

THE WAKING SPHINX

South African
Essays on
Russian Culture

Edited by
Henrietta Mondry

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*Sphinxes on the
Neva Embankment,
erected in St. Petersburg, circa 1773*

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17. Bauer, J.M. op. cit. p. 184. The incorrect plural in this quote is used in the original.
18. Krüger, T. *Das vergessene Dorf*. p. 459.
19. Cf. German popular interest in Wild West stories and the ever popular novels of Karl May among the young.
20. Rachmanowa, A. *Ehen im roten Sturm*. Salzburg: Anton Pustet, 1932.
21. Rachmanowa, A. op. cit. p. 361.
22. Krüger, T. *Das vergessene Dorf*. p. 136.
23. Konsalik, H.G. *Der Himmel über Kasakstan*. p. 42.
24. Konsalik, H.G. op. cit. p. 113.
25. Konsalik, H.G. *Natascha*. p. 611.
26. Rachmanowa, A. *Ehen im roten Sturm*. pp. 390-395.
27. Krüger, T. *Heimat am Don*. p. 174.
28. Krüger, T. *Das vergessene Dorf*. p. 46.
29. Konsalik, T. *Natascha*. p. 481.
30. Rachmanowa, A. *Studenten, Liebe, Tschenka und Tod*. p. 162.

3 "GOD AND THE TSAR": IRONIC AMBIGUITY AND RESTORATIVE LAUGHTER IN GOGOL'S 'OVERCOAT' AND SHOLEM ALEYKHEM'S 'ON ACCOUNT OF A HAT' [IBER A HITL]

Joseph Sherman

"I didn't make the world. Let God and the Tsar look to it."¹

I

Nikolai I's disingenuous assertion, "I do not rule Russia; ten thousand clerks do," in seeming to shift responsibility for daily pettifogging persecutions off himself on to the vast bureaucratic apparatus of the State, actually betrays a smug pride in Peter the Great's system of civil, military and ecclesiastical administration which his successors refined into a near-sacred ritual of rank. The mystique of absolutism, so expertly underpinned by the public service, ensured that the deference paid in strict taxonomic degree to every one of those ten thousand clerks steadily aggregated into total obedience to the omnipotent person of the Tsar himself.² Conferring Divine Right on its secular head, Russian Orthodox Christianity upheld an ideology of unquestioning obedience to established authority, coming, after the eighteenth century, to share with the secular machinery the common aim of eliminating those who defied Tsarist despotism.³ To survive, such a system had self-evidently to deny human considerations such as compassion and empathy with human weakness — the very qualities which, summed up in the Yiddish word *mentshlekkhoyt*, may justly be regarded as the cornerstones of the spiritual profession of Judaism and the quotidian practice of Jewish life. Predictably, therefore, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Jews, perhaps even more than the liberals and socialists who derived so much of their zeal for human rights from the imperatives of the Jewish Prophets, became the chief objects of the hatred of such fanatical supporters of traditional paternalism as Pobedonostzev and Purishkev-

itch. For Russian Jews, theologically locked into a conception of history as a fully-revealed cycle, and economically locked into a debilitating poverty by repressive ghettoization, it was not the Tsar but God who was the Most High and to whom absolute obedience was owing; it was not the *ukaz* of the emperor, but the commandments of the Everlasting which were unchallengeably binding.

Some of the most brilliant literary responses to the confines of Tsarism came from two writers whom a mischievous destiny placed at diametrically opposed religious and social polarities, yet caused to be born and brought up in the identical area of a Russia which was holy to one and hostile to the other. Nikolai Gogol, the violently conservative, Jew-hating traditionalist, died in Moscow seven years before the *shtetl* Jew Sholem Jankev Rabinovitsh was born in Gogol's home province of Poltava in the Ukraine. Both responded to the plight of men under Tsarism with equivocal humour, so that it has become a critical commonplace to speak of Gogol's art as presenting "laughter through tears." Of his own work, Rabinovitsh also once observed in a letter:

I tell you it is an ugly and mean world and only to spite it one mustn't weep! If you want to know, that is the real source, the true cause of my constant good spirits, of my, as it is called, 'humor.' Not to cry out of spite! Only to laugh out of spite, *only to laugh!*⁴

But there is a profound difference in the way each conceived the nature of both his laughter and his tears. The formula applied to Gogol's work blurs the fact that his laughter is a quicksand which subsumes the tears: in sacrificing individualism to absolutism, Gogol's laughter is essentially destructive.⁵ For Rabinovitsh, by contrast, laughter is creative: in "spiting" the world, it becomes a means of conferring identity upon individuals, and so of ensuring their survival.

To focus on the complexity of Rabinovitsh's art, as exemplified in 'On Account of a Hat,' it is useful by way of comparison to glance at Gogol's 'Overcoat', from whose pockets, it would certainly have pained its creator to know, came not only Dostoevsky and his contemporaries, but a whole generation of Yiddish writers as well. Both stories scrutinise "little men" seemingly crushed under the

juggernaut of Tsarism. At a superficial glance, Akakiy Akakiyevitch appears a downtrodden lackey whom a vast bureaucracy has entirely depersonalised. But closer examination reveals him more as an object of contempt than of compassion. Having made the copying of documents the focus of his life, he sees nothing but his own handwriting, and when he is ludicrously jolted back into the real world by bumping into a horse, "only then did he realise that he was not in the middle of a sentence, but in the middle of the street."⁶ Gogol presents him as a man deprived more of emotional than of financial resources, an obsessive cut off, by choice and without sense of loss, from any life-promoting contact with community or individual. His acquisition of a new overcoat becomes, fleetingly, the acquisition of a new potential for enjoying life, but given the nature of his personality, when he is robbed of his overcoat on the first night on which he wears it, to go for the first time in his life to a party in the fashionable, brightly-lit suburb he has never visited before, he is effectively deprived of something which could never really be his own.⁷ His spectral return is to reclaim not his own overcoat, but that of the Important Person — in short, to take back that which was never his, but which he is exposed as having always coveted. Akakiy Akakiyevitch ends up asking not for sympathy but for status; he does not seek the overthrow of established authority, but a greater share of its privileges. Gogol's ending mocks not only his readers but Akakiy Akakiyevitch himself, whose vengeful reappearance reinforces rather than rejects the monolith of Russian Church-State mythology. The perfect social system requires requital for one who has been unjustly treated, not because justice is owing to the individual by right, but because it is owing to the public credibility of Tsarism. The laughter Gogol provokes destroys Akakiy Akakiyevitch in order to destroy the reader's potential sentimentality.⁸

