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LEIB THE BLIND: THE BA'AL-GUF AS NATURAL FORCE

The ba'al-guf-- the literary character whose center of gravity is physical appetite, passion and force-- eventually emerges as a kind of hero in Jewish literature. He becomes the proto-type of the "new Jew"-- the passionate and instinctual man-of-the-earth who would arise to replace the docile and tormented hyper-intellectual of traditional Jewish life and literature. So it is that Menashke, the conflicted and paralyzed narrator of Rahamim by Haim Hazaz, regards his foil, the primitive but canny Kurd from Zacho, with a mixture of envy and admiration, and that we, the readers of the story, come away from it with the distinct impression that the future will belong to the Kurds from Zacho of the Jewish world rather than to the Menashkes.

very clever!

Putting aside for the moment the question of whether or not this facile vision of Jewish life has ever borne fruit or is ever likely to do so, I must say that I find the earlier manifestations of the ba'al-guf, such as those we encounter in Kola Street by Sholem Asch and The Girl by Zalman Schneour, to be far more interesting. In these stories, the ba'al-guf is depicted not so much as a hero, but as a long-suppressed natural force. If the ba'al-guf is heroic, it is only in the sense that a thunder storm or a raging river is heroic; or that any aspect of reality is heroic in asserting its existence in the face of denial. But like all natural forces, the ba'al-guf is also depicted in these stories as being blind, dumb and capable of great destruction. If he is a hero at all, he is a tragic and also a dangerous one, as likely to bring down the House of Israel as he is to redeem it.

me too!

good

Sholem Asch sets his tale of primal force in an appropriately primitive literary apparatus. Kola Street is a story rendered with a consciously primitive hand. So it is that Asch begins his story with a long description of its natural setting, followed by a still longer exposition of its social context. Neither of these ~~are~~ is integrated into the narrative in the modern manner; rather, they are

set off, before the action of the story commences-- a device which borrowed from more primitive literary forms and which consequently, gives the story a mythological, even a biblical feel.

Even when the narrative itself finally gets underway (nearly a third of the way through the story) Asch continues to emply a decidedly primitive technique. He builds scenes by briefly setting their context (usually in a sentence or less) and then piling detail upon detail in a deceptively artless manner. On page 268, for example, we encounter the following passage:

> In the meantime the baker died. The town lived in ever-growing fear. Various stories were told about peasants gathering here and there. Yechiel, the village peddler, reported in the synagogue that a peasant woman in a village had asked him to look into a mirror; he had seen the rabbi's head there, whereupon the woman had said that she had cast a spell. There were rumors of ritual murder, and reports came from neighboring villages that Jewish dairymen had been held up and robbed of everything. A town meeting was called in the rabbi's house and a day of fasting was decreeed. The well-to-do Jews left town. The street of the scholars looked as if Death had swept it with his black wings. In the House of Study candles burned all day and Jews recited Psalms. The Psalm-readers stayed up all night. Mothers would suddenly grab their children coming home from school and hug them and lament over their young lives. Betrothals and weddings were postponed till "after"-- when things would calm down. Jewish guards armed with heavy sticks patrolled the streets after dark.

(See also "The town was more and more in the grip of fear.etc." on page 269, the account of the fight on page 270 and many similar passages.)

Another primitive touch emplyed by Asch is the way he renders the action of the story in completely external terms. There are no interior monologues in this story. The thoughts and feelings of the central characters are never discussed (except when the reader is assured that they have no thoughts or feelings as on page 271 ; "He did not regret the fun he had started-- he was not the kind of man who was given to regrets.") Rather, the story procedes entirely on action and gesture, and particularly on the former.

All this literary primitivism accomplishes two things at once; it creates a kind of primitive ambience appropriate to the play of primal forces the story will concern itself with. But even more importantly, it evokes a sense of these forces themselves. As image is piled on top of image, the reader develops a strong sense that the

very nice

central energy of each scene (fear, mayhem, viloence etc.) is gathering and accumulating with great force. The relentless succession of narrative action and gesture also contributes to the sense of accumulating, and finally, bursting force which so characterizes this story.

What is the nature of this force? It seems to be an explosive mixture of erotic attraction and violent repulsion symbolized in the story by both the relationship between Notte and Josephine, his gentile servant, and, of course, by the pigeons. The pigeons are a particularly loaded symbol. They, in fact, are the source of the conflict between Notte's gang and the gentiles, but as they hover over the warring bands like a shadow, or a collective neshoma, we notice something quite curious; the very quality of the pigeons which compels their human counter-parts to violence is their propensity to pair off with each other sexually-- a circumstance which suggests that the antagonism between Jew and peasant-- like so many forms of human antagonism-- might very well represent a grotesque distortion of an underlying attraction which finds itself incaple of being expressed. (Such an attraction is also suggested by the long descriptive passages at the beginning of the story which seem to imply that the Jews of this place have a more natural affinity for their peasant neighbors than for their scholarly brethren.) This attraction/repulsion is also at the center of Notte's relationship to Josephine, his gentile maid. He beats her black and blue, then they go up to tryst in (of all places) the pigeon cote.

very interesting point

Asch seems to take a decidely ambivalent attitude towards this force. On the one hand, he ridicules the denizens of Scholar Street for their fear and disdain of it, and, at least by inference, blames them for its suppression. The scholars and rabbis disparage the residents of Kola Street ("They're illiterates, butchers, fish-mongers!" p.262) but live off their charity and run to them for protection whenever they are beset by drunken peasants. Morever, if, as I believe they do, the pigeons represent the spiritual passion of the Jewish people, it is a telling indictment of the religious and scholarly establishment, that their solution to the problems which have beset the community is to kill off the pigeons altogether.

heady stuff!

very interesting theses; convincingly argued

But the story also seems to suggest that this same passion, unfettered and uninformed by any kind of intellectual or relgious tradition, is blind and destructive-- even bestial-- in character. It may, in fact, be more admirable to fight back when attacked than to stand by passively and be victimized, or worse still, to depend upon the protection of others. But when the battle is actually joined, the foot-soldiers of Kola Street are hardly portrayed in heroic terms. Thus we read on page 271: "No one was fighting for any definite reason; all were seized by the same frenzy: the beast that slumbers in man was roused. They were one seething mass in the sight of heaven and God, and each was trying to eat the other alive."

