

**THE URIEL WEINREICH
MEMORIAL LECTURE I**

Columbia University

**Sholem Aleykhem: Person,
Persona, Presence**

by DAN MIRON



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1. The pen-name, Sholem-Aleykhem (sometimes rendered in English in the spelling: Sholom Aleichem), made its first appearance in the year 1883, undersigning a short, biting satirical feuilleton published in *Dos yidische folksblat*, then the only literary and news magazine in Yiddish. The feuilleton entitled "Di vibores" [The Elections]¹ attacks the well-off leaders of a certain Jewish community in the Ukraine, whose efforts to prevent with threats, bribery, and chicanery the re-election of a young and popular *rabiner* (the official, government-authorized rabbi, to be distinguished from the traditional *rov*, the real religious authority) were frustrated by the spontaneous revolt of the poorer members of the congregation. The fact that the author, who by then had published quite a few Hebrew articles as well as one short romance in Yiddish under his real name—Sholem Rabinovitsh—saw fit this time to hide behind a rather bizarre pen-name, was perfectly understandable. His satire did not refer to its victims by name, and the provincial town where the elections took place was symbolically called *Finsternish* ('Darkness').² Yet nobody at all acquainted with the affair was meant to fail to identify either place or persons involved. Moreover, the

¹ "Di vibores" in *Ale verk* [Complete Works], compiled and edited by N. Oyslender and A. Frumkin, I (Moscow, 1948), pp. 50-53. Hereafter this edition of *Ale verk* will be referred to as the "Soviet edition."

² Sholem-Aleykhem was obviously imitating the well-known Hebrew and Yiddish fiction writers of the Haskalah ('Enlightenment') literature, such as P. Smolenskin, who had developed the plot of his major novel, *Hatoe bedarkhe hahayim* [Lost in the Paths of Life], in East European Jewish towns with names such as *Madmena* ('Dunghill', 'Bog'), *Mapelya* ('Darkness'), *Shakula* ('The Bereaved One'), etc., or Sh. Y. Abramovitsh with his *Tsvuashits* ('Town of Hypocrites'), *Glupsk* ('Town of Fools'), *Tuneyadevke* ('Town of Idlers'), etc.

re-elected *rabiner* was none other than Sholem Rabinovitsh himself, who at the time earned his living by holding this quasi-religious, actually administrative, position in the town of Lubny. In the characteristic *narodnik* mood of the contemporary young Russian intelligentsia he tried to improve the lot of the poor in the town, while his relations with the rich members of the community were strained. A pseudonym, which would confuse local identity hunters and make them lose scent, was needed. It is quite probable that it was conceived as nothing more than a temporary strategic device created for the particular purposes of a satire which, for all its legitimate social criticism, still smacked of a personal vendetta; a mask to be discarded once its immediate usefulness had been exhausted.

The mask, however, was not discarded. The publication of "Di vibores" more or less coincided with the young author's decision to give up his vocation as a Hebrew publicist and settle down to the career of a Yiddish humorist, and that decision, as he himself confessed later in his life, once more made the concealment of his identity—at least for the time being—desirable, or even necessary.³ That was why he stuck by his Sholem Aleykhem, and allotted him the authorship of a more ambitious and wide-ranging series of satirical sketches, "Di ibergekhapte briv oyf der post" [Letters Stolen from the Post Office], which he now began to publish in the *Folksblat*. This series can, for all practical purposes, be considered his real *debut* as a Yiddish writer. Why should a young writer, who was obviously trying to develop an impersonal, genuinely literary, and perfectly acceptable satire, find it necessary to conceal his identity? While to us this may indicate an excessive inclination to secretiveness, such be-

³ See, for instance, the short autobiographical sketch the author wrote in 1908, translated from Russian into Yiddish in *Dos Sholem-Aleykhembukh* [The S.-A. Book], ed. Y. D. Berkovitsh (New York), pp. 3-4.

havior was, under the prevailing circumstances, understandable and quite common. It was not accidental that Leo Wiener, the Harvard instructor who in 1899 published, in English, the first survey of the history of Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century, had to add to his pioneering book a special appendix of pseudonyms and the real names they concealed.⁴ Most Yiddish writers at the time felt, as some of them put it, that they had “to cover their nakedness” with a pseudonymous fig-leaf,⁵ because, among other reasons, Yiddish was completely lacking in cultural status, despised as the “mixed” and deformed jargon of the “unenlightened” masses both by the purist Hebraists, the disciples of the Haskalah movement and its Hebrew literature, and by the newly assimilated, superficially Russified upper middle-class. It was extremely difficult for a writer, especially for one who had some reputation as a Hebraist at stake, to commit himself openly to the professional writing of Yiddish belles-lettres. Young Sholem Rabinovitsh knew only too well how disappointing such a commitment on his part would have been to his father, a genuine old-style lover of the holy tongue, who relished every Hebrew article his son managed to get published and expected him to become “a second Abraham Mapu.” (Mapu, the most popular Hebrew novelist of the nineteenth century, was admired for the high idealism and the romantic intricacies of his fables as well as for his exquisitely polished pseudo-biblical style.) Sholem Rabinovitsh was