Of an entirely different order is the humour employed by Rabinovitsh. Under no illusions about Tsarism's menace to Jewish survival, Rabinovitsh exposes the wounds it inflicts, while applying to them the balm of laughter.⁹ Where Irving Howe notes of his art that Rabinovitsh "attaches himself to the disorder which lies beneath the apparent order of the universe, to the madness beneath the apparent sanity,"

Ruth Wisse calls attention to the observation of Ba'al Makhshoves that Rabinovitch's "incomparable achievement [is to conjure] up the collective anxiety and then [dispel] it magically, laughing the danger away."¹⁰ Like 'The Overcoat', 'On Account of a Hat' also examines an individual under the dead weight of Tsarism, but from the perspective of a Jew, the persecuted deviator, balanced precariously between two socio-cultural extremes.¹¹

Sholem Shachnah, the chief character of this tale, is distinguished from Akakiy Akakiyevitch by having a mutually-enriching relationship with both community and family. Despised and discriminated against he may be in the world of greater Russia into which he periodically makes forays, but he always returns to a cultural, spiritual and emotional matrix which defines and dignifies him. Our attitudes towards the central figure of both Gogol's story and that of Rabinovitch is from the outset deliberately influenced by the names their creators give them. Even when he is made the butt of the whole *shtetl's* raillery, Rabinovitch's little man is formally addressed in the traditional manner as *Reb* Sholem Shachnah. People mock the absurdity of his claims, not his dignity as a human being. By contrast, the rigmarole through which Gogol takes us in 'The Overcoat' before settling on the name of his chief character, and that name itself, are designed primarily to mock through degradation. The evident association of the vulgar word for excrement, *kak*, with the name of Akakiy Akakiyevitch surely carries more conviction than pious correspondences which have been suggested with the holy life of St Akakiy. Chekhov was clearly conscious of this when he rewrote Gogol in his own sketch, 'Death of a Clerk.' There he deliberately derives the name of his chief character, Chervyakov, from *chervyak*, the Russian word for worm. Both Gogol and Chekhov consciously dehumanise their characters in their very names; Rabinovitch's Jew, throughout all his grotesque misadventures, remains a living person, so that the laughter provoked by his experiences becomes restorative rather than rebarbative.

II

Authoritarianism produces a reductive society which degrades individuals into stereotypes, and diminishes empathy to stock response. Russian and Yiddish literature repeatedly demonstrates how Tsarism benumbs the popular mind: for Russians, all Jews are thievish, cowardly and alien; for Jews, all Russians are violent, crude and anti-Semitic.¹² In different ways, and for different purposes, both Gogol and Rabinovitch develop narrative strategies which, apparently supporting the simplistic, erode it to jolt the unwary reader abruptly into shocked awareness of the cant he has been indulging, and his own ludicrous position as one of the mocking author's chief targets. 'The Overcoat' has tricked generations of readers into accepting Akakiy Akakiyevitch at face value, and revering him as the paradigm of suffering humanity. That Gogol goes to considerable pains to encourage the sentimental response he intends to explode is most evident in a famous passage often quoted as proof of the tale's putative noble purpose. On the few occasions when he can bear no more of the cruel teasing of his colleagues, Akakiy Akakiyevitch reproaches them with one standard, doleful remark which, uttered one day in the presence of a potential new tormentor, effects on the latter — we are expected to believe — an almost mystical conversion of the kind which transforms brutality into compassion:

... for a long time afterwards, even during his gayest moments, [the new clerk] would see that stooping figure with a bald patch in front, muttering pathetically: 'Leave me alone, why do you have to torment me?' And in those piercing words he could hear the sound of others: 'I am your brother.' The poor young man would bury his face in his hands and many times later in life shuddered at the thought of how brutal men could be and how the most refined manners and breeding often concealed the most savage coarseness, even, dear God, in someone universally recognized for his honesty and uprightness ... (P 74).

This moralising colours into mawkishness by juxtaposition with the very next sentence, in which Gogol hastens to assure his readers that Akakiy Akakiyevitch "worked *with love*" (Gogol's emphasis): that contrary to what fanciful idealism would have us believe, his life's

whole purpose and pleasure lies in mechanical copying. Offered a reward for his long service in the form of "the preparation of a report for another department from a completed file" which entailed only "altering the title page and changing a few verbs from the first to the third person", he breaks into a cold sweat, suffers a complete paralysis of capacity, and begs fervently to be allowed to stick to his old work (P 75). The gullible reader is lured further away from recognising this as persiflage by Gogol's hyperbolic presentation of Akakiy Akakiyevitch as not only an automaton but a pauper, inhabiting a single room in a squalid boarding house, rapidly eating without tasting whatever is set before him (including unnoticed flies), in order to return as soon as possible to that monomaniacal transcription which is his *raison d'etre*:

After he had copied to his heart's content he would go to bed, smiling in anticipation of the next day and what God would send him to copy. So passed the uneventful life of a man quite content with his four hundred roubles a year ... (P 77).

Gogol appears to reinforce the prejudices of the liberal reader, determined to see powerful social criticism here, at the very moment that it undercuts them. For once having solicited acceptance of Akakiy Akakiyevitch as the embodiment of humiliated penury, the narrative makes it impossible for the reader to understand the reason for this devastating indignity. Akakiy Akakiyevitch has no dependants, no indulgences, no pleasures. Tracing his character's shock, terror and despair faced with the appalling prospect of finding eighty roubles for a new overcoat, Gogol, having dragged us through a heart-rending catalogue of all the other necessities Akakiy Akakiyevitch cannot afford, then delivers an arithmetical body blow to conventional sentimentalism by briskly informing us how half the required sum has already been saved:

For every rouble he spent, Akakiy Akakiyevitch would put half a kopeck away in a small box, which had a little slot in the lid for dropping money through, and which was kept locked. Every six months he would tot up his savings and change them into silver. He had been doing this for a long time, and over several years had amassed more than forty roubles (P 85).