So also, we have the wonderful symbol of the blind Lieb (the blind heart? the blind Lion? Yiddish or Hebrew?) "a giant who could snap an iron bar" but who, of course, couldn't see.

The tragic nature of Notte's passion is made all the more clear by the fact that Asch presents us with a far more positive figure at the outset of the story in the person of Reb Israel. Reb Israel is also a ba'al-guf, but he still lives within the context of a social and religious system which serves to inform and direct his considerable passion and vigor. Although clearly not a religious figure himself, Reb Israel seems able to bridge the gap between the world of the ba'al-guf, and the religious tradition which preceded it. Only one generation furthur removed from this tradition, however, his children seem loosed from it altogether, and like the gentiles to whom they are both attracted and repelled, they seem to have no moderating influence capable of holding their passions in check.

Thus unrestrained, Notee's passions are clearly seen as destructive. They loose violence, not only on the community, but on himself as well. In the climactic scene of the story, Notte breaks his pigeons' — (His soul? HIs heart? Only a few sentences before we read ;"He lay there and felt the helpless little birds quivering on his breast.") — necks, then cries out "God!" Admittedly, this last ejaculation is the sort of epiphany which lends itself to many interpretations; but among them, certainly, is the idea that this final violent act has led him to the realization that he has become so distant from

any kind of religiious feeling that he's finally turned on his own soul and brutalized it as well.

If this is a catharsis, its a very dark sort of catharsis indeed. IMediately thereafter Notte smashes his own image in the mirror, destroys all the furniture in his house, tears his own shirt, bites his own hand and collapses. The climax of Kola street is relentlessly bleak. If we have any admiration for Notte at the end of the story at all, it is merely a sort of detached awe for the sheer brute force of the thunder which sleeps in his breast. But the story has given us scant grounds for hoping that Notte's passion will find a productive outlet. One rather suspects, that when he rouses from his stupor, the force will merely re-cur like a bolt of lightening or like a flash flood.

The central figure of Zalman Schneour's The Girl is also presented as a kind of primal force. Even the title, and particularly its elaboration in the first line of the story ("No one could possibly call Brayne a girl-- just the Girl.") suggest a kind of larger-than-life quality to her persona. She is portrayed as a kind of sleeping giantess-- a hulking figure, quiescent, sleepy, malleable, but moldering with a kind of nascent passion and repeatedly associated with the color red. She is warm (as Asne is cold) and inward. Her considerable appetites (for the roasted poppyseeds as well as for the young lovers she watches pasively from her window) seem to provoke fear and anger in her father , who beats her mercilessly with his shoe at the least manifestation of either. Her character and her relationship to her parents are summarized nicely on page 319:

> Two little people danced about her: a skinny Jewish woman with cold wrinkled hands, and a small Jew with matted hair, one shoe in his hand and the other on his foot. Both cursed and beat her. She stood between these two creatures, large, weighty , guilty, red from head to foot, and accepted the blows, ignorant of any defense. All she did was blink her eyes, sweat and snuffle, an exhausted horse.

But she is also associated with the color white. "Soft white clouds swim slowly, Sabbath-like," as she watches from the window. And it is, significantly, a white blouse which Zavel is continuously soiling with his shoe, suggesting that it is not Brayne's passion, but Zavel's fear of it which is impure.

nice!

Also, the potential for the eruption of some dormant strength is clearly suggested by the choked laughter she makes , and the narrators wonder at it: " How could such a small, smothered sound come from a great healthy cow like Brayne?"

Eventually , this strength is in fact drawn out by the phallic Benny Lip (a figure associated with both her appetite for roasted poppyseeds and with the repeated soiling of her white blouse by Zavel's angry shoe). Brayne's sexual passion is realized and she is transformed. A full laughter now emerges from her throat, and now she is the powerful one in relation to her parents. ("For the first time Zavwel recognized in Brayne a creature stronger than himself.") She no longer submits to his beatings nor to his attempts to control her. Now her mother and father cower in bed, terrified of this new, powerful creature the world has unleashed on them.

Still, Brayne is a good deal less than a heroic figure. Like Notte in Kola Street , there is something bestial and consuming about her new-found personal force. So we read that she pushes her belly "agasint the wall and howled like a maddened beast." and a little later; "She rarely slept at night now, but tossed from side to side, choking with laughter," and a little later still; "Only the girl's voice existed, choked, frightful, bestial."

If we are sympathetic to her, it is only because her parents are such groteque and unsympathetic figures. No longer able to bully her, they huddle together and try to drown their terror of her new potency in a muddled and drunken recitation of religious platitudes ("She's pregnant, God help her! Amen, Zavel answered." and later, "Dear madam, eh blessings on you...eh, slip me a few cents,... for a benediction.")

Brayne's passion, like Notte's, has a kind of irresistable force it. If it is heroic, it is because it manages to overcome all attempts to suppress it. But since this supression is seen in both stories as an almost natural impossibility, we are inclined to regard both Brayne and Notte not as heroic, but rather as <u>elemental</u> figures, more like the wind or the rain than like Hamlet or Hercules.

-end-

Well done, indeed! Could I have a copy of this for my files?

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