

Voices of Ambivalence in Sholem Aleichem's Monologues

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IT IS GENERALLY RECOGNIZED that Sholem Aleichem's success as a writer rests upon an almost mystical intermingling of laughter and trembling, the combination of traits that Bellow singled out as characteristic of Jewish literature in general.¹ Since the appearance of his fiction in the 1880s, generations of readers have been asking themselves just how Sholem Aleichem manages to both move and amuse them simultaneously. A quick review of his most memorable characters—Mott the cantor's son, Tevye the dairyman, Menakhem-Mendl the *luftmentsh*—demonstrates that the human voice is the medium of his great achievement, for in spoken language he found his vehicle for expressing Jewish life in Eastern Europe at the turn of the century.² The best works of Sholem Aleichem are his first person addresses, sometimes delivered directly to the mediator-author seated in a third class train compartment or under a tree, or written compulsively to an unreceptive wife. In all cases, the variety and perfection of idiosyncrasy in each individual voice earn our admiration. It is the monologue, therefore, that gives shape to all of his work and any attempt to understand his art must address itself to the nature of that form. Moreover, Sholem Aleichem's monologues are some of the finest expressions of the general preoccupation with spokenness and the human voice in Yiddish literature.

Sholem Aleichem inherited the monologue form both from the general European literary tradition, where it is known specifically in Russian literary scholarship as the *skaz*,³ and from the Yiddish literary

and hence expressing the "feminine" nature of the Jewish people in Eastern Europe are far less convincing. As I plan to point out, it is not just the garrulousness of the speakers that is unnerving; it is the hidden substance of their speech, which occasionally the listeners, and we the readers, are able to detect. As Dan Mirron has noted, the comedy of the monologues depends on the reader's being superior in intellect to the speaker. In other words, a gap exists between the cultivated and uncultivated mind, the former seeing history in an ordered cause-and-effect relationship and the latter seeing it as random, disconnected and illogical. The distinction is a valuable one and, I believe, confirms the point that the monologues are critical artistic fabrications and not the product alone of a sensitive literary stenographer rendering the voice of the people. But while our superiority as listeners may indeed contribute to our laughter, it does not account for our sense of dread at the darker side of the monologues. They are not all comic in tone, and the ironic distance created by what Mirron has accurately called the cultivated mind's view of the uncultivated one results in pathos and despair as often as it does in comedy. Moreover, the listener and reader are not always synonymous, as in *Dos tepl* ("The Pot") and *An eyfse* ("A Piece of Advice"), where a rabbi and the author's persona respectively are the listeners. The rabbi in *Dos tepl* may be more cultivated than the speaker, but he does not necessarily share our perspective.

In place of an emphasis on either comedy or pathology, I would suggest that there exists a general tension in all of the monologues, at times surfacing as comedy, at other times surfacing as pathos, and that this tension results not so much from cultivated listeners and uncultivated speakers as it does from a collision of traditionalists and secularists, conservatives and radicals, or a collective world view of absolutes coming up against an individualistic skeptical view. Since the speaker is usually a traditionalist of one type or another, he or she feels like an outsider to a changing world they no longer understand. Thus, comic techniques that are frequently repeated and that are applied to ambivalent subjects which have deeper meanings than appear on the surface can disturb as well as amuse us. It is the relationship of this darker side to the comic, of the trembling to the laughter, that I wish to explore. In all of the monologues collected in one volume by that name,⁹ with the exception of the two set in America, there is a basic situation. A monologist lodges a complaint with the listener, who is either the reader or a specific implied persona, concerning an injustice which he or she has suffered and which threatens the speaker's traditional view of the world. If society would conform to what the speakers believe (or still want to believe) is a true world order, then their sufferings would cease. As I will attempt to demonstrate, these complaints against society and even against God are not always conscious. Frequently,

there is a manifest content which is practical and prosaic in tone and conveys genuine protest only metaphorically, as in *Dos tepl*, for example, where the broken pot of a poor woman is really a vehicle for lamenting the unjust fatal illness of an only son. It is this contrast between form and content that may be comic at times, but the grievance is ultimately what is left with the reader.

Written between 1901 and 1916, the monologues range widely in voices of the Jewish community: men and women, rural and urban, poor, middle class, and wealthy, modest and proud, insecure and bold.