By calculating strictly according to Akakiy Akakiyevitch's own scrupulous regimen, this represents the startling gross expenditure of eight thousand roubles. Even conceding that this scrimping has gone on for twenty years, what all that money has been spent on remains inexplicable, since Akakiy Akakiyevitch has no clothes, no shoes, no linen, and his meagre board and lodging cannot possibly have consumed his entire annual income.¹³ Yet Gogol now makes Akakiy Akakiyevitch practise the most mortifying austerities to scrape together the rest of the money, an agonisingly comic process which devastatingly transforms the quest for a new overcoat into an unmistakable metaphor for the acquisition of enhanced status. When the tailor finally delivers the new overcoat to him,

... without doubt it was the most triumphant day in Akakiy Akakiyevitch's whole life ... [he] continued on his way to the office in the most festive mood. Not one second passed without his being conscious of the new overcoat on his shoulders, and several times he even smiled from inward pleasure. And really the overcoat's advantages were two-fold: firstly, it was warm; secondly, it made him feel good (P 87-89).

These undercutting narrative devices have, by the end of the tale, demonstrated to the reader how, as a victim of his own preconceptions, he himself, as much as Akakiy Akakiyevitch, has become the object of that sardonic joke upon which 'The Overcoat' builds an enduring claim to excellence.

For similar purposes, and with similar techniques, Rabinovitsh also sets up stereotypes for which he subtly invites acceptance as self-evident, before knocking them down to demonstrate how far the bemused reader has made himself an unwitting victim of the very Tsarist regimentation he is justly supposed to deplore. The petty dealer who recounts the trials of a luckless *landsman* to Sholem Aleykhem soon reveals himself as a man who deals in types rather than with individuals. To him, Sholem Shachnah is always incompetent, his misadventures always comic, his traumas always overblown. He presents as a one-dimensional view of a stock character what gradually emerges as the complex and painful experience of a vulnerable human being.

In the process of laying bare the depths of this *angst*, however, Rabinovitch, with ongoing ironic ambiguity, also reveals that Sholem Shachnah is himself as much in the grip of bigotry as everyone around him. In his dream, he type-casts Ivan Zlodi (Ivan "Thief") as a boorish Gentile peasant, a *goyisher kop*, fit only to be alternately cursed and cajoled, in the same way as he himself is daily type-cast as a sub-human alien fit only to travel in the third class. A discriminatory society is shown to pervert the humanity of all alike. Confronting the unimaginable in the mirror of his first-class compartment, Sholem Shachnah jumps to the biased conclusion that Yeremei, the station porter, has — true to stereotypical form — cheated him by taking a tip in exchange for a promise to wake him, and reneged. Yet we know that Yeremei has, ironically, proved as honest as Sholem Shachnah, just as ironically, has been seated in a first-class compartment. The stock constructs of human existence under Tsarism are shown to deconstruct themselves in the process of actual lived experience, in direct proportion as the narrative techniques of Gogol and Rabinovitch deconstruct the stereotypes they appear to uphold.

III

That a hat can define status and identity, or the lack of both, has unforgettably been illustrated in our own time by the bowlers of Charlie Chaplin and his eminent progeny, Beckett's tramps Vladimir and Estragon. Rabinovitch's manipulation of this classic circus device counterpoises two cultural, social and ethical systems between which the *shtetl* Jew must struggle to maintain his balance. Fellow Jews recognise in a man wearing a hat one who is fulfilling the injunction of the *halakhah* to cover his head as an expression of *yirat Shama' yim*, awe for God who dwells above him. Gentiles in Tsarist Russia recognise under that hat merely a *Zhid*, denied the salvation of the Church and the protection of the Emperor who is its guardian. Thus ironically, what in spiritual terms is made for Jews a symbol of humility before God, is, in social terms, made for Russians a sign of humiliation before the Tsar. Where the Jew covers his head to show respect for God, the Gentile uncovers it to show respect for man; where for a Jew a hat

imposes the equality of spiritual humility, for the Gentile it confers the superiority of social status. The confusion of the hats of a Jew and a Russian officer in this tale is therefore a confusion of identities on several profoundly existential levels.¹⁴ In Tsarist Russia, it transforms *Zhid*, despised object, into *vashe blagorodie*, respected person, and in so doing contrasts the spiritual definition Jews give themselves with the social denigration imposed on them by others. When he sees himself in the mirror, wearing the alien headgear, Sholem Shachnah experiences what Camus has called "the divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting."¹⁵ His response, within the parameters of this "absurd" situation forced upon him, is wholly logical. Since spiritual and social sundering in Russia has been too absolute for a Jew not only ever to be an official, but ever to be treated with respect, the Jewish response is to divide experience, to live physically under the rule of the Tsar, but spiritually under the rule of God.

The inherent artificiality of such a division is pointed in the self-defeating irony of Rabinovitch's style. When Sholem Shachnah first sees the officer, he wonders

... *mi yodehe vos far a knepl, vos far ayn odn befokdekh dos iz?* (Y 247).

[literally, "Who knows what sort of a button (official), what sort of a lord in his bringing to account this is?"]

By making Sholem Shachnah open his deliberations with the Hebrew, rather than the Yiddish, formulation of the question "Who knows?" Rabinovitch weights the problem being pondered, since Hebrew, as the language of the Revealed Law, is the idiom in which countless profound spiritual questions are posed. Sholem Shachnah then describes the officer's exalted rank with the Hebrew phrase *odn befokdekh*, or, literally, "lord in your bringing to account." In the Penitential Prayers recited on the Eve of *Rosh Hashone*, from which this phrase is drawn, it is the humble opening of a plea for God, who brings all men to account, to temper with mercy the severity of Absolute Justice.¹⁶ In everyday Yiddish usage it is calculated, like the metonym *knepl*, button, applied to any man in uniform, to deflate the smallness of "man, proud man/Dress'd in a little brief authority." But

in Sholem Shachnah's social situation, the irony rebounds on itself. The official, as a functionary of the Tsar, is truly a "lord who brings to account." While Jews may believe that the decrees of Heaven set at naught the legislations of the world, they are in day-to-day experience more victims of the latter than beneficiaries of the former. Since human identity is derived not only from how we define ourselves, but from the roles in which others cast us, Sholem Shachnah's dream of making vast profits out of *imeniyes*, real-estate "transactions", can never be anything but a hopeless delusion in a Gentile world of which he simultaneously is, and is not, a part. His contemplation of the Russian official complacently taking his ease on the station bench offers the bitter alternative to the old wry acceptance of being Jewish, *S'iz shver tsu zayn a Yid*, "It's hard to be a Jew":

Tsu zayn a goy un nokh a knepl dertsu iz, aponim, taki gor nisht shlekht (Y 246-247).

It's not such a bad life to be a gentile, and an official one at that, with buttons ... (E 113).

