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## A NOTE ON THE MONOLOGUE AS A LITERARY FORM

## SHOLEM ALEICHEM'S "MONOLOGN" - A TEST CASE

To one interested in the monologue as a literary form, Sholem Aleichem's "Monologn" present a most rewarding area of investigation. The remarks which follow do not purport to offer an exhaustive discussion of this fascinating material, but merely to signalize some of the possibilities of the subject. *Insert # 1*

The problem which I am trying to outline is but a small facet of a larger question - that of the interrelationship between verbal structure and world-view, between the literary mode of expression and the attitude toward reality which it embodies, the kind of human predicament it helps dramatize. If as a German esthetician Emil Lucka has put it, imaginative literature is "the world transformed into language", the verbal device is the writer's most potent means of grappling with reality. In literary art ideological battles are often fought on the plane of the opposition between metaphor and metonymy, or meter and free verse.

This by now is rather widely accepted with regard to poetry where verbal texture is organized throughout for esthetic effect. Few students of literature will deny that the poet's choice of words and the patterns of his imagery bear important relation, indeed often provide the clue, to the total meaning or meanings of the poem. Yet there is no reason why artistic prose should not be discussed in the same vein, or, for that matter, why an inquiry into the "larger" implications of the literary artist's use of language should be confined to the lexical stratum. The recurrence in a work of literature to grammatical categories, e.g. the first-person or the second-person pronouns, can be as revealing as the prevalence of certain semantic units or clusters. If the latter often is expressive of the poet's, or the literary school's, perception of reality, the former may be instrumental in defining the point of view, through which the narrative is mediated, the narrator's position vis-a-vis the world which emerges from his tale. This brings me to the question of monologue vs. dialogue in narrative fiction.

"Monologue" could be, and actually has been, defined simply as an absence of dialogue, as non-alternating, continuous, extended utterance.<sup>2</sup> Should we accept this rather negative definition, we would have to agree with the distinguished Russian linguist and literary theorist V. Vinogradov, that monologue is the predominant type of discourse in artistic prose. True, there are novels or short stories where the dramatic technique or, to use Henry James's phrase, the "scenic method" reigns supreme. "The Killers" of Hemingway and *Jean Barois* by Roger Martin du Gard are cases in point. Yet a more typical work of fiction represents a complex interplay of dialogue and "monologue", with the latter taking over whenever the events are described, reported or commented on rather than actually rendered.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in René Wellek and Austin Warren *Theory of Literature*. New York, 1949, p. 341

<sup>2</sup> In Viktor Vinogradov, *O xudožestvennoj proze* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1938).



But, for our purposes at least, the Vinogradov-type definition is much too broad. Nor would the conventional, i. e. dramatic, interpretation of our key term be anymore apposite here. A "monologue" such as Dmitrij Karamazov's confession or Šatov's harangue in *The Possessed* occurs within, and is part of, a dialogue situation. What I henceforth propose to mean by "monologue" as used in narrative prose is neither "non-dialogue" nor an extended utterance of a protagonist, but a mode of discourse or narration employed throughout a work of fiction or a large part of it in which the voice of an individual speaker or story-teller is distinctly heard and which is marked by the frequent use of the first-person pronoun.

def.

But then, one could interpose at this point, why not speak about 'Ich-Erzählung', as distinguished from "Er-Erzählung"? There is no question but that the concept of first-person narrative is very germane to our discussion. If nonetheless I will persist in using the word "monologue", that is mainly because it reflects more closely the discursive, non-dramatic quality of some of our salient examples.

A further discrimination seems to be in order. For certain purposes at least, it might be useful to distinguish between written and oral monologue. Various types of the former have been employed in European prose fiction, ever since the eighteenth century when the Sentimentalist quest for "authenticity" and intimacy encouraged the use of such non-fictional genres as a memoir, a diary or a letter. ~~At the same time,~~

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Let us return now to the oral variant. In the artistic prose of the last two centuries,

there have been many instances where "Ich-Erzählung" was oriented towards actual, live speech. This narrative manner, known in Russian literary scholarship as the

<sup>3</sup> Victor Erlich, "Some Uses of Monologue in Prose Fiction: Narrative Manner and Word-View", *Stil- und Formprobleme in der Literatur* (Heidelberg, 1959), 371-378; idem, "Notes on the Uses of Monologue in Artistic Prose", *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics*, I/II (1959), 223-231.

skaz,<sup>4</sup> from the root meaning "to say, speak, relate", has been recently defined by a young American Slavist, Hugh McLean, as "a stylistically individualized inner narrative placed in the mouth of a fictional character and designed to produce the illusion of oral speech".<sup>5</sup>

The only drawback of this succinct formula lies in its "inner narrative" clause. The requirement of a frame story fits well enough McLean's test-case, Leskov's *Polmoščniki*, and a number of other relevant instances, e. g. that masterpiece of *skaz*, 'the tale about Captain Kopejkin' in Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Yet it disqualifies unnecessarily works which otherwise exemplify the *skaz* very neatly, be it Gogol's "The Overcoat" or Ring Lardner's "The Haircut". As McLean himself indicates further, the sole indispensable ingredients of this narrative mode are "orality" and "individualization".

