

THE STORYTELLER AS HERO

Tevye the Dairyman and the Railroad Stories

by Sholem Aleichem

translated with an introduction by Hillel Halkin

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In an industrial age, when writers are moved to resurrect and preserve the past before it is polluted forever, one of the ways they do so is by telling stories. It happened in Germany, when the Brothers Grimm reinvented the *märchen* and inspired the Romantic school of literary fairy tales. It happened in czarist Russia at the end of the 19th century, with the Tolstoyan return to the land and to stylized folk narratives. It is happening now, in postindustrial America, with the rise of professional storytellers who hone their craft at regional workshops and national conferences.

It happened, perhaps most dramatically, at the very eclipse of Western civilization, in 1936, when one of our century's most outstanding literary critics, Walter Benjamin, produced a minor classic on the subject of storytelling. His essay "The Storyteller," written as an appreciation of Nikolai Leskov, distinguished between the teller of local tales and traditions who was rooted in the soil, and the teller of exotic places who returned from his travels with knowledge of the outside world. Benjamin praised the storyteller above the novelist for inhabiting a moral world of "experience" rather than an alienated world of "facts." The pauper was suddenly turned into the prince of fiction.

Leskov died in 1895, just when a younger compatriot of his, Sholem Aleichem, was beginning to people his fiction with surrogate storytellers who fit Benjamin's typology exactly. Among the most outstanding were Tevye the patriarchal dairyman, who remained firmly rooted in the past, and the anonymous traveling salesman who collected the unusual tales told to him over the years in the third-class compartment of the train. These tellers opened up the other side of Leskov's Russia: a world of Jewish religious passions and of crazy Jewish schemes, a closed and self-destructing world that could best be captured in a medium at once both fluid and conventional, popular and predetermined—the live narrated story.

One might have thought that Jewish

writers from Eastern Europe, born into a traditional society and not yet plagued with industrial angst, would have no trouble harnessing the story as a modern literary vehicle. But insofar as storytelling conjured up a communal world of folklore, fantasy, and superstition, it could not be reconciled with the new, secular culture that the Young Turks were trying to create in Hebrew and in Yiddish. The young Sholem Aleichem was no exception, despite the folksiness of his adopted pen name (which means "How Do You Do"). Storytelling was anathema to Sholem Rabinovitch, raised as a good merchant's son on Orthodox Judaism, on the Hebrew Enlightenment, and on Russian secular culture.

In 1873, a year after his bar mitzvah, Sholem was enrolled in the Russian school of his native city, Pereyaslev, in the Ukraine. Supporting himself as a private Russian tutor, he later met and eloped with one of his students, the daughter of a rich Jewish landowner, whose estate Sholem would inherit. Turgenyev could not have written it better. Meanwhile Sholem's father encouraged his son's fledgling efforts in Hebrew, which was the proper vehicle for an enlightened young man. An early work was his story of the "Sights and Dark Sides" of small-town Jewish life; it exposed a fanatic resistance to change, caustic humor, exaggerated fears. Still, there was nothing in it to suggest a reappropriation of Jewish folk life.

But things *were* changing in czarist Russia. People were moving from the villages and towns to the cities, or away from Russia altogether, to the Golden Land. There was mob violence, political reaction, universal unrest. Gone was the Jewish enlighteners' hope for gradual, liberal reform, within Jewish life and without. The revolutionary alternative that captured the minds of these despairing intellectuals was "auto-emancipation," first proclaimed by Leo Pinsker in 1882. It was a call for national self-determination on one's own land.

Against this backdrop, Sholem Aleichem embraced the cause of Yiddish lit-

erature. At night he busied himself writing Yiddish novels. (During the day he played the Kiev stock market with the money left to him by his father-in-law.) The choice of the novel was predictable. If the end was Jewish national renewal, then emulating the pride of modern Russia—its great novelists—would earn one's own people a place among the nations. At 29, Sholem Aleichem produced his first "authentic" Jewish novel, *Stempenyu*.