It is the Russian official, not the Jew, who stretches himself out *vi ba'im tat'n in vayngorten*, "as if in his father's vineyard." In the Tsar's Russia, the prophetic promise (Isaiah 65:21-22) seems to have been fulfilled for the Gentile and denied to the Jew.

IV

Because an "absurd" existence continually displaces the boundaries of possibility, the tale's narrative strategy keeps reality and fantasy in ironic suspension throughout by employing the device of three overlapping narrative voices. The central comic disaster befalls one whose nickname has been earned through a lifetime of misadventures, and who is thus established as not only a *luftmentsh*, but a *shlimazl* as well, one about whom are continually told "bushels and baskets of stories" (E 111). Although his trials are reported in the minutest detail, suggesting that he has himself confided them, Sholem Shachnah's ambiguous position at the centre of "whole crates full of stories and anecdotes" throws doubt upon the credibility of what is related. The

misadventures of the permanently luckless are often exaggerated for the sake of a good yarn. The present purveyor of the latest Sholem Shachnah joke is presented reductively as "a Kasrilevke merchant, a dealer in stationery, that is to say, snips of paper" (E 111). This chatty raconteur is purportedly a substantial businessman, yet like Chaucer's Sergeant of the Lawe, he too "semed bisier than he was." His tale is offered on seemingly unimpeachable authority — *Eyn mayse ... ken ikh aykh dertsaylen, vos mit dem Sholem-Shachnah hot zikh farlofen Erev Peysekh; s'iz a mayse mit a hitl, un nisht keyn oysgetrakhte mayse, nor ayn emes'e, a raiyele mayse, khotsh zehen zeh't zi oys vi an anekdot* (Y 243) — to a willing listener in the *persona* of one Sholem Aleykhem who vouches for its truth in terms which radically undermine it:

I must confess that this true story, which he related to me, does indeed sound like a concocted one, and for a long time I couldn't make up my mind whether or not I should pass it on to you. But I thought it over and decided that if a respectable merchant and dignitary of Kasrilevke, who deals in stationery and is surely no *litterateur* [*A Kasrilevker yid a soykher, vos handelt mit obriyezkes, iz nit shayekh tsu literatur un geher zikh klal nit on mit keyn sform*] — if he vouches for a story, it must be true. What would he be doing with fiction? Here it is in his own words. I had nothing to do with it (E 112; Y 244).

At the same moment that the *litterateur* Sholem Aleykhem blandly invites us to believe that only literary people, corrupted by fiction, tell lies, he explicitly establishes that what he relates is a story told by one *luftmentsh* about another. If one can believe that, his two separate strategies of disverification imply, one can believe anything. ✓

Rabinovitsh then proceeds to insert into the whole course of the stationer's narrative what, by virtue of endless repetition, become two *choric refrains* which further undermine the veracity of what is being reported. The first is a regular assurance — *Sholem-Shachnah heyst es*, "Sholem Shachnah, that is" — that Sholem Shachnah is really the subject of the bizarre events described. This repetition, because it is directly meant to challenge credulity, goes far beyond the necessity often demanded in Yiddish speech-narration to remove ambiguity

about which of two persons spoken about is specifically meant. The second common Yiddish speech-narrative device, a frequent call for rapt attention to maintain a listener's suspense — *Ihr horkht tsi nayn?*, “Are you listening or not?” — comes in this context to demand, Believe, if you dare, that a *shtetl* Jew is treated with respect by Tsarist authority-worshippers who, conditioned to see objects instead of persons, treat all Jews with contempt, and all officials with servility. What reduces all this to “absurdity” for the Jew is that stock respect is accorded to an outward sign through which Christian officials render unto Caesar what for Jews is due unto God.

The use of multiple narrators forces the reader carefully to distinguish between whose views of events are actually being offered, and consequently where the truth of what is related actually lies. The second narrator recounts Sholem Shachnah's misadventures with heavy irony, not only for sport, but to heighten his own status. In effect, however, well as his style serves his anecdotal purpose, it ends up undercutting him as much as his subject. He classifies Sholem Shachnah as a *dreyer*, a word which, like Rosenfeld's English equivalent “rattler”, can denote both competence and incompetence. The deal from which Sholem Shachnah benefits was actually clinched by a professional man of affairs, Drobkin, *a groyse, a moyrediger dreyer*, “a great big fearsome rattler, a real-estate broker from way back” (Y 244-245; E 112). Sholem Shachnah, on the other hand, is a hopeless amateur: according to his itinerant biographer he is not a “rattler” but a “rattlebrain”, not a *dreyer* but a *drey-zikh*. The double edge of this irony becomes apparent when one recognises that it is, after all, to one who himself deals merely in snips of paper that the bumbling Sholem Shachnah appears irremediably provincial. The mockery he heaps on the pretensions of a fellow *luftmentsh* becomes self-exploding through an elaborate play on words — what he says of Sholem Shachnah could just as easily be said of himself:

A Yid dreyt un dreyt, koym oysgedreyt, kumt men tsugeyen un me makht ihm far oys dreyer! (Y 245).

A Jew twists and turns until he has almost turned himself inside out, and along they come and turn him into nothing (My translation).

Pretending to greater worldly wisdom, this petty trader in *obriyezkes* ridicules the naiveté of applying traditional Jewish processes of reasoning, with which he is himself obviously familiar, to situations in the Gentile world where these have no validity, as his own situation amply testifies. His joking with the self-consoling illusion that “a Jewish head” can solve all problems unintentionally becomes a joke at his own expense:

Iz men dokh ober a Yid, ihr horkht tsi nayn, falt er oyfeyn eytse ... (Y 247).

But that's why he's got a Jewish head on his shoulders — are you listening to me or not? — so he figures out the answer ... (E 114).

Only one who has been brought up to ponder life's problems in the same way could make Sholem Shachnah inwardly debate his terrifying confrontation with the Russian officer on the bench in the dialectic of a *yeshiva bokher*, and choose a course of action according to a Rabbinical conviction that God does not suffer injustice to prevail in the world:

Tsi iz dos taki a yoysher, az dos gantse bisl oylem-hazeh zol araynfaln tsu eynem, un dem anderen gornit? (Y 247).

So is this Justice, that all the pleasures of the Present World [as opposed to *oylem-habe*, the World to Come] should be given to one, and nothing to another? (My translation).