During the last two centuries the *skaz* technique has been used by a number of prose writers, endowed with an uncannily keen ear for the vernacular, e. g. Gogol, Leskov, Zoščenko in Russia, Ring Lardner and J. D. Salinger in America. In Yiddish literature the most successful exponent of this manner is, incontestably, Sholem Aleichem. Both his masterpiece, *Tevye der Milkhiker*, and many of his most characteristic tales, such as "*Dos tepl*", "*An eytzeh*", "*Yosef*" are cast in the form of an oral monologue. (Another major work of Sholem Aleichem's, *Menachem-Mendl*, is a novel in letters, and, thus, an example of *written* monologue).

In describing various devices of stylization employed in "The Overcoat", Eixenbaum calls attention to emphasis on "mimicry, articulation and sound gestures". This phrase is fully applicable to Sholem Aleichem's "Monologn". Their verbal tissue "mimics" skilfully the actual texture – the grammatical, lexical and above all the intonational pattern – of a "folksy" oral narrative. Suffice it to mention the lame redundancy of the syntax

איך וועל איינך פֿרעגן אַ שאַלע וועל איך איינך; איך האַנדל מיט אייער האַנדל איך;

the grotesquely irrelevant digressions and the rambling incoherence of Yente's narrative in "*Dos tepl*"

נו, אַנטקעגן וואָס זשע איז דאָס נעקומען צו רייד?

the compulsive repetition, in the somewhat more polished monologue, "*Yosef*" of the smug phrase

אַזוי ווי איך בין אַ יונגערמאַן אַ הינטשיקער, און אַ שיינער יונג, מיט אַ שטיקל נאָמען, [אַזו"ו]

the hemming-and-hawing of the hapless young man in "*An eytzeh*".

The *stylistic* ingredients of such a technique are obvious enough. Not unlike a "realistic" dialogue, a *skaz*-type monologue allows ample scope for subliterate verbal materials – the relative formal incoherence and "sloppiness" typical of ordinary discourse, "slangy", substandard expressions, dialectal peculiarities, inane misuses of

<sup>4</sup> See especially Boris Eixenbaum, "Kak sdelana 'Šinel' Gogolja", *Poëtika*, 1919; "Illjuzija skaza", *Skvoz' literaturu* (Leningrad, 1924); Viktor Vinogradov, "Problema skaza v stilistiké", *Poëtika*, I (Leningrad, 1926).

<sup>5</sup> "On the Style of a Leskovian Skaz", *Harvard Slavic Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), II, 299.

In his celebrated study *Problems of Dialectics of Poetics* (Problemy poëtiki dialektičeskogo, 1963, p. 248) Mikhail Bakhtin offers a broader definition: *skaz* is seen here as essentially an "imitation toward someone else's speech" (*čuzaja reč*).



language characteristic of the uneducated or semi-educated speakers. At the same time, as the last item may imply, *skaz* tends to function as mode of characterization. The class-determined deviations from the linguistic norm betray the speaker's or narrator's social and educational status,<sup>6</sup> even while his idiosyncratic verbal mannerisms often reveal his personality traits. Thus, in "Yosef" the already mentioned boastful refrain in the narrative of the successful young tradesman, reveals what one might call a worried smugness. Overtly, the note sounded here is that of self-satisfaction and conceit, but the obsessive repetition of this phrase, in the context of a story about a major emotional setback, may indicate an urgent need for self-reassurance. Consider this passage from "An eytze":

אליין בין איך, דארפֿט איר וויסן, א יונגער-מאן . . . פֿון א קליין שטעטל. דאָס הייסט, דאָס שטעטל איז נאָרנישט קיין קליינע שטעטל, א שטאָט קען מען זאָגן, נאָר קעןן אַינערע שטעט הייסט עס א שטעטל.

Here the oscillation – what Trunk has called the "hin un tsurik" (back and forth) of the prose<sup>7</sup> underscores the narrator's pathological indescision and sense of inadequacy.

It could be interposed here that this character-forming and/or articulating function is no monopoly of monologue. Any strongly differentiated dialogue yields not only through the tenor, but also through the distinctive style of the alternating utterances, some clues as to the personalities involved. Yet the "monologist" is not merely one of the protagonists; his is a strategic position, since it is through him that the story – or a large part of it – is mediated. The narrator's moral and intellectual range defines the *narrative focus*, the vantage point from which the events are presented.