Perhaps even more impressive than the novel itself, a tragicomic love story about a Jewish musician named Stempenyu, was the place in which it appeared: a large and handsomely produced Yiddish literary almanac, modeled on the great Russian miscellanies of the 19th century. The publisher-editor was none other than Sholem Aleichem himself, who paid his authors the unheard-of sum of 20 kopeks a word. Among the most prominent contributors were I. L. Peretz, making his first appearance in Yiddish, and the veteran prose writer Mendele Moykher-Sforim (or Mendele the Bookseller). Sholem Aleichem dedicated his novel to Mendele, whom he addressed as his *zeyde*, or grandfather, thereby inventing a literary tradition with himself as its rightful heir. Alongside this ambitious publishing venture Sholem Aleichem launched a vigorous campaign against the sensational pot-boilers then flooding the Yiddish market; responsible "folk writers," he argued, needed social realism, stylistic discipline, high moral purpose.

While Sholem Aleichem looked to Russian and European models to legitimate the new secular forms and forums he sought to introduce, he also believed that the content of this new, national culture had to be drawn from Jewish life. That is why Stempenyu, the passionate folk fiddler, was the ideal protagonist. Here was a Romantic hero who spoke his own musician's argot (faithfully transcribed and annotated throughout the novel), who was also free to pursue the passions of his heart. After all, where else but on the fringes of respectable society would one find a Jewish lover? According to the dictates of social realism and high moral purpose, however, the selfsame hero would have to be eclipsed by the married heroine, the very model of bourgeois respectability, who successfully thwarted his advances. Anna Karénina would not have made it in the shtetl.

Six years later, in 1894, Sholem Alei-

chem discovered a different kind of folk hero. At first he described him as a kind of noble savage: "a healthy, broadly built Jew, dark and hairy, hard to tell his age, wearing large boots and a grimy cloak over a warm undershirt, even in the greatest heat." Tevye too had his own special language, a densely idiomatic style replete with quotations and pseudo-quotations from Scripture and the liturgy, from Ukrainian proverbs, and imitations of other people's speech. "Tevye is always eager to talk, loves a folk saying, a proverb, a snippet of Scripture; he's no scholar, but he's no ignoramus either when it comes to Hebrew print."

In the first of the Tevye monologues, there was a note of condescension in the narrator's voice, and a touch of the grotesque in Tevye's self-involvement. Sholem Aleichem did not yet appreciate what he had discovered; he was not yet comfortable allowing the folk to speak its mind freely. Later he removed the professional narrator completely, retaining him only as an implied listener, and enlarged Tevye's emotional repertoire so that his voice might speak for all traditional fathers trying to make sense of a changing world.

WHY, THOUGH, after working so hard to modernize Jewish culture by means of the novel and highbrow literary periodicals, did Sholem Aleichem suddenly revert to the outmoded form of the monologue? More important, what prompted him to move from condescension to creative identification with the folk? Here we come to the delicious paradox of modern Jewish culture: just as the impetus to modernize came from the outside, so too did the model of reclaiming one's lost resources. Though Leskov might have served him just as well, Sholem Aleichem's direct influence was Gogol. His portrait, along with Mendele's, graced Sholem Aleichem's study. During the 1890s, Gogol was a ubiquitous presence in Sholem Aleichem's life. He kept a box marked "Gogol" on his desk for work in progress; he wore his hair à la Gogol, could quote him, even imitate his manner. What is most prized today in Sholem Aleichem's work owed its inspiration to Gogol. The laughter-through-tears formula, which is supposed to capture the essence of Sholem Aleichem's humor, came from the famous seventh chapter of *Dead Souls*.

Thus, when Sholem Aleichem paid his first visit to Berdichev in 1897, he began

madly to record all its sights and sounds, exclaiming to his brother: "If Gogol could make a hamlet famous, why shouldn't I be able to immortalize Berdichev!" From that visit the fictional town of Kasrilevke was later born. As Gogol had badgered his friends for anecdotal material that he might fashion into stories, so too did Sholem Aleichem, especially after leaving Russia. And as spoken language became the center of Gogol's reality—the source of the comic, the grotesque, the fantastical—so Sholem Aleichem reinvented spoken Yiddish through a fusion of myth and the mundane.