Playing Gentile games by Jewish rules is rendered even more farcical by Sholem Shachnah's effort to persuade the porter in *gem-ore-loshn*:¹⁷

Heyoys azoy vi er, Sholem Shachnah heyst es, vet zikh tsushparen a bisl ot doh oyfeyn ek bank, vu der odn ligt, un heyoys azoy vi er, Sholem Shachn' n heyst es, shoyndi dritte nakht, az er hot keyn oyg nisht tsugemakht, hot er moyre, er zol, kholile vekhas, nisht farshpetigen dem poyezd, alkeyn zol er, Yeremei heyst es, lemenashem, tomer shloft er, ihm oyfveken, Sholem Shachn' n heyst es, vorum morgen oyfder nakht hobn mir Yom-Tov, Peysekh ... (Y 247-248).

Whereas it will transpire that he, Sholem Shachnah of that name, will repose himself for a short while even here on a corner of that bench upon which the lord reclines, and inasmuch as it has befallen that it is now the third night that he, the Sholem Shachnah aforesaid, has not closed an eye, and he is in great fear lest he, may the Almighty forbid and avert it, might

delay and hence take nothing by his motion to board the steamcar, therefore on that account let him, Yeremei of that name, for the sake of the Holy One Blessed be He, be sure to awaken him, the Sholem Shachnah aforesaid, lest he be asleep, for wherefore on the morrow at night do we celebrate the Festival of Passover ... (My translation).

Giving Sholem Shachnah high-flown Talmudic legal language at this critical juncture enables the second narrator to deride him as a *shtetl* innocent abroad. But in the act of laughing at the small-time Jew trying to control the big-time Russian bureaucracy through the only means he considers adequate, we are moved to recognise the incapacity of his whole life's experience.

Hence the culminating irony of the tale is that for Kasrilevke the ultimate falsehood is not Sholem Shachnah's dream of success in the secular world, but his experience of obsequious treatment on a railway station. The jeering of *children*, importantly — so soon themselves to be Jewish adults in a Jew-hating world — suggests that, for one glorious moment, they themselves indulge a wish-fulfilment fantasy which, though it offers no likely change to the role they will end up playing in greater Russian society, nevertheless becomes real in direct proportion to the gusto with which they reject it:

They pointed him out in the streets and held their sides, laughing. And everybody asked him: 'How does it feel, Reb Sholem Shachnah, to wear a cap with a red band and a visor?' 'And tell us,' said others, 'what's it like to travel first class?' As for the children, this was made to order for them — you hear what I say? Wherever he went they trooped after him, shouting, 'Your Excellency! Your excellent Excellency! Your most excellent Excellency!'

"You think it's so easy to put one over on Kasrilevke?" (E 118).

Though Kasrilevke refuses to be taken in by either story, both are actually true. Sholem Shachnah did, in his ineffectual way, make a small fee as a distant middleman. In all its *grotesquerie* he did also put on the wrong hat and was treated with the deference due to rank. Yet he himself insists on falsifying both truths, and is made a double victim for his pains. By denying both reality and fantasy, the Kasrilevkites, as much as Sholem Shachnah himself, query the nature of reality for Jews under Tsarism. Try as they will, they cannot live

simultaneously inside and outside the profane values of the secular world. Within their *shtetl*, they may define a meaningful existence for themselves, but that *shtetl* is part of the Russian Empire, which defines, through intensifying government persecution, the precariousness of that existence. Their self-chosen division of experience can never be complete: balanced against their own *modus vivendi* is another which insists on redefining their identity to the extent of erasing it altogether.

V

The narrative makes the dimensions of this abstract problem concrete through recurrent journeys which become metaphors of rootlessness, whether undertaken in the wagons of peasants, or in that terrifying destroyer of all boundaries and distinctions, all securities and definitions, all meanings within earthly time itself — the train.¹⁸ The paper dealer's condemnation of the train is given, through the connotative varieties of the different languages he employs to voice it, the force of an extra-textual digression which pinpoints the principal source of Jewish dispossession and degradation:

*Pruvet akorsht, zayt moykhel, gebn a fohr-aroyts oyf a tsikavest tsu unz, keyn Kasrilevke heyst es, mit der nayer bahn, vos me hot unz a teyve getohn un tsugefihrt, vet ihr fihlen a tem gan-eydn! Ihr vet shoyn farzogen kinds-kinder! Vorum biz ihr kumt keyn Zlodievka, veyst ihr nokh, as ihr fohrt, un az ihr kumt keyn Zlodievka, hot ihr a peresadka, dos heyst, ihr darft zikh iberzetsen oyf der nayer bahn, vos me hot unz a teyve getohn un tsugefihrt keyn Kasrilevke. Badarft ihr koydem blayben shteyhen oyf etlekhe sho loyt der raspisanije, oyb me farshpetigt nit, un ven? Akurat nokh halbe nakht, ven s'iz gut mlosne oyf n hartsen un es vilt zikh gut shlofen, un siz nishto afilo vu dem kop tsutsushparen — nisht umzist zogen unzere Kasrilevker khakhomim un fartaytshen, vi ayer Teyve taytsh: **Tov shem meshemon tov — s vami dobre, a bez vas lutzhe.** Der pshat iz: az ohn der bahn is geven a sakh besser, vi mit der bahn (Y 245-246).*

Just try riding out our way on the new train and see how fast you'll arrive. Ah, what a pleasure! Did they do us a favor! I tell you, Mr Sholom Aleichem, for a taste of Paradise such as this you'd gladly forsake your own grandchildren! You see how it is: until you get to Zlodievka there isn't much you can do about it, so you just lean back and ride. But at Zlodievka

the fun begins, because that's where you have to change, to get onto the new train, which they did us such a favour by running out to Kasrilevke. But not so fast. First, there's the little matter of several hours' wait, exactly as announced in the schedule — provided, of course, that you don't pull in after the Kasrilevke train has left. And at what time of night may you look forward to this treat? The very middle, thank you, when you're dead tired and disgusted, without a friend in the world except sleep — and there's not one single place in the whole station where you can lay your head, not one. When the wise men of Kasrilevke quote the passage from the Holy Book, "*Tov shem meshemon tov*," they know what they're doing. I'll translate it for you: We were better off without the train (E 113).

