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The Moral Exploiter: Sholom Aleichem's *A mentsh fun Buenos-Ayres*

Employing the device of a railroad passenger recalling conversations and stories related to him by his fellow travelers, Sholom Aleichem artfully weaves depictions of contemporary issues and social problems with subtle character portrayals offering insights into human nature in his Ayznban-geshikhtes. Long hours spent aboard a third-class railway car traversing the Pale of Settlement permit the narrator to hone his skills as an observer of humanity, enabling him to create a typology of personalities based on the diverse characters he encounters.

Despite his clandestine occupation as a white slave trader - a social ill whose significant participation by Eastern European Jewry as both exploiters and victims at the turn of the century has caused Yiddish to leave its recognizable imprint on the languages of South America - the title character of *A mentsh fun Buenos-Ayres* represents but an ordinary man struggling for sustenance and acceptance in a society where externally imposed economic restrictions transform 'parnose' into the pre-eminent value. Fraught with internal contradictions and hypocrisy of which he is only superficially aware, he seeks recognition in a Jewish society where all but the tiny elite comprised of the learned and the wealthy are wholly powerless. He is the 'Jedermann,' or as the narrator himself explains, "glat a lebedikn pasazhir" (71) traveling aboard a railway which, with its various passengers, represents a microcosm of Eastern European Jewish society.

Since the narrator, a traveling salesman in search of companionship and good conversation during his travels, reports not a single utterance on his own part until the final paragraphs of the tale, one is inclined to characterize the story as a monologue related via a narrator serving as but a literary device. However, upon closer reading, one realizes that the narrator's role is not restricted simply to relating his interlocutor's words and guiding the

reader's questions about the nature of the mysterious traveler's occupation and the veracity of his claims. Rather, the narrator's own views and values are reflected through those details of the merchant's appearance and conduct which he selects to relate. In fact, only at the end of the story, does the narrator choose to relate verbatim his conversation with his acquaintance.

The 'merchant' from Buenos Aires ranks lowest in the narrator's hierarchy of travel companions, for, without specifically divulging the source of his wealth, he offers no knowledge which can improve the narrator's economic position. In the evaluation of the narrator, a businessman accustomed like his companion to appraising wares, he is neither a true "soykher...vos farshteyt gesheft" nor a "geroykherte lyulke" from whom "Me ken...epis nashn." (71) His conversation is of no educational, i.e. practical value as he is merely a "lebediker un freylikher un a baredevdiker." (71)

What impresses one immediately about the merchant from Buenos-Aires is his seemingly boundless self-absorption, a quality of which the reader is warned by the narrator in the opening paragraphs of the story:

Un a mol shikt aykh Got tsu glat a lebedikn pasazhir...Dos moyl makht zikh ihm nit tsu redendik, un nur fun zikh, un nur fun zikh, 71

So garrulous and self-absorbed is the merchant that he allows precious little room for interruptions of his monologue, preferring an attentive listener to a lively conversation partner. Obsessed by an almost pathological desire to demonstrate his material worth and personal merit to others, he proudly recounts his transformation from a ragged shtetl urchin to a successful international businessman. Consequently, the man from Argentina repeatedly insists upon his wealth in the face of prior adversity. More than once he assures the narrator that he is traveling third class, not for lack of economic means ("Gelt iz blote," he asserts, 74), but rather in order to be among the 'proste mentshn' among whose ranks he includes himself - people whom he can most easily impress with his affluence and tale of the self-made man. For much of the story, he continues to dazzle the narrator with ostentatious demonstrations of his wealth, beginning with the display of his bill-stuffed wallet and

gleaming ring and continuing with endless boasting of costly expenditures and his buying-power in general.

Since he is a product of the same broad class of 'proste mentshn' as the merchant from Buenos Aires, the narrator shares what is, at first glance at least, the merchant's superficial materialism. He offers the reader an appraisal of the merchant's diamond ring ("Der ring, oyb er iz nor an emeser, darf vert zayn nit vintsiker fun fir-finf hundert...", 73) and, admiring the merchant's "net un nobel" (78) dress, declares one's external appearance the supreme indicator of a person's character. In his mind, a person so elegantly and expensively attired is of necessarily irreproachable integrity.