What they have in common is dissatisfaction, a complaint that is almost a serious protest, and their garrulousness. The latter is their defense mechanism as it helps them avoid confrontation with their real criticism of their society and even of God's dealings with his people. Too

terrified to follow their surface grievances to their logical conclusions because they might destroy the beliefs that define them and without which they cannot imagine life, the monologists intermittently retreat

back into the homespun truths and familiar phrases of their collective world. They must do so to protect themselves, and they most often do

so unconsciously. This movement between the individual's urge to cry out and his culture's role as both comfort and gag is expressed in the

speaker's shifts in language, shifts that often seem illogical and comic, but are coherent on a deeper level. As a result, we have the familiar

paradoxical response to Sholem Aleichem's monologues of laughter and sorrow.

To test this thesis about the dynamic of Sholem Aleichem's style, it is necessary to read one or two representative monologues. I have avoided selecting a monologue from one of the longer works, because a reading of one of the Tevye monologues, for example, necessitates an examination of the entire series. Instead, I have chosen "pure" monologues, each a piece that stands alone and yet appeared in a volume of monologues, I have chosen *Dos tepl* and *An eytse* because they are expertly crafted and because Sholem Aleichem's male and female speakers differ in their concerns and it is worthwhile to look at one of each. In *Dos tepl* a widow appeals to a rabbi for advice about a pot that is no longer kosher, but what she actually wants is an answer to a question far more profound than that concerning dietary laws—the incapacitated pot is really her son and she wants to know why an only son of a widow should be stricken with an incurable disease. In *An eytse* a traditional young husband supported by his wife's family so that he can devote himself to religious study is threatened by a young doctor whose secular knowledge has made him prestigious, powerful, and, to the scholar's misery, more manly in the eyes of his young wife. Each monologue is addressed to an appropriate authority for the obvious problem

facing the speaker—the *yidene* speaks to a rabbi about a possible violation of dietary law, the now unkosher pot, and the young man tells his tale to a writer, the persona Sholem Aleichem, because "you write about everything, therefore you must know everything." And as I will demonstrate, in both cases the authority figure and listener, when he can no longer bear the monologue, acts irrationally to put it and its threatening implications to an end.

An examination of the speech patterns of *Dos tepl* will reveal the polarity of formulaic phrases expressing customary thoughts and

unconscious forbidden feelings. At first glance there may appear to be no pattern in the ramblings of the *yidene's* monologue, yet a close look reveals a regular set of transformations from latent meaning, a preoccupation with meaningless death or suffering, to manifest meaning, a practical reference to the community's events, values, and rituals; in other words, from the individual to the collective. The speaker is a widow whose only son seems to have inherited his father's fatal cough.

She begins by telling the rabbi of her daily struggle to provide him with the chicken broth prescribed by the doctor. But the presence of her neighbor Gnese, her husband, and her brood, with whom she shares a room and stove, perpetually mocks her existence, for our speaker can find no justice in the blessings of a large family for a slovenly and inept housekeeper like Gnese, and widowhood with a sickly son for a diligent self-sacrificing woman like herself. Ostensibly, she has come to the rabbi because Gnese's negligence and untamed brood have caused some of the milk in the pot to spill onto the widow's only meat kettle, the one she uses for David's daily broth.

She begins in the rambling style common to many of the monologues by identifying herself: she is the wife of a scholar who died young and the daughter of Basye, the candlemaker, candles reminding her of more modern gas lights, reminding her of two lamps she broke recently. "O, *akegn vos iz dos gekumen tsu reydt? Akegn dos vos iz zagt: yung geshiorbn,*" i.e. "Yes, how did this come up? Because of what you said: 'Died young.'"

In this opening digression, the tone of the entire monologue is set, but the order here is the reverse of what will occur from this point on. Here, the widow's digression has linked a broken glass with someone who died young, a foreshadowing of the broken pot as a metaphor for her dying son. In this instance, she goes from practical mundane reference, the broken lamp, to her real concern—premature death. In all of the following references she will allude to her genuine fears first and then rapidly shift to the practical. Yekl's sister died in childbirth, she remarks in one of her so-called digressions, always ending in suggestive ellipses at the end of a paragraph with the formulaic, "Now how did this come up?—Oh, being a widow," that is, from mention of senseless

death to her own practical problems. In discussing her tenants, one of these an old man mistreated by his children, she ends bitterly about old age. "How did this come up?" she asks, "Oh, neighbors" which brings her back to daily life again.