To place them squarely within the purviews of the ubiquitous Tsarist bureaucracy, the mechanical functionings of a railway service, like a change of trains [*peresadka*] and a timetable [*raspisanije*], or often the train itself [*poyezd*], are referred to in Russian. But the most devastating verbal indictment against the fragmentation caused by this supposed "progress" appears in the quotation from Ecclesiastes 7:1, cited first in Hebrew, then explained with a Russian proverb, and finally paraphrased in plain Yiddish. The generalised moral observation, by virtue of being restated in three languages, each of which carries specific existential connotations for Jews, is thus transformed into a kind of syllogism of reduction. Its first term, the Scriptural teaching that "a good name is better than precious ointment", insists on rigorously separating the spiritual from the material, and giving exclusive weight to the former. Its second term, a common Russian proverb, "With you it's good, and without you it's better", coarsely acknowledges material benefits, the cost of which ultimately outweighs any advantages gained. The dichotomy thus presented is neatly united and reduced by the Yiddish conclusion, "We were better off without the train". With their mobility curtailed, cut off from contaminating contact with the Gentile world, Jews could indulge the illusion that they lived in daily and holy expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Now, however, the train breaks down their protected confines, scatters them about in the void of the outside world, and bursts Jew-hatred violently in upon them. All too often, in the work of Rabinovitch, the train will as rapidly separate families forever as it will bring carloads

of pogromists to raze whole *shtetlakh* where they stand. This is why the station platform appears to Sholem Shachnah a vision of death and the torments of Gehenna which will follow it:

Bekitzur, gekumen mit tshemodandel keyn Zlodievka, hot unzer Sholem-Shachnah, ihr horkht tsi nayn, vos iz shoyn friher tsvey nekht nisht geshlofen, zikh tsugegrayt layden khibut ha'kever, dos heyst, opvarten a nakht — vos zol me tohn? — un genumen zukhen eyn ort oyf tsutsuzetsen zikh. Ver? Vos? — Nishto! Ongeroykhert, ongeshpigen, finster, khoyshekh (Y 246).

To make a long story short, when our Sholem Shachnah arrived in Zlodievka with his carpetbag he was half dead; he had already spent two nights without sleep. But that was nothing at all to what was facing him — he still had to spend the whole night waiting in the station. What shall he do? Naturally he looked around for a place to sit down. Whoever heard of such a thing? Nowhere. Nothing. No place to sit. The walls of the station were covered with soot, the floor was covered with spit. It was dark, it was terrible (E 113).

Rosenfeld's otherwise sound English version does not fully convey the apocalyptic connotations of the Hebrew words employed in this description. Sholem Shachnah comes to the station prepared to endure *khibut ha'kever*, the punishment of the wicked after death: the smoke-filled filth which surrounds him is not only murk, but *khoyshekh*, recalling the *khoshekh al p'nei t'hom* or darkness which was upon the face of the deep before Divine Light brought the world out of chaos. Subconscious terror that for Jews, too, "the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" racks the dream which disturbs his exhausted sleep by vividly bodying forth *a gants farplontenish*, "a total derangement" of self and station which Jews suffer outside the confines of *shtetl* and community.¹⁹ Once again he finds himself a passenger in a Gentile conveyance, this time hastening to impose order on an aggregatingly chaotic existence by observing the ritual of the Passover *Seder*. In the wagon of the *orl*, or uncircumcised one, Sholem Shachnah's ability to perform his religious obligations as a member of the Covenant is made dependent on the goodwill of one who is specifically placed outside that Covenant. The Festival of Freedom must ironically still be celebrated in Egypt, where the

alternative to being painfully dragged thither is being hurtled along at a breakneck speed which, in tearing off his hat, threatens to obliterate him both spiritually and physically: *nokh a minut — un er verd tsheshoten*, “another moment and he would be scattered [to pieces].” Sholem Shachnah’s instinctive reaction emblematises his desperation to preserve his selfhood:

...[er] *khapt zikh mit beyde hent ba’ im kop un klogt zikh, az er hot farloyren dos hitl* (Y 249).

Agonised over the loss of his whole identity as a Jew which hatlessness symbolises, Sholem Shachnah endures the fearsome climax of his terror fantasy when the wagon suddenly stops dead still in the middle of an open field where, hatless and homeless, he must confront an existence entirely deprived of defining parameters. At this precise moment, he is abruptly awakened from a dream to a reality which actualises his worst fears — in the hurly-burly of a railway station, he unwittingly not only loses his own hat but puts on that of the official; not only sheds his identity as a Jew, but assumes that of a Gentile; not only discards his lowliness as one of the oppressed, but gains the status of one of the oppressors. Dream and reality merge: *di mashmoes, as der kholem iz nit keyn kholem* (Y 249), “the probability is that the dream is not a dream.” He awakens from identitilessness in the middle of an imaginary open field, into identitilessness in an all-too-real “field of (Gentile) folk”.

VI

This tale, which appears in a volume of stories entitled *Fun Peysekh biz Peysekh* [From Passover to Passover], is set on the eve of *z’man kheyrutaynu*, that Festival which celebrates God’s redemption of His Chosen People from bondage. Its significance informs both the frame narration and the story proper. The stationer regrets that Sholem Aleykhem is in a hurry to get home as it is *Erev Peysekh* (Y 243), a necessity which parallels the source of all Sholem Shachnah’s misfortunes.²¹

In the Diaspora, the Passover *Seder* recalls the promise of redemption in its concluding prayer, “Next year in Jerusalem.” The pain of

this unfulfilled wish for all Jews in the Tsar’s Russia is self-evident, but it is intensified for Sholem Shachnah personally when he is compelled to spend “both Seders among strangers in the house of a Jew in Zlodievka” (E 117). Despite the Talmudic teaching that all Israel are responsible one for another, true Jewish belonging is here shown to depend upon individual families and own dwelling-places. Sholem Shachnah’s concern, having made a little money, is to send it home immediately to provide his family with the means of celebrating the Festival with the dignity it demands, and in turn bestows on its celebrants (Y 245; E 112).

Celebrating the Passover becomes a ritual not only of religious, but of social self-assertion, the only means through which a Jew in Tsarist Russia may attain any degree of self-esteem. In pressing on the Ivan Zlodi of his dream, Sholem Shachnah speaks urgently of the need to be home in time for *paska nasha yevreiska*, “our Jewish Easter”, hoping to wrest respect for his own religious observances by equating them with those of the Christian. The Ukrainian waggoner can only be encouraged to do Jews a favour by a false correspondence between his religion and theirs, just as Russian station officials can only be prevailed upon to treat a Jew with dignity when they falsely take him for one of themselves. To survive in Exile, this tale makes clear, a Jew must exist.