⁴ Leo Wiener, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Scribner's, 1899), pp. 383-384.

⁵ See Abramovitsh's well-known recollections of the psychological pressures he had to withstand when he began to write Yiddish (in 1863) in his *Reshimot letoldotay* (written in 1889), *Kol kitve Mendele Mokher-Sfarim* (Tel-Aviv, 1947), p. 4. Abramovitsh refers here to those few Hebraists, who at the time (the 1860's) also wrote Yiddish, as philanderers visiting a despised mistress in the darkness of the night. They published their works either under pen-names or anonymously, “lest their nakedness be uncovered and their glory turned into shame.”

also keenly aware of the contempt with which it would be regarded by members of the Jewish-Russified "plutocracy," with which he was now connecting himself through a marriage alliance. He decided, therefore, to keep it secret, as long as he could.⁶

These reasons for secrecy, however, soon became irrelevant. The status of Yiddish literature was rapidly improving during the 1880's. To its ever growing popularity with the masses was now added the good-will of a part of the Jewish-Russian intelligentsia. For this group had been jolted from its illusion of emancipation and assimilation within the framework of a liberalized Russia and thrown into a fervent nationalistic mood by the 1881 pogroms. Under the influence of this new mood, Hebrew and Jewish-Russian intellectuals had second thoughts with regard to their derogatory attitude towards the manners and *mores* of traditional Jewish society, and started to discover in them inherent values. The Yiddish language was obviously one of these. Although it was still regarded by many influential intellectuals as unsuitable for cultural and literary use of lasting value—the newly created Zionism added to its other alleged deficiencies the stigma of *goles*, i.e., the stigma of being an exilic product—Yiddish, nevertheless, attracted well established Hebrew and Jewish-Russian writers, such as Y. L. Perets, D. Frishman, or S. Frug. Many of those started new careers as Yiddish writers without resorting to pen-names. Sholem-Aleykhem himself contributed enormously to this ascendancy to respectability of Yiddish literature by his creative writings, by his activity as a critic, and especially in his role as editor of *Di yidishe folksbiblyotek*, the literary almanac, which although short-lived, epitomized the new status of Yiddish. He appealed at the time both to the Yiddish-speaking masses and to such Jewish-Russian intel-

⁶ See the autobiographical sketch mentioned in note no. 3.

lectuals of the new nationalist trend as Sh. Dubnov, who were praising the new Yiddish writing in the Jewish-Russian magazines. However, success breeds its own compulsions and constraints. As the popularity of his comic sketches grew, starting with the "Ibergekhapte briv" whose appeal to the readers of the *Folksblat* in a very short time made the name Sholem-Aleykhem a household word with them, the author must have realized that his pen-name was there to stay. For, of course, it immediately became more than a mere pen-name. It was regarded as a presence, with whom the reading public grew intimate, rather than as an indication of the name of an author. Sholem Rabinovitch, who knew what an achievement such an intimacy was for a feuilletonist, was not going to spoil a good thing. On the contrary, he did everything in his power to make his Sholem-Aleykhem's grip on the public stronger and more widespread. As a matter of fact, he launched an elaborate public-relations campaign on behalf of his pseudonymous creation, which paradoxically made him come up with yet more and more pseudonyms. Under these he wrote various articles, feuilletons, and letters to the editor, attacking or praising the impudent Sholem-Aleykhem, alternately belittling him and his allegedly undeserved popularity, or wondering at his devilish cleverness, relishing his pranks.⁷ This, by the way, was to become a recurrent pattern of behavior with him. His overpowering predilection for literary games of hide-and-seek prompted him to devise new pen-names, and it is quite conceivable that the list of twenty-three pseudonyms attached to his name in S. Chajes' lexicon of Hebrew and

⁷ These feuilletons, articles etc., published under such pen-names as *A Litvak*, *Gamliel Ben Pdatur*, *Baron Pipermoter*, and *Menakhem-Mendl* (yes, here in 1887 the great Menakhem-Mendl made his first appearance in the author's works), as well as articles and letters written as a reaction to them, were collected in the first volume of Sholem-Aleykhem's *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, pp. 147-155, 487-514.