In other such instances she goes from the death of a friend's wife, and an obligatory aside to the rabbi about God giving and God taking, to mention of her only son. By this time, the pattern has emerged and the reader can sense beneath the story of David's serious obsession with her child's health. In telling the story of David's serious obsession with her child's health, she goes from the shroud allusion to what she calls her real subject, health. Her bitter outcry against doctors, who won't or can't prescribe medication for David's cough, is really only an aside, she says, from her real subject, the famous chicken broth. But when she finally discusses her hated neighbor Gese, the pattern surfaces most clearly. Gese's children, she says, cough all day from their mother's bad cooking, specifically her excessive use of pepper. What she means, the widow assures us, is that Gese is a *shlimazl*, can't do anything right. But the cough reference has alerted us. The implication here is that while the widow slaves over her chicken broth in order to prevent her only son's cough, God has given many children to Gese who actually causes them to cough. When the widow reports Gese's screams that David should be a scapegoat for them all, being only one and therefore less important than her own children—"Zayn zol David di kapore far undz *aitmen*"—she immediately leaves the topic of scapegoats and death for what she contends, once more, is her main concern—Jewish ritual and law—"from milk and meat on one oven, no good can come," ("Fun *milkhiks mit fleyshiks in eyn oven kon keyn guts nishit arays.*") The metaphor of pot for son is made explicit in the widow's warning to Gese before the disastrous damage to the vessel. "If you make this pot treyf, I shall be left without a pot at all, and without the pot I'm like a person without hands, because I have only one pot, that's all." Moreover, the use of the endearing diminutive *lepl* rather than *top* is another indication of the association between the pot and her children.

By the time the widow curses her neighbor for having ruined her pot, we know that she is cursing her as a mocking emblem of the great injustice she feels but dares not express openly. "How did this come up?" she asks, slipping right back into a proverb about Jewish domestic life, "Because pots and good housekeeping you can never have enough of." The question that she poses to the rabbi is finally a thinly veiled protest about God's justice in the world. "When a pot breaks," she asks, "why is it always the whole one, the good one?" And then the veil

drops. "I want to ask you, rabbi, why something is as it is. Picture two people walking, one is an only son, a one and only, a mother's source of trembling, and the other is . . ." But the rabbi can bear no more, and the monologue ends with the widow calling for the rebbeztzin to help revive her unconscious husband who has fainted, we now understand, before the desperate question to which he had no answer could be uttered, before the metaphor could be explicitly revealed.

The young man in *An eytse* is in a similar situation. His tale of indecisiveness and impotence is so powerfully threatening that the listener abandons his usual stance as observer and resorts to violence in order to terminate the monologue. Like the widow, the young man sees himself as the victim of injustice, not through enduring hunger or death, but through social humiliation. He is caught between two social norms: the traditional honored position of being a "kept" son-in-law by wealthy in-laws and the newer social system which permits a young doctor, because of his secular scientific knowledge, to examine and stimulate his wife who, in turn, regularly calls for him to relieve her anxiety attacks. And this while her parents generally assume that the depression and hysteria suffered by their daughter results from mistreatment by her husband. The young man curses a world that presents him with two equally disastrous alternatives: (1) the "modern" one: he can demand an end to the visits, thereby risking a divorce and a merciless reentry into the struggle for existence, attendant upon losing the wealth and honor that the marriage has given him; (2) or the "traditional" one: he can do nothing, retaining dignity at the price of daily humiliation. Just as the widow's monologue is marked by repeated references to death, this monologue contains repeated repressed desires for violence. Like a bull with a red mantle before him, the young man is incited to violence whenever he sees his mother-in-law's Turkish shawl as the woman runs in to comfort her only child and to call for the doctor. Each time he begins to fantasize violent action (physical or verbal)—to stamp on and tear the shawl to pieces, to defame the doctor with the truth about his practice, or to stab or drown himself—the author/listener interrupts in order to get him back to his subject. He is caught, as is the widow, between what he *should* feel, expressed in customary phrases such as the one about his in-laws, "May they live to be a hundred," and what he does feel, which he cannot express except as forbidden fantasy. This vacillation is more apparent whenever he attempts to qualify his statements: "I myself am from a small town . . . that is, the town isn't actually small" or "She [his wife] isn't exactly overly bright . . . that is, she's not a fool." One of the ironies of this monologue is that Sholem Aleichem the listener, who actually relieved to few times unlike the rabbi in the previous one, is originally relieved to discover that his visitor is not a writer, believing that an actual case