Like Gogol, in his *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (the "hamlet" mentioned above), Sholem Aleichem created a character so real, a folk milieu so rich, that the audience mistook it for ethnography. Tevye's speech was so thoroughly absorbed into modern Yiddish that linguists can no longer determine where folklore ends and Sholem Aleichem begins. Of Gogol's four fictive narrators in *Evenings*, however, none was as memorable as Tevye, who alone spoke all the lines, played all the roles, and kept appearing for 20 years. Tevye's ability to deflect the shock waves of history while remaining absolutely fixed in one tiny place accorded him legendary status. (Even a trip to the nearest shtetl was a rare treat for Tevye, not to speak of a visit to the city of Yehupetz-Kiev. Tevye's place was in the forest, and his sole means of conveyance was his wagon drawn by his long-suffering horse.) It was Tevye's ability to reshape personal griefs and collective tragedies into perfectly wrought tales that made him the greatest storyteller in Jewish fiction.

What a difference between Tevye and Stempenyu! The young Sholem Aleichem had discovered Stempenyu the folk fiddler as a naive vehicle of romantic rehabilitation. The mature artist found in Tevye, in the natural, Bible-quoting dairyman, a meaning and a method to explore life's contradictions. And the main contradiction was this: within a closed and crumbling world that had scant intellectual resources, that offered the most paltry economic and social rewards, a spiritual giant could exist, and persist. What's more, this hero, who would never be comfortable appearing in someone else's idea of a modern European novel, was allowed to

weave his own spiritual tapestry out of the most conventional cloth: a story whose "moral" was already spelled out from the start, whose plot was utterly predictable.

"If you're meant to strike it rich, Pani Sholem Aleichem, you may as well stay home with your slippers on, because good luck will find you there too." On that note of upbeat fatalism Tevye began his first story, narrated "live" to the celebrated writer Sholem Aleichem in 1894. In life there were but two possible plots: a miraculous stroke of good luck, or an undeserved catastrophe. Tevye experienced the first only once. He was fated to experience the second again and again.

WHAT SUSTAINED HIM through this fatal predictability were his own storytelling talents; or, to be more precise, his ability to change the nature of experience by narrating it. He did it by stringing dialogues together into a story. The use of dialogue had several advantages. Since nobody could play with language nearly as well as he did, this already gave him an edge over all the others who caused him grief: his daughters, their suitors, the Jewish gentry, the local gentiles. Second, the dialogues, many of them internal, recorded the full range of Tevye's responses, which were always more important than the events themselves. Finally, the dialogues not only demonstrated Tevye's skills, they were themselves a commentary on the saving power of language in a world bent on self-destruction.

What also sustained him was having somebody who would listen. Besides Sholem Aleichem, who was available only now and again, Tevye could always rely on God to lend a sympathetic ear. God's presence was palpable, especially in the forest, where Tevye was most eloquent. But Tevye was no pantheist, or mystic; he was an ironist. Drawing on the limited repertoire of sacred texts known to a man of simple learning, he "misquoted" them, or otherwise undercut them with his own ironic commentary (superbly captured, for the first time, by Hillel Halkin's new translation). Through 20 years of incremental sorrows, Tevye continued to challenge God with God's own words, which in turn produced, as Halkin puts it, "one of the most extraordinary Jewish religious texts of our own, and perhaps of any, time."

Tevye's growing awareness of himself as a Jobian figure made his complaint against God, and his utter dependence

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on him, more poignant. At the low point of his paternal career, after fleeing the home of the rich uncle who disavowed his nephew's betrothal to (the pregnant) Shprintze, Tevye burst into tears:

I went over to my wagon, laid my head on it, and—but promise not to laugh at me!—I cried and cried until I had no tears left. Then I climbed aboard, whipped my poor devil of a horse to within an inch of his life, and asked God an old question about an old, old story: What did poor Job ever do to You, dear Lord, to make You hound him day and night? Couldn't you find any other Jews to pick on?