After feigning hesitancy and inability to recall the unbearable torment of his earlier years as a means to heighten the tension of his monologue, the merchant without the slightest difficulty takes to recounting the poverty and suffering which characterize his youth:

Az ikh tu a mol a trakht, hert ir, vos bin ikh geven, az ikh bin geven a kind, shteln zikh mir...di hor kapoyr! Ikh ken mikh, hert ihr, gar nit dermonen vegn dem. Ikh ken mikh nit dermonen un vil mikh nit dermonen. (74)

Beginning with childhood flight after a physically abusive step-father drives him from his home in a tiny shtetl in Kurland, a long series of purported escapes from situations of destitution, abuse, and arduous labor serve as a leitmotif in the narration of the restless merchant. The words, "ir vet mir gloybn, tsi nit?", represent a trope which permits the merchant repeatedly to elaborate bold claims intended to stupefy his travel companion. Initial skepticism as to the veracity of the merchant's tale arises in the reader, however, when the merchant's hand - purportedly maimed by his stepfather - reveals itself to be "veykhe, guzunte, pukhke." (75). While he reports this observation, the narrator does not yet begin to doubt the details of his companion's biography, still too impressed by his affluence.

The self-aggrandizing merchant delights further in telling of beatings at the hands of the capricious blind cantor and his travels through Mitava and Libava before departing for Buenos-Aires. After fleeing backbreaking labor in the wilds of Argentina, in comparison with which he dismisses the Hebrews' slavery in Egypt as a "tayere metsie" (77), the

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merchant begins to detail his rise to the top of his trade and expound on his philosophy of professional ethics. While the merchant's propensity toward exaggeration is by now evident to the reader, the narrator fails to notice this as yet, captivated instead by this near breathless autobiography and enjoying the generosity of his gourmand acquaintance. As perhaps an unconscious reflex to a youth plagued by hunger, the merchant interrupts his monologue on all but one occasion only to indulge his voracious appetite for food, drink, and cigars. Eager to learn the source of the merchant's wealth, the narrator merely begins to wonder as to the nature of the merchandise through which his traveling companion has amassed such a staggering fortune. Thus, smitten with the merchant's wealth he remarks, "...mayn khevreman trinkt mit aza min apetit, az me meg im mekane zayn. Mir ober gribelt di gantse tsayt in moykh eyn gedank: mit vos far a min artikl handelt er...?" (83).

While he avoids direct identification of his trade - referring to himself simply as a 'Lieferant' in the elevated daytshmerish of the world of commerce, or perhaps his germanized native Kurland dialect (his dialogue also evinces such German loan words as 'Wirtschaft,' 'Stufe,' and 'versuchen, 'the latter meaning here 'to attempt'), Motek the merchant does not hesitate to reveal it in all but name, although the narrator does not recognize this. He is wholly unashamed of his illicit occupation, instead reveling in his business acumen. Remembering his own experiences as a 'mentsh' working for his current partners before deciding "az arbeyn oyf yenem toygt oyf kapoyres" (79), Motek prides himself on his compassionate treatment of his own "mentshn," who "lebn zikh op...vi di Roytshilds" (81) in his employment. Refusing ever again to execute lowly tasks for the benefit of others, he is pleased with the autonomy and self-sufficiency which this elevated position in the underworld secures him. Moreover, the prestige and social influence afforded him through "gifts" of charity and bribery further legitimize his unethical dealings in his eyes. Even the rabbis of a Jerusalem Yeshiva profit from his philanthropy, surely willing to overlook the illicit source of his wealth when seeking contributions.

Declaring his respect for even the most menial of labor as long as it is honest ("Ale parnosos zenen sheyn. Abi ir handelt orentlekh un abi dos vort iz a vort.", 80), he fails to recognize the moral abasement of his profession, insisting instead upon his personal integrity in business affairs:

Nor ir meg't gloybn oyf nemones, az keyn ganef bin ikh nit. Keyn gazlen bin ikh avade nit. Un keyn shvindler oykh nit. Lomir hobn aza yor, vos far eyn orentlikher soykher ikh bin. (80)

In his own eyes, the man from Buenos Aires is a virtuous man who has worked his way up the professional ladder through personal integrity and talent, loyalty to this employers, and sheer effort:

Di rekhte hant bin ikh bay zey [his employers] geven. Dos gantse gesheft, ken men zogn, iz geven oyf mir. Baym koyfn skhoyre, baym farkoyfn skhoyre, baym opshatsn skhoyre, baym sortim skhoyre - umetum ikh... (81)
Ikh meg zikh barimen, hert ir, az ikh hob zey gedint erlikh, vos erlikher ken shoyn gar nit zayn. (84)

He is unaffected by the immorality of the white slave trade, reassured by the knowledge that he provides a service that is in great demand, albeit by a society which is ashamed and loathe to call it by its proper name. Indeed, once its victims are reduced to simple merchandise - 'skhoyre' - the whole trade becomes of course sanitized and the dehumanized victims cease to possess any more than economic value. As Motek himself explains, he deals in

di skhoyre, vos ale veysn, nur keyner redt nit fun dem... Vayl di velt iz shoyn tsu a kluge, un mentshn zenen shoyn tsu gaytsik. Zey hobn faynt, az me zogt zey shvarts, s'iz shvarts, un oyf vays, s'iz vays. Zey hobn beser lib, farkert, az me zogt zey oyf shvarts, s'iz shvarts, un oyf veys, s'iz vays (80).