history will be less troublesome than dealing with a manuscript of fiction. But the young man has come to Sholem Aleichem because he thinks writing about life makes one an expert on living, and it is this very inability to distinguish between action and fantasy that accounts for his anguished indecisiveness, and that threatens the listener who has before him a case of passive observation carried to an extreme. His only response, at the end, is itself violent—he wants to strangle the speaker.

In each of these two monologues, a grievance about the real world seethes below a manner of speech and a context that represents proper behavior, custom, and resignation to the rules of that society. And in each case, an inability to express this "why?" openly because it means accusing God or society, results in a double story and a tension that finally threatens the listener. In each of them, a personal grief gives way to collective reasoning, but the need to express that individual pain persists. Moreover, apart from the fear of heretical social outcry, both the *gidene* and the young man are afraid to face basic psychological truths about themselves—the mother is unable to face her imminent loss and the young husband is unable to face his humiliation. Their speech is an indicator of constant avoidance of such personal pain, for in each to face the psychological problem would entail admission of personal weakness. This is a step they cannot afford, because their sense of personal self apart from society is so undeveloped that without a social or cultural complaint they are left with nothing. Their grief must be the result of society's or God's injustice because they do not see themselves as individual beings. Sholem Aleichem depicts this avoidance of what they suspect is true in techniques that have frequently been singled out as the bases of his humor—garrulity, verbosity, repetitions, digressions, and a confusion of the literal and figurative.¹⁰

A close look at a passage from *Dos tepl* should illustrate how some of this works. The following excerpt is the penultimate paragraph of the monologue. It is immediately preceded by Gneses's outburst, "Your Dovidl should be sacrificed for all of us—he's only one!" and Yente's response, "What do you say to a slut like that? Shouldn't she have her mouth slapped shut with a wet towel?" It is followed by Yente's halting and indirect attempt to ask the rabbi her real question with her analogy of the two sons—"One is an only son, his mother trembles over him. . . ." The rabbi's fainting at this point ends the monologue.

What were we saying? Yes, you said, from dairy and meat on the same oven, no good can come. . . . So there was the pot, see, upside-down, and the milk

spilled all over the oven. Rabbi, I'm afraid that (God forbid) it may just have touched my pot, and then I'm a lost soul! Comes to think of it, though, how could the milk have reached it? My pot was standing there in a far corner, shoved away somewhere at the opposite end of the oven. But it's the old

story—the chicken or the egg? Anything's possible; how can I be sure? Just my rotten luck! What if . . . ? Rabbi, I'll tell you the honest truth, see, Never mind the broth. A broth is a broth. Of course, it breaks my heart—probably. Yesterday, I bought some geese at the market, made some roasts to sell, so there are a few giblets left for Saturday—heads, innards, this, that. You can make something from it! But woe is me, Rabbi, how can I, if I don't have a pot? I'm afraid if you say the pot is *trayf*, I'm left without a pot, see; and without a pot, it's like I'm without a hand, because I've got only one pot. That is, as for pots, I used to have three meat pots. But then Gense (may she sink into the earth) once borrowed a pot from me, a brand new pot, and then she goes and gives me back a crippled pot. So I said to her, "What kind of pot is this?" So she said, "It's your pot." So I said, "How come I get back a crippled pot when I gave you a brand new pot?" So she said, "Shut it. Don't yell like that, who needs your things? First of all, I gave you back a brand new pot. Second, the pot I took from you was a crippled pot. And third, I never even took a pot from you. I have my own pot, so get off my back!" There's a slut for you. . . ."