Whenever – as is so often the case with the *skaz* – the story-teller is characterized mainly by limitations of sensibility and intelligence, betrayed by his use of language, we are confronted with what I would like to call a "worm's-eye view of reality". (Needless to say, this technique is quite compatible with the written brand of *Ich-Erzählung*). In R. Lardner's "The Haircut" the revolting exploits of a local bully are related admiringly by a barber whose moral coarseness prevents him from registering a proper response to the situation. In Gogol's "How Ivan Ivanovič Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovit" most of the story is told by a "local yokel" who is in no position to appreciate the utter stupidity and triviality of the squabble between the two Ivans. The same device is used, in a somewhat more subtle way, by Dostoevsky. In some of his novels, e. g. *The Possessed*, Dostoevsky interposes between himself and the reader a provincial chronicler, who is neither as vulgar as Lardner's narrator nor as inane as Gogol's, but who is clearly too naive and parochial to appreciate fully the moral implications of the events he painstakingly records. And, to return to Sholem Aleichem; we find a somewhat similar situation in "Yosef", where a tale about a fiery young revolutionary is placed in the mouth of a bewildered outsider – the already mentioned "young man on the make". The narrative manner becomes thus a technique of indirection, a kind of compositional synecdoche. A tension is effected between two views of reality – the "overt", and clearly inadequate, view, offered by the speaker or chronicler, and the implicit one, presumably that of the author and of the "ideal" reader.

The problem of fictional monologue as a narrative focus is closely bound up with the narrator's position vis-à-vis the world he "transforms into language". To be sure, the relation which prevails between the "speaker" and the other protagonists is, in each individual case, reflected in the general drift of the given monologue. But not infrequently the very fact of an extended utterance tends to underscore the precarious, not to say, *preposterous* social situation in which the speaker finds himself.

This is especially true of "oral" monologues, or, once more, of the *skaz*-like variety which makes a special point of its "orality". (Technically, many a retrospective tale

<sup>6</sup> It goes without saying that this can be true of written monologue as well. Thus, an epistolary novel, such as Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk*, can emulate faithfully the stilted, pseudo-literary style of a semi-educated "little man", Makar Devushkin. The difference here is not of kind, but rather of degree. Since actual speech is less formalized (or more casual) than written language, the deviations from the norm assert themselves more exuberantly in oral monologue.



by Turgenev is an "inner narrative" placed in the mouth of a wistful country squire who reminisces in front of a fireplace. Yet this frame is perceived here as mere contrivance. The point of departure is soon forgotten, since the style of this presumably oral narrative is scarcely distinguishable from the author's polished prose.) Monologue becomes something of an anomaly where "normal" verbal interaction seems to be called for. In "real life" a lengthy, uninterrupted utterance requires a special setting, be it that of a parliament, of a conference hall or a classroom. Where such a positive justification is lacking, a monologue-situation sometimes arises by default, either because the "addressee" is unable or unwilling to respond, or because the speaker cannot control his verbal urge.

The preposterousness of an interminable monologue in what was purported to be a dialogue situation is at the core of some of Sholem Aleichem's telling comic effects. Let us cite only two examples, "*Dos tepl*" and "*An eytseh*".

In both instances monologue was to serve as a starting point for a conversation; it was supposed to elicit an advice from an 'authority' (a rabbi in "*Dos tepl*", a wise and experienced writer in *An eytseh*). In both stories the counselor is nearly or actually brought to the state of mental collapse by the visitor's pathological loquaciousness.

Voluble Yente (in "*Dos tepl*") roams all over creation, digresses interminably about her late husband, her frail son's Talmudic studies, the vicious temper of her tenant. She is unable to come to the point, indeed to formulate the question which she presumably came to ask. For a number of pages, the rabbi endures this verbal onslaught, punctuating it time and again by sympathetic grunts. In the finale, he faints, literally overwhelmed by the grotesquely long prelude to a query which never comes off.

The structure of "*An eytseh*" is a bit more intricate: the fidgety young man who presumably comes to the author in order to seek his advice as to whether he ought to divorce his spoiled and hysterical young heiress-wife, is clearly incapable of stating his case and then listening to the older man's counsel. All he can do is to act out *ad nauseam* his paralyzing indecision – the pendulum-like swing from bitter resentment at being an outsider in the house of his well-heeled father-in-law to an equally acute fear of losing the social position he now enjoys. This verbal orgy of ambivalence reduces the "author" to a mere echo of the speaker's alternating attitudes. At each pause in the visitor's monologue he promptly agrees with his last conclusion, be it a negative or a positive one. But this reaction, instead of achieving its obvious goal – that of bringing the tiresome interview to an end, – has invariably the effect of activating the "other voice", of setting off a harangue in favor of the opposite solution. This pattern culminates in a farcical dialogue where each piece of "advice" elicits automatically a polemical response דארף מען זיך נטן! נטן! וואס זשע איז דער יריד? נישט נטן! נו, און דער דאקטער? ...

and suddenly collapses with a bang, as the long-suffering author's exasperation explodes in a blood-curdling yell:

איך האב אנגעכאפט מיין פארשוין פארן נארגל און מיט נישט מיין קול געשריין: גטן זי  
ואלסטו, ממור! גטן זי! גטן זי!

