

SHOLOM ALEICHEM
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fifteen years after the death of the immortal Sholom Aleichem, yet it is as fresh and relevant as on the day it first appeared in print. The translation is by Samuel Kreiter, noted writer and translator.)

Fifteen years! And what years! If fifteen years are, as the Roman historian, Tacitus put it, "a large expanse of human existence", then we have lived through a whole continent. There is a chasm between then and now. Broken links, shredded threads - a world of ruins. Prehistoric values - social, religious, also literary in terms of form, style and theme - have been transmuted. Everything is different.

If the process of "shinoi arachin" (the changing of values) has gone on everywhere, then its impact on Jews amounts to a virtual catastrophe, a gigantic upheaval that destroys the structure to its foundation. It leaves a vast empty space as that in the heart of Warsaw where the magnificent Russian cathedral once stood. The ground is bare except for some scattered rocks as a reminder of the past.

Now, after fifteen years, I am reading what I had written in the wake of Sholom Aleichem's death. Opinions have varied, viewpoints shifted, sympathies and digressions acquired other complexions. I expected that the fifteen-year-old phrases would sound strangely antiquated, give me the feeling of sadness evoked by wilted flowers in a graveyard.

Instead the passages read as though I composed them only yesterday. Even yesterday is already old, judging by the flight of the hours, the speed of minutes evaporating. In truth not one new thought comes to my mind, not one fresh unsaid word.

I have observed Sholom Aleichem audiences. The laugh because they identify themselves with his tragi-comic characters. They ride with Tevia to the market-place row with the melamed (Hebrew tutor) on the Bog river, or run with Menachem Mendel to "make deals". Possibly they are also amused by their outlandish "jargon", their old fashioned garb, but overlook the human beings. The "crack u" at the quips, but fail to perceive the great art Sholom Aleichem has created.

Those who are a long time from the old country, weaned from the archaic speech habits, appear incapable of catching the fine nuances of the language which is replete with glowing variations. They "say" Sholom Aleichem as pious Jews "say" the liturgical verses, oblivious to their inherent poetry. Conceivably he is taking on the functional aspect of a festival prayerbook. Therein perhaps lies the remarkable originality of his work.

What is laughter? Why do people laugh? Why does a certain situation stir in us gaiety and, at another time, a sense of tragedy? Why does a particular word bring us jollity and, on a different occasion, tears? Various theories have been advanced, but none offer the clear-cut concept Bergson had formulated: "Laughter must have a social function, it must satisfy a social demand". If we are a bit hazy about its precise import, the human relationship has been established. In the case of Sholom Aleichem his laughter has seeped through from generation to generation, and echoes above time. This is the sieve which sifts humor, and rejects the coarse kernels. Only the essence drops into the vessel which we call history of culture.

There were quite a few humorists and satirists in English literature, but only three - Dickens, Sterne, and Swift - have achieved national eminence and universal repute, and are remembered. Similarly in Russia where only the names of Chekhov and Gogol survive. Indeed there were other, if lesser, luminaries, probably droller, more whimsical, but none served a social purpose, and so are forgotten. Dickens, Gogol and Chekhov forged their own world of images in their own mirrors. These mirrors and the images in them endure.

The more I read and ponder Sholom Aleichem, the clearer I visualize the uniqueness of his artistry. Among Jews he was the first to evolve a new style that is still without an heir. He cannot be classified. If you will, he is not even a humorist. Consider, for example, his story, "The Small Pot". A Jewish matron comes to a rabbi to ask for a ritual ruling. She talks on and on until the rabbi falls into a faint. There is really nothing to laugh at. A woman talks the way she feels. The story is built around a principle paralleling "Ulysses" by Joyce and the novels by Proust. The difference is that Sholom Aleichem is more natural, more psychological, and avoids erotic effects.

In a typical etude, "The Gymnasium", a Jew tells the story of his son seeking admission to a high school and how he is impeded by the "numerus clausus". Implicitly it is an account of Russian - Jewish life antedating the Revolution. Here, too, the man talks the way he thinks - diffused, involved, the motives interlocked. Throughout the narrative the author's had is barely seen, except in the last line where he dispels the illusion. The Jew who talks with earnestness and realism, suddenly asks: "Who invented a wife?". In order to check the tide of words, the writer produces a joke as a dam. A joke stems the flow of humor.

Sholom Aleichem's fluency and method are unrivaled in

world literature. His effortlessness, his movement, his flexible transition from incident to incident, from mood to mood, are not equaled in any language. He has been compared to Mark Twain and Jew hailed the flattering coupling as an honor. The world-famous Mark Twain and "our Sholom Aleichem" trailing after Kasrilevke and his Tevia the Dairyman! However, in looking a little closer and deeper, it is our Sholom Aleichem who emerges on top as the more authentic craftsman. Undoubtedly Twain's "Tom Sawyer" is more interesting than Sholom Aleichem's juvenile tale, "The Pocketknife", and the "Connecticut Yankee" is more suspenseful than "The Draft". But this is theme, not art; broader content, not higher form. In literature, as in painting, form is of the essence. That is why one finds it hard to assess an artist, especially a humorist.

A German writer rightly observed that "...seriousness is for all; humor is for the very few". If there were no "Jewish Wall" between Sholom Aleichem and the world at large, he, not Mark Twain, would be the reigning master. He is more inventive, more perceptive in form and technique.

It was the philosopher Harold Hofding, I believe, who first described humor as a modern phenomenon in the relative sense of the term. Only when a nation is spiritually free can the people view themselves with objectivity. This explains the curious fact why Jews, in the course of their cultural history, found no room for humor. They were too serious, too tragic, or else inclined towards justifying which, in substance, is trivial and derisive. Humor is not ridicule; it does not sneer; does not even laugh... It is unintentional, unforced. It helps one see things uncritically from all angles. Having lived in various Kasrilevkes, Jews either sighed, used banter, wept, or laughed bitterly, without ever seeing Kasrilevke in its true pathos abounding in human absurdities and contradictions - in its whole spectrum.

Sholom Aleichem was the first to see it, and to build a framework around his new vision of the Jew as externally freed, and internally tied up - the Jew of transition. Thereby his laughter attained the degree of humor that assumed social attitudes. Sholom Aleichem is the new Jew of detachment and discord struggling toward a new harmony. His mirror reflects earth and sky, horses and dogs, trees and houses, and people who move about between the earth and sky.

As I leaf through Sholom Aleichem's books, gloomy thoughts and melancholy melt away. I see Jewish life in his relection, and from his mirror his face smiles at me. His smile holds a mystery....

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