It begins with what has already been established throughout the monologue as a rhetorical strategy of avoidance, the shift from Gense's allusion to David's death to the practical and proverbial advice about the dairy and meat dishes on one oven. Yente has once again avoided voicing her complaint and facing loss of life by retreating into the laws of her tradition. The illogical statement about what really worries her in the middle of the paragraph is also a rhetorical decoy. "Never mind the broth," she says, or for that matter what David will eat. What she fears is that she will be left without a pot, "because I've got only one pot." Here the pot is both a literal means of saving David's life, for without it she can't cook him his essential food, and the symbol of the boy himself, an only son who is marked for death. Her circular reasoning contributes to the motif: I'm not really worried about the broth; I'm actually worried about the pot because without it I can't cook the broth which I'm worried about not having. The missing assumption, of course, is that broth keeps David alive. On a manifest level, the pot is important, not David's broth. On a deep level they're the same thing. The tone of this passage, characteristic of Sholem Aleichem's tone in almost all of the monologues, is simultaneously comic and tragic, the "laughter and trembling" that has become common coin in recent discussions of his fiction. But exactly how does the darkness seep through the comic voice? The comedy here is largely a result of faulty reasoning and inappropriate emphasis, but the particular logical flaws ironically reinforce the darker theme of the work, as seen in the example of the broth. In other words, the repetition of rhetorical devices, which are initially enjoyed only for their comic effect, eventually strike the reader as also neurotic linguistic twitches, speech patterns that reflect social dislocation. They're still comic, but their cumulative effect is

unsettling and disturbing as well. For example, by the time the reader laughs at Yente's report of Gese's series of excuses about the pot, each cancelling out the previous one, the pot has already accrued meaning as a symbol of David. We are amused by the illogic¹² but restrained by the vehicle of that illogical progression. The same is true for another comic technique in this passage, an inappropriate emphasis or displacement of serious comments in what appear to be light contexts. In the passage "Rabbi, I'm afraid (God forbid) it may *just* have touched my pot, and then I'm a lost soul", the expletive "God forbid" in the context of the drop of milk on the meat pot appears to be a habitual aside, comic evidence of Yente's garrulousness. But in the context of the pot as David and his mother's fear of death, the expletive takes on ominous nuances. The same is true for "I'm a lost soul" which is comic overstatement on the level of ritual matters, but serious confession on the level of her personal tragedy. In this, the penultimate paragraph, tragic echoes trail behind all of the comic devices. "A broth is a broth," says Yente, and then in a stale and overstated aside she admits that losing it "breaks my heart." We are amused at her flip exaggeration while also being moved by her careful skirting of her real heartbreak.

These two monologues are typical of the entire monologue collection which, in turn, embodies some of the general characteristics of Sholem Aleichem's writings. First, they demonstrate the differing concerns of men and women, a result of the division of labor and assigned roles in Jewish communal life. The women, bound to the daily chores of physical survival, concern themselves with practical issues (excluding, of course, women of wealth). The men, generally or at least ideally protected from the market place and the kitchen, are more concerned with social standing or moral issues. In a well-known longer work, for example, Menakhem-Mendl the *infimish* fantasizing about the future and his practical mundane wife Sheyne Sheyndl are the archetypal characters of this world view. Of the monologues in the volume in which *Dos tepl* and *An eyse* appear, five of the monologues, for example, are women who tend to express themselves in culinary terms: Gill *Purishkevitch* (1911), *Gendz* (1902), *Der yontefliker tsimes* (1904), *A vaysse kapore* (1904), *Dos tepl* (1901). The names of two of them are pejorative: Yente, meaning a vulgar or sentimental woman, and Giti Purishkevitch, who shares the name of the leading antisemite in the Duma. For all five, the buying, selling, and preparation of food for either nourishment or ritualistic purposes all become metaphors of social maladies.

In addition to the symbolic kitchen utensil in *Dos tepl*, in *Gendz* ("Gese") a poor woman who raises geese for a living begins with complaints about individuals in her town and ends in a general lament about the rich townspeople's neglect of the poor and starving. Eventually the geese, because they are flexible and hardy, become a symbol of

her own children, then only of her daughters, and finally of herself—the life of a woman in the shtetl, haunted by the cries of her hungry family. Another voice of a simple Jewish woman complaining about the greed of others occurs in *Der yontefliker tsimes* ("The holiday stew") where away visiting a crippled sister. The *tsimes*, a kind of potpourri of ingredients, can be understood also to refer to her motley group of neighbors and, in its idiomatic sense, to the whole sorry business. Because she directs her complaints against the *hayniker* (moderns, literally "those of today") who want to divide goods among all people communally, she is really protesting socialism with a practical example of greed.