To be sure, there was something ennobling in being chosen by God, in being paired with the biblical Job. It was also revealing of Sholem Aleichem's own humanistic outlook that the man chosen as Job's pair was not a rabbi, a *tzaddik*, or a young revolutionary, but a simple backwoodsman. For Tevye-Job was a new kind of archetypal figure who stood for the Jewish people as a whole. He embodied the "folk" who had no access to power, to politics, to the press, but who never lost the ability to protest its innocence and to demand redress.

Thus Tevye's fortitude inverted the old spiritual hierarchy. He was a true democratic hero. On the other hand, his very traditionalism defied at least two secular pieties. In the battle of "Fathers and Sons," as it was waged in 19th-century Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish novels, the author's sympathies were always on the side of the young. But Sholem Aleichem, by allowing Tevye to upstage everyone else, made the young progressives into foils to the tragicomic patriarch. Moreover, Tevye's sense of *déjà vu*, of being an actor in an ancient drama, belied all the political ideologies designed to harness the forces of history. Tevye's combination of faith and fatalism was perhaps the only balancing act that could bridge the abyss of time.

BUT COULD the act be accomplished outside of the mythic forest, where even the horses understood Yiddish and every tree sang praises to God? How about on board the very symbol of modern technology, the train? Here the nervous pace of travel allowed for no long-term relationships. Here people were immediately segregated by class and had to act accordingly. Still, by virtue of the bleak economic conditions prevailing in Russia, a place of refuge did exist, an almost homogeneous environment where a whole class of Jewish travelers—mid-

dlemen and merchants—could meet and swap stories: the third-class compartments. As one would expect, their stories were adapted to fit the setting; memory was strictly personal, plots were secular, and very few actually ended.

Trains had benefited the Russian Jews little, for there was still no place to go to make a living within the so-called Pale of Jewish Settlement. In the eight-year span covered by the *Railroad Stories* (1902-1910), the political situation dramatically worsened; the constitutional reforms announced in October 1905 were followed by counterrevolutionary violence. One of the victims of this upheaval was Sholem Aleichem himself. He left Russia in the aftermath of the Kiev pogrom in 1905. He returned triumphantly in 1908, only to collapse with a near-fatal attack of tuberculosis. This was followed by years of convalescence in this spa and in that. Thus Sholem Aleichem's own state of exile was perfectly matched by the crowded third-class compartments rumbling across the Ukraine, where the only reprieve from the rain always falling outside was playing another game of cards and listening to a half-crazed fellow passenger narrate another tale of woe.

GESHIKHTE, the Yiddish word for story, also means history. What began in Sholem Aleichem's mind as a series of *peklekh*, or personal sob stories, became, after his own self-imposed exile and subsequent run-in with death, a vast panorama of dissolution. Blackmail, suicide, bankruptcy, police raids, draft exemptions and draft quotas were a staple of these travelers' tales. As Halkin reminds us in his admirable introduction, even the most ludicrous plots had their basis in historical fact. Indeed, English readers will discover from this first complete translation of the *Railroad Stories* that Sholem Aleichem's confrontation with modernity has few equals in Yiddish literature: not in the writing of Sholem Asch, who, despite the historical sweep of his novels, fell back on a soppy ecumenism just when one of the ecumenical partners—the Jews—was being wiped off the face of the earth; and not in the writing of Issac Bashevis Singer, who tends to remove his heroes from society when the going gets rough. That Sholem Aleichem could wrest some ironic consolation even from this bleak historical landscape is the real measure of his greatness.

The third-class compartment was a

refuge of sanity because it was the only place in a technological world where the act of storytelling could still flourish; where, in the words of the anonymous traveling salesman, "suddenly everyone is telling everybody everything, and everything is being told to everyone. The whole car is talking together at once in a splendid show of Jewish solidarity." Though encounters en route were notoriously fickle and fake, Jews were more likely to let down their guard among their own. And once the barriers were down, they could share a "world of experience," to reinvoke Benjamin's telling phrase. For these uprooted men (it was still an all-male subculture), storytelling was never an escape from reality, a return to some preindustrial paradise. It was a communal act of purgation, a modern rite of passage, a temporary means of turning chaos into comedy.

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