... on guile ... The Jew had always managed to smuggle his way in through crime and madness. He had stolen into Canaan and into Egypt. Abraham had pretended that Sarah was his sister. The whole two thousand years of exile ... had been one great act of smuggling.²⁰

The significant irony, however, is that unlike Singer’s Herman Broder, whose formulation this is, Rabinovitsh’s Sholem Shachnah has no conscious intention to deceive. He *knows* there is no similarity between *Peysekh* and Easter with the same conviction that he *knows* it is not he but the Russian official who has been awakened and put into a first-class compartment. Yet we know, as well as Rabinovitsh who writes the tale, that there *is* a direct connection between *Peysekh* and Easter, just as we know that it *is* actually Sholem Shachnah who sees his reflection in the mirror in an alien hat. The deliberate juxtaposition

of *Peysek* and Easter invites the ambivalent recognition that in the Tsar's Russia, both Jews and Christians annually celebrate a festival of spiritual redemption under conditions which testify only to temporal subjugation.

In its widest implications, this confusion of real with ideal touches the nerve centre of Jewish identity in the Russian *Golah*. The Jews are, theologically speaking, God's chosen people singled out for a particular mission, just as they are, politically speaking, the Tsar's rejected subjects, singled out for particular persecution. Viewing the prospects of their long-term survival, they must cling fervently to faith in a God who gives no evident sign of his benevolent intentions, in despite of terror at a Tsar whose malign purposes are daily apparent. In such an ambiguous state of being, human assurance cannot exist. Hence Sholem Shachnah's wife is enraged most by the import of his telegram:

Zi hot zikh a nem gegeben tsu ihm gants raiyel. Zi hot tsu ihm nisht gehat keyn taynes nit defar, vos er iz nit gekumen oyf yom-tov aheym, un nisht far' n royten okoleshok mit der kokarde — nayn! Dos alts iz zi ihm dervayl moykhel; defar vet zi zikh shoyt mit ihm shpeter rekhenen; — a tayne tsu ihm hot zi gehat nor far der depesh. Un nit azoy far der depesh, ihr horkht tsi nayn, vi far' n vort bezpremyenno. Velkher gute yohr hot ihm getrogen, er zol raykh makhen kazna: "Bezpremyenno yedu paska domoi"? Un bekhlar vi kon a lebediger mentsh zogen "bezpremyenno"? ... (Y 253).

And did she give him a royal welcome! Did she lay into him! Mind you, she didn't complain about his spending the holiday away from home, and she said nothing about the red band and the visor. She let that stand for the time being; she'd take it up with him later. The only thing she complained about was — the telegram! And not so much the telegram — you hear what I say? — as the one short phrase, *without fail*. What possessed him to put that into the wire: *Arriving home Passover without fail?* Was he trying to make the telegraph company rich? And besides, how dare a human being say "without fail" in the first place? (E 117).

For her, the waste of money is aggravated by its open defiance of a Scriptural teaching which, whether she is aware of it or not, informs the attitude of all pious Jews: "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth" (Proverbs 27:1). Her rage is

directed against a condition of existence which cannot be amended. The accident which so radically amended it for Sholem Shachnah, even briefly, underscores the appalling disparity between things as they could be, and things as they are.

VII

While both Gogol and Rabinovitsh maintain the *status quo* of their respective worlds, it is preserved by the former as inherently beneficent, and by the latter as irremediably to be endured. Where Gogol's humour upholds Tsarism by making it, however grotesquely, the instrument of restored justice, Rabinovitsh upholds human values, and the Jewish faith which informs them, in despite of Gentile persecution. The ghost of Akakiy Akakiyevitch finds rest in the folds of the Important Person's overcoat. His ghostly visitation makes an insecure and self-important blusterer into a better administrator for the Tsar, and he himself receives in spirit what was denied him in flesh:

The encounter had made a deep impression on him. From that time onwards he would seldom say: 'How dare you! Do you realise who is standing before you?' to his subordinates. And if he did have occasion to say this, it was never without first hearing what the accused had to say. But what was more surprising than anything else the ghostly clerk disappeared completely. Obviously the general's coat was a perfect fit (P 107).

Gogol, perceiving in Tsarism not wounds to humanity but blemishes on the perfect face of absolutism, burns them off with derision. Rabinovitsh, recognising his powerlessness to heal these wounds, uses laughter to soothe them.²² Sholem Shachnah is restored from identitiless terror to the bosom of home and family, where even the tirade of his wife and the ridicule of his townsfolk are redemptive, because they reassert, in wholeheartedly human terms, those relationships which confer and receive meaning from his existence. The difference, after all, between a *luftmentsh* and a ghost is finally the difference between being alive and being dead.