This grotesquely violent outburst can be viewed as the author's desperate act of self-defense against the fate which befalls the rabbi in "*Dos tepl*", and, more broadly, as the listener's last-minute attempt at asserting himself as an active protagonist rather than a mere passive victim of the speaker's obsessive soliloquizing.

Indeed, the natural tendency of the "compulsive" oral monologue is to reduce the "other" to the status of a mere shadow. True, in "*Dos tepl*", each "paragraph" takes as a point of departure a word or expression just uttered by the rabbi. But such a phrase is usually but a by-product of Yente's irrepressible emoting, a perfunctory summing up by the rabbi of her preceding harangue. Moreover, even these feeble echoes are given *indirectly*, through the medium of the woman's never-ending query.

One is reminded of quite a different literary monologue – the recent novel by Albert Camus, *La Chute* ("The Fall") – written in the form of a confessional *Ich-Erzählung*. At each juncture, the rambling confession of Camus' declassé lawyer is addressed to someone, but the listener has no independent existence here. His occasional responses have to be inferred from the turgid monologue of Jean Baptiste Clémence, whose is the only voice to be heard in the moral desert of the Amsterdam *ter* – which provides the backdrop of *La Chute*.

More importantly, the speaker's desperate attempt to provoke a counterconfession fails dismally. The embarrassing candor of Camus's "penitent-judge" is an elaborate moral trap. The routine of laying one's soul bare is designed to induce a commensurate act of penance on the listener's part. Yet, in the end, the nearly silent beneficiary of the narrator's ambivalent self-debunking, refuses to reciprocate. Characteristically, he turns out to be a lawyer – another lawyer! – rather than a prospective "client" in dire need of assistance and sympathy. Instead of setting off a dialogue, the monologue serves here to underscore its ultimate impossibility. No wonder Camus's hero mutters sadly as the narrative draws to its close: "*Ne sommes-nous pas tous semblables, parlant sans trêve et à personne [italics mine, V. E.], confrontés toujours aux mêmes questions bien que nous connaissions d'avance les réponses?*"

By comparison with Dostoevsky's sado-masochistic Hamlet of the Petersburg garret, or, for that matter, with his recent American echo, the hero of Saul Bellows' "The Dangling Man", a Sholem Aleichem character may seem "wholesome" and "rooted", closely identified as he is with a definable social milieu, and a folk ethos. And yet, in the works of the Yiddish master of *skaz*, the implications of proclivity for monologue are not altogether dissimilar. For one thing, as Y. I. Trunk has pointed out, for many of Sholem Aleichem's "monologuists" talk is a substitute for



action. Utterly incapable of tackling their problems, they tend to dissolve them into "words, words, words". (Or is it rather that their loquaciousness provides an alibi for Sholem Aleichem's own intoxication with the vernacular, with the twists and turns of colloquial Yiddish?) For another thing, though Sholem Aleichem's heroes are not typical "outsiders", they too "live in a world of their own". This is certainly true of that archetypal Jewish *Luftmensch*, a cross between Don Quixote and Micawber, Menachem Mendl. But stolid and "sensible" Tevye is not immune to wish-fulfillment fantasies, either. In an analysis of the "Finf-un-zibetsik toyznt" monologue Trunk shows how Tevye's melancholy account of his bitterly disappointing visit to Menachem Mendl's suddenly shades off into daydreaming:

און צוריק פֿליס מיר אדורך א נעדאנק פונקט קאפויער: איך קום אַרײַן צו מנחם־מענדלען . . .

Internalizing events as it does within the confines of an individual consciousness, the free-wheeling monologue helps blur the boundary between fact and fiction, between grim reality and comforting delusion, and thus provides a singularly appropriate vehicle for a subjective, not to say solipsistic world-picture.

To conclude, monologue in Sholem Aleichem exhibits all the major uses to which this medium has been put in narrative fiction. It provides an occasion for deploying the manifold stylistic resources of the vernacular. It serves as a clue to character, and as a deliberately restricted "point-of-view". Finally, it helps epitomize a distinctive social situation, a human predicament.

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