In a direct appeal to the author/listener Sholem Aleichem, Gittel Purshkevitch, the name of another monologist and also the title of the monologue, wants revenge and justice for her sufferings with the help of the writer's pen. Like the widow in *Dos tepl*, she too is a widow with an only son, and like the former, she too pays lip service to God with a hint of cynicism, "First God and then Wissotzky," the latter providing her with a livelihood since she is a seller of tea. But being poor, neither God nor Wissotzky come to her aid when her only son is drafted after the three sons of the rich merchant are exempted from duty. Sholem Aleichem gives us an entirely different voice in *A vaysse kapore* ("The white scapegoat"), the monologue of a simple bourgeoisie, assimilated, pretentious, and stereotypical with her gambling unfaithful husband (complete with perfumed rose-colored stationery), her Chopin-loving mother, and her jaded flirtations. In the monologue she appeals to a traditional listener who will appreciate her sense of responsibility in annually ordering a *kapore-hindl* for each member of her household and will understand her pride in being the only member of her home with a sense of *yidishkayt*. In this monologue, the rooster is an item of ritual, the only symbol of traditional Judaism which is the speaker's source of pride, and idiomatically, again, another ironic source of pride, as she characterizes her romantic parlor room success with "Zey zenen ale given nokh mir a kapore," i.e., "They were all after me like scapegoats." In other words, "they had a crush on me," implying the indifference one feels toward any scapegoat.

With the exception of *Vaysse kapore*, the four *yidnes* who speak in these monologues are pleading for justice on a very elementary level—they want food. Several speak of husbands too preoccupied with study to concern themselves with physical sustenance, a task left to the Jewish woman. And in each case, the topic of food is both literal and metaphorical, for the buying, selling, and preparing of food is both a vehicle and an avoidance strategy for condemning their society and even their God. Because the monologist in *Vaysse kapore* does not have to

worry about acquiring food for her family, her complaint concerns changing mores and deteriorating tradition, similar to the complaints of the male monologists in this collection.

Just as this *yidene* feels that she is an outsider because she occasionally maintains a tradition that everyone in her assimilated circle has entirely discarded, these male speakers all feel like outsiders, but to different systems.

In addition to antagonism between religious and secular values, as in *An eytse*, there are also conflicts between business and professional values and between the bourgeois community and a loose community of political radicals, students, and artists. To cite but one example, *Yoysef*, told by a "gentleman" to the author, gives us the voice of a "modern" bachelor who sees himself as a rake but winces at being called "bourgeois." The monologue ostensibly relates the love and unsuccessful courtship of a young woman, whom he loses to a young socialist leader named *Yoysef* who is blessed with the power of eloquent speech. *Yoysef's* apprehension, imprisonment, and execution and the disappearance of the beautiful young woman along with the restaurant that served as a meeting place for the young socialists reveal that the "gentleman" was really in love with the Left, and that this is a monologue about the romanticism of conspiracy as seen through the eyes of an alienated bourgeois.

Despite the differing concerns of the men and women monologists, they share what is common to all of the characters in Sholem Aleichem's fictional world—the victimizing of traditional men and women by historical change and forces of modernism. Perhaps the monologues of *Teveye* the dairyman constitute Sholem Aleichem's greatest achievement in the genre because he combined the concerns of both men and women and the succession of one man's personal sorrows with a corresponding succession of collective beliefs all in one eloquent voice. *Teveye* is profoundly moved at the sight of his hungry children while he also weeps at their moral choices, for they betray views of the world unlike his own. He, too, would like to openly challenge God and he, too, backs away into Yiddish folk sayings and idioms that, by their very communality, protect him from modernism by offering momentary comfort.

No speaker in these collected monologues is as endearing as *Teveye*, *Menakhem-Mendel*, *Motl* the cantor's son, or many other Sholem Aleichem characters, perhaps because a single appearance deprives us of the cumulative effect that often induces reader empathy. Nor are there any child protagonists, whom Sholem Aleichem so skillfully presented elsewhere. What unites these disparate voices is their lack of occasion for rejoicing, their extreme restlessness, and their faltering belief in anything. In fact, from 1901 to 1916, there is an increasing incursion of

modernism, a gradual shift from doubting a traditional god and the justice of a traditional way of life to doubting the new god of secular capitalism, culminating in the most vulgar embrace of materialism in the least successful monologues, the two set in America. The most masterful of these monologues is *Dos tepl*, for it is an intricately structured muffled cry of pain.