He is unconcerned with the moral contradictions inherent in his activity as an 'honest merchant' of dishonest merchandise, for he recognizes this same behavior in the surrounding society thanks to whose own contradictions he has captured the wealth and dignity he sorely lacked in his youth. He is well aware that the society in which he lives depends upon dissimulation in order to protect itself from the recognition of its own ignominies, preferring to call black that which is white and white that which is black - an illusion both to the term 'vaysn-shklav-handel' and society's conscious practice of cosmetically concealing its

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ugliness through language in a game of ethical self-deception. Only the newspapers cause him and his colleagues occasional grief - not out of moral conviction in his view, but merely because "di gazetn zenen zikh mekhaye, abi zey hobn fun vos tsu klingen ." (81). With the police on their payroll, however, he and his colleagues remain relatively undisturbed by journalists' denunciations.

Despite his avowed loyalty to the former bosses for whom he claims to have risked his life, he does not hesitate to threaten starting his own business with company secrets ("Vayl s'iz do soydes, hert ir, soydes mit soydes.", 84) in order to become a partner and thereby satisfy his personal ambition and ideal of self-reliance. He is even unaware of the contradiction inherent in a business whose partners supposedly enjoy each other's complete confidence ("Mir gloybn zikh eyms dos andere oyfn vort.", 82), yet nonetheless each employs a network of private agents and spies as a guarantee of this trust. After all, he explains, "Gesheft, vos firt zikh oyf nemones, ken andersh nit geyn." (87).

In his own eyes, Motek has never abandoned traditional shtetl values. A child of poverty, he has become the 'gvir' upon whose philanthropy others depend and who is thus accorded honor in the shtetl of his birth. Receiving a welcome worthy of the Messiah in Soshmaken - a shtetl which in the past has only offered him "hilkhike petsh, trukene klep, ayzerne stusakes, royte funken in di oygn, bloye tseykhns oyfn layb un dertsu a hungerikn mogn" (75) - represents perhaps the most eagerly awaited moment in his life: each day he sends a telegram to the residents to remind them of his imminent arrival so that he may be greeted with exuberant shouts of "Motek iz gekumen, undzer Motek fun Buenos-Ayres" (88). Further, the merchant's face is described by a narrator who typically devotes little attention to physical detail as becoming transfigured as he envisions his triumphant return: Epis iz dokh yunger gevorn. Yunger un sheyner. Un di kleyne boymeldike oygelekh hobn bakumen gor an ander fayerl mit a nayem glants fun freyd un fun gediles un fun libshaft. Fun emese, nit gemakhte libshaft. (86)

It is to the shtetl of his birth which he returns in order to find a virtuous bride, visit the graves of his relatives, and impress all those who remain with his wealth, for it is

acceptance which he seeks most of all through his relentless boasting. Now that he has compensated for the material deprivation of his youth, he seeks to shower his bride with wealth and establish the model bourgeois family:

Ikh vil an anshtendig kind. A yidishe tokhter. Zi meg zeyn vi orem, vel ikh deroyf nit kukn...Ikh vel ihr oysputsn , hert ir, a palats vi far a printsessin...Di kinder vel ikh lozn shtudirn. Dem oyf doktor, dem oyf inzshinier, dem oyf yurist. Di tokhter vel ikh opshikn in a yidishen geschloenes pensyon. (87)

It is insignificant whether Motek's claims are entirely true or largely the exaggerations of an 'engrossiste,' as the narrator is inclined to believe by the end of the story. Having internalized the importance of 'parnose' - a value not unique to the shtetl, but one of perhaps unsurpassed importance there due to the Jew's precarious existence as an extremely discriminated minority in not infrequent physical danger - he has acquired through illicit means the wealth and influence unavailable to him in the tiny shtetl and now returns on a visit in order to enjoy his new found position of honor in its social hierarchy.

Despite his vaunting and apparent blindness to a hypocritical system of values, Motek the merchant from Buenos Aires is but a man like any other striving for acceptance and recognition. While his moral inconsistencies are perhaps more striking than those of others, it is only through the contradictions of a larger society which is willing to overlook immorality in return for payment and to provide a market for his unspoken commodity that his livelihood is possible. Thus, Motek is reassured in his self-perception as but an honest merchant in search of 'parnose' like any other.