer and a cigar before "we were the best of friends" (SA, 167). At every dramatic pause in the story, every moment at which we expect the moment of recognition, Motek plies the narrator with food and cigars and the narrator's line of speculation peters out. He has been corrupted—just as the innocent provincial girls are corrupted and seduced away by Motek the pimp.

There may be structural reasons, as well, for the failure of recognition in the story. Terence Cave notes that "the recognition scene is, as it were, the mark or signature of a fiction" (4). It is almost invariably a contrived moment, a *deus ex machina* that pops up to explain the otherwise inexplicable elements of the story—the resolution of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, is a paradigmatic case. The tale that Sholem Aleichem gives us is purportedly factual, and is actually based on fact. The salesman's failure to read the signs and enact the anagnôrisis is in a way a strikingly realistic touch.

Furthermore, Cave claims that what he calls the "scandal" of recognition (and in this case it would be truly scandalous) is "essentially funny, silly, and thus appropriate at best to comedy" (2). While I do not know

that I would necessarily go as far as calling the moment of anagnōrisis "funny," there is something faintly humorous mingled with the shock and dread of that instant of recognition--there is a horrified chuckle that escapes us as we realize that Oedipus has married his mother, that Rochester's wife is locked in the attic, that Darth Vader is really Luke's father. The pieces of the puzzle snap into place and we are, quite trivially, titillated. I think that this potential for amusement also exists in the situation in "The Man from Buenos Aires."

By preventing any sort of comedic recognition, any moment where a cartoonish light-bulb goes on over the head of an open-mouthed salesman, Sholem Aleichem avoids trivializing the very real horror of the white slave trade. In doing so, he also manages to keep us, like the salesman, on a much more uneven and unsettling keel than if all were ever spelled out for the salesman and for us.

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