By far the most successful monologues in this collection are those in which language patterns—cliches, homespun truths, well-worn phrases—mediate between the wavering believer and his or her despair but cannot heal or entirely console, as in *Dos tepl* and *An eytse*. The linguistic disguises which Sholem Aleichem has draped around his speakers, according to M. Viner, permit the writer to escape from making the moral choices that his mutually contradictory and eclectic petit bourgeois social views would have eventually necessitated.¹³ So, mirrored in the vacillation of the monologists is the uncertainty of the author himself, who, like his speakers, releases a flood of language to remove him from crisis.

In Sholem Aleichem's monologues we recognize what is unique to his style; from Sholem Aleichem's voices emanate the laughter and trembling that we associate with his fiction. Furthermore, because they are carefully created patterns of speech often directed at particular listeners, these monologues offer interesting models of how language can be both imprisoning and comforting. The essentially public and social nature of language mediates between an individual and his or her direct experience of life, and it is this mediating function of words that has been at the center of both literary and critical writings in recent times. And the monologue serves well as a means of expressing the limits of language. At the far end of Sholem Aleichem's monologues, in a distilled form, is the hysterical voice of Becker's neurotic woman in *Not I*, a voice that addresses the audience uninterruptedly and, in a recent New York production, is seen only as a pair of hips in space, or the lone voice of Kasper in Peter Handke's play by that name, trying desperately to retain some independent identity amid the robot-like broadcasted voices mouthing all of the clichés of the culture.¹⁴ Sholem Aleichem never attempted to express such nausea about language because he had not discarded all of the collective truths of his society. Instead, his own ambivalence about individual expression and societal identity and obligation speaks through the confused voices of his monologists, for whom the Yiddish idiom and the truths it had so long expressed were both a shelter and a prison, a place of warmth and consolation and a place of deceit. And in that tension, a drama of recent Jewish history is enacted, its comic ironies and genuine despair.

NOTES

- 1 Saul Bellow, "Introduction" to *Great Jewish Short Stories* (New York, 1963).
- 2 For a discussion of his voices see Ruth R. Wisse, *Sholem Aleichem and the Art of Communit- cation*. The B. G. Rudolph Lectures in Judaic Studies (Syracuse University, 1979).
- 3 Victor Erlich, "A Note on the Monologue as a Literary Form: Sholem Aleichem's 'Monolog'—A Test Case," *For Max Weinreich on his Seventieth Birthday: Studies in Jewish Language, Literature, and Society* (The Hague, 1964), p. 45.
- 4 Dov Sadan, "Three Foundations" [Yiddish], *Di goldene keyt*, 34 (1959), p. 53.
- 5 Dan Mirton, *Shalom Aleikhem: pikey masa* [S.A.: Critical Essays] (Ramat-Gan, 1970). See also his "Bouncing Back: Destruction and Recovery in Sholem Aleikhem's *Motl Feyge dem Khazn*," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 18 (1978), pp. 119-84.
- 6 Hugh McLean, "On the Style of Leskavian Skaz," *Harvard Slavic Studies*, 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1954), p. 299.
- 7 Y. Y. Trunk, *Sholem Aleikhem—zayn vezn un zayne verk* [Sholem Aleichem—His Essence and His Works] (Warsaw, 1937), pp. 167-207.
- 8 Mirton, *Shalom Aleikhem*.
- 9 All quotations from the monologues are taken from *Ale verk fun Sholem-Aleikhem* (The Collected Works of Sholem Aleichem), (New York: Folksfond edition, 1917-25), vol. 21.
- 10 For a discussion of his humorous techniques see Rhoda S. Kachuk, "Sholem Alei- chem's Humor in English Translation," *YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science*, 11 (1956-57), pp. 39-81.
- 11 Translation by Sacvan Bercovitch in *The Best of Sholem Aleichem*, ed. by Irving Howe and Ruth Wisse (Washington, 1979), p. 80.
- 12 For an interesting analysis of this humor see Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (New York, 1969), chap. 2.
- 13 M. Viner, *Tsu der geschikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19in yorhundert* [On the History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century] (New York, 1946), p. 2, p. 260-64.
- 14 For a most recent clever use of the monologue form see Susan Sontag's story "Baby" in *I,lectera* (New York, 1978).