Notes

1. The peasant innkeeper, Peter Sabouroff, repeatedly gives this self-interested response to the sufferings of the world around him in the Prologue to *Vera: or The Nihilists* by Oscar Wilde. *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*. Vol. 2: *Vera and Other Early Plays*. New York: Doubleday, 1923. pp. 8-9.
2. See, for instance, Iswolsky, H. *Christ in Russia: The History, Tradition and Life of the Russian Church*. Kingswood: Bruce, 1962. pp. 110-121.
3. Cf. Billington, J.H. *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture*. New York: Vintage, 1970. pp. 290-296.
4. Quoted in Madison, C. *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers*. New York: Schocken, 1971. p. 96.
5. Peace, R. *The Enigma of Gogol*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. pp. 9-10.
6. Gogol, N.V. 'The Overcoat' in *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*. Translated with an introduction by Ronald Wilks. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982. p. 76. All subsequent quotations and page references from 'The Overcoat' are made from this translation, and are incorporated into the text between parentheses after the letter P.
7. Peace, R. op. cit. p. 143.
8. Of the destination to which Gogol's tortured humour led him, James Billington observes:
"Gogol ... could offer no simple message or hopeful conclusions; he could find no guiding road except one which led to destruction — first of his later works and then of the frail body which had linked him with the world. The caricatured figures of *Dead Souls* ... reveal Gogol's fascination with human disfigurement ... But there is no bearer of salvation, nothing as compelling as the images of evil and blight."
Billington, J.H. op. cit. p. 339.
9. Rabinovitch's ongoing response to Tsarist tyranny is explored by Roskies, D.G. *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984. Chapter 7, pp. 163-192.
10. Howe, I. and Wisse, R.R., eds. *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979. Introduction, pp. viii-ix.
11. Rabinovitch, S.J. (pseud. Sholem Aleykhem). 'Iber a Hitl.' *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleykhem*. Vol. 2: *Fun Peysekh biz Peysekh*. Vilna: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1925. pp. 243-254. English version 'On Account of a Hat.' Translated by Isaac Rosenfeld in Howe, I. and Greenberg, E., eds. *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*. New York: Schocken, 1973. pp. 111-118. All subsequent quotations and page references from the Yiddish original are incorporated into the text between parentheses after the letter Y, and from the English translation after the letter E.
12. I am grateful to my colleague, Dr Merle Williams, for suggesting some of the ramifications of stereotyping for the art of Rabinovitch and Gogol.
13. Peace, R. op. cit. p. 142 and fn. 75, p. 325. Professor Peace offers strong proof for this re-reading of 'The Overcoat' simply by making this elementary calculation — something which, having been done, appears obvious, but which the majority of readers never bother to do, and so willingly allow themselves to be gulled by Gogol.
14. In general terms, this significance of his hat to Sholem Shachnah has been noted in a recent essay by Murray Baumgarten, 'Clothing and Character.' in Miller, D.N., ed. *Discovering the Canon: Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986. pp. 89-91. As my argument will show, however, I do not share what seems to me Baumgarten's implication that since "Sholem Shachnah cannot accept the good fortune of even momentarily being someone he isn't" (p. 90), he really wants to be accepted by the Gentile world.
15. Camus, A. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Quoted by Esslin, M. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968. p. 23.
16. The actual sentence in Hebrew, from which this phrase is taken, reads: *Adon b'fokdakh enosh lab'korim b'mitzui ha'din al timtakh*, literally, "O Lord, in Your bringing [of man] to account every morning, do not be over-strict in Your judgement." *Seder Slikhot l'Erev Rosh Ha'Shanah*. Vilna, 1855. p. 57.
17. I am grateful to Dr David Roskies for a personal letter in which he draws my attention to this stylistic device.
18. Interestingly and ironically, the arrival of railroads aroused similar consternation in Russians themselves. Railroads "were to become symbols of modern Russia with its interrelated process of spiritual destruction and material progress"; they provoked a "sense of confusion and bitterness"; and they "brought the first massive intrusion of mechanical force into the timeless, vegetating world of rural Russia, and a great increase in social and thus class mobility throughout the empire." Billington, J.H. op. cit. pp. 382-385.
19. David Roskies notes:
"The dream sequence, of course, is the storyteller's shorthand for the hero's psychic state. It is also the pivotal point in the story, where reality gives way to hallucination. For once Sholem Shachnah awakens, he no longer knows what world he's in. Which brings us to the central theme of the story — the crisis of identity."

Roskies, D.G. 'On Account of Two Hats.' in Cardin, N.B. and Silverman, D.W., eds. *The Seminary at 100*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987. p. 245.

20. Singer, I.B. *Enemies, A Love Story*. Connecticut: Fawcett Crest, 1972. p. 226.

21. The great deal of critical attention which the complexities of this story have received has been summarised by Ruth Wisse:

'The kernel "story" of "On Account of a Hat" ... was once told to me as a regional Jewish joke, in about ten seconds. Out of this insubstantial matter, Sholom Aleichem has woven a masterpiece with a dozen interpretations: it is the plight of the Diaspora Jew, an exposure of rootlessness, a mockery of tyranny, the comic quest for identity, a Marxist critique of capitalism, and, of course, an ironic self-referential study of literary sleight of hand ... It is easy to mock the highfalutin readings this story has received, but those who catch its serious import are not wrong either.'

Howe, I. and Wisse, R.R. loc. cit. p. xxvi. I am encouraged by Dr Wisse's remarks to avoid apologising for contributing yet another 'highfalutin' reading of this story.

22. Of particular interest is the fact that Rabinovitsh greatly admired Gogol, to the extent that he hung the Russian writer's portrait in his study next to that of Mendele. That Rabinovitsh was influenced by Gogol is undoubted, but critical dispute centres around the nature of that influence. It has been argued that "What is most prized today in Sholem Aleichem's work owed its inspiration to Gogol." Cf. Roskies, D.G. 'The Storyteller as Hero.' Review of *Tevye the Dairyman and the Railway Stories*. Translated with an introduction by Hillel Halkin. *The New Republic*. 9 November, 1987. p. 39, cols. 1-2. However, the *mentshlekhkayt* so characteristic of Rabinovitsh, even in the darkest stories of his last period, seems to me entirely absent from Gogol, whose sardonic mockery precludes either compassion or hope from any but those readers determined to superimpose their own brand of liberal humanism on Gogol's work because they believe it should really exist there. *Dead Souls* seems to me more terrifying than encouraging, while such stories as 'Ivan Shponka and His Aunt' and 'The Quarrel of the Two Ivans' provoke the laughter of the insane asylum which Poprishchin inhabits.

4 ANTI-SEMITIC TRENDS IN SOVIET DOSTOEVSKY SCHOLARSHIP OF THE BREZHNEV ERA

Henrietta Mondry

The beginning of the present decade saw the publication, by Soviet Dostoevsky scholars, of two rather strange books. The authors of these books approached an issue which had been silenced from the beginnings of Soviet Dostoevsky scholarship, namely Dostoevsky's anti-Semitism. Amongst Western scholars, the author of the most extensive and exhaustive study of Dostoevsky's attitude towards the Jews, David Goldstein,¹ spoke of the total self-censorship of Russian and Soviet scholars *vis-à-vis* this aspect of Dostoevsky's writing. Apart from V. Soloviev,² D. Merezhkovsky,³ and M. Gorky,⁴ pre-revolutionary critics avoided the issue altogether. In the Soviet period, it was only L. Grossman⁵ who courageously broke the silence in his *Confession of One Jew*, and A. Steinberg and P. Berlin, two emigré critics, who addressed the problem of Dostoevsky's attitude towards Judaism. Goldstein's own conclusion, reached after a thorough examination of Dostoevsky's literary and journalistic writings, demonstrates Dostoevsky's racial, economic and political anti-Semitism. This verdict was modified by Joseph Frank (1981), who described Dostoevsky as a "guilty anti-Semite".

The two books under discussion, *V Mire Dostoevskogo* (Moscow, 1980) and *Tri Kruga Dostoevskogo* (Moscow, 1979), appeared after the publication of Goldstein's study *Dostoevsky and the Jews*, and thus could not capture Goldstein's attention. The two books mark the end of critical self-censorship and of the official silence *vis-à-vis* Dostoevsky's anti-Semitism. What is more, the two books in question also turned the pages of literary scholarship into a forum for anti-Semitic argumentation.