Yiddish pen-names is far from exhaustive.⁸ He was, on the other hand, ever careful to employ them not as possible competitors of Sholem-Aleykhem, but rather as his foils. Clearly, he was determined to make the presence of Sholem-Aleykhem loom as large as possible in the consciousness of the widest readership accessible in Yiddish. He was certainly successful, perhaps even a little too successful. For such was the vitality and suggestiveness of this presence that Sholem-Aleykhem not only dispossessed the author's real name of its reputation (the name Rabinovitsh remaining hardly known outside a narrow circle of friends and literati), but also overwhelmed, to a certain extent, his private personality, blurring the dividing line between his public role, as the national comedian, and his private life. Moreover, one can sense how, more than one time along his career, the presence of Sholem-Aleykhem constrained the author, perhaps even prevented some possible developments in his literary art. This is seen most remarkedly in the genre of the novel, where the constant intervention of Sholem-Aleykhem in the development of the plot, his loquacity and tendency to "sum up" the protagonists and send them about their business, often had disastrous results.⁹ Here and there one can perhaps trace some well-concealed expressions of resentment against the omnipresence of this overpowering image. However, such resentment, even if it became fully conscious, came too late to have any effect either on the reading public or on the writer him-

⁸ Saul Chajes, *Ozar beduye-hashem: Thesaurus Pseudonymorum quae in Litteratura Hebraica et Judaeo-Germanica Inveniuntur* (Vienna, 1933). See index, p. 46.

⁹ The tendency strongly influenced all of the author's novels but is particularly noticeable in the early ones. Preparing some of these for republication in his collected works, the author made an effort to diminish the part of Sholem-Aleykhem as the omniscient *raisonneur*. See, for instance, the long authorial musings he deleted from *Kindershpil* [Children's Game] and *Sender Blank* in the commentary section of the second volume of *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, pp. 289-337. What he left, however, was often more than enough.

self, who let his Sholem-Aleykhem share with his real name the authorship of the most personal and unfacetious of documents—his will.

2. The phenomenon of adopting a pen-name that has a life of its own, that somehow manages not only to take over the author's public image but also to make inroads into his private life, is, of course, not unprecedented. In fact, it has become quite a common phenomenon in modern literature, especially following the Romantics in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The case of Beyle-Stendhal—that incorrigible masquerer, who never tired of donning a new pseudonym nor of quoting nonexistent quotations from nonexistent authors—is perhaps the most prominent and interesting instance.¹⁰ The uncomfortable co-existence of Mr. Samuel Langhorne Clemens and Mark Twain, as recently presented in Justin Kaplan's biography, is another fascinating instance of the autonomy a pen-name can assume, as well as of its sometimes obnoxious vitality.¹¹ Many will probably deem this instance more pertinent to our argument, since Sholem-Aleykhem's comic style and hold on a very large segment of the reading public have always been said to resemble those of the American humorist. A score of other cases of prominent nineteenth-century writers, whose adoption of pen-names actually meant a redefinition of identity, comes to mind. They range from the romantic and exotic Novalis at the beginning of the century to that of the professedly "realistic" and down-to-earth Maxim Gorky (Gorky means 'bitter') at its end, not to mention those of famous women writers

¹⁰ An excellent exposition of Stendhal's case, of his philosophy of life as a masquerade, and of the distinction he made between "existence for oneself" and "existence for others," can be found in Jean Starobinski's article "Stendhal pseudonyme" in *L'oeil vivant* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1961), pp. 191-244.

¹¹ Justin Kaplan, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966).

such as the two Georges—Sand and Eliot—whose masculine pen-names probably indicated more than sheer insistence upon equality in a man's world. The particular reasons that made this phenomenon a commonplace in nineteenth-century Yiddish literature have already been mentioned, and the precedent of Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, the central figure in this literature, is certainly significant in the present context. Abramovitsh's Mendele Moykher-Sforim ('Mendele the Book Peddler') was, like Sholem-Aleykhem, so omnipresent and overpowering that he almost obliterated from the consciousness of the reading public, as well as of the critics, the fact that he was a character, a dramatic creation, a part of the fictional reality of Abramovitsh's stories rather than their author. That this precedent directly influenced Sholem Rabinovitsh can not be doubted, since he regarded himself from the very start as Abramovitsh's disciple, tried to imitate his manner, and crowned him the "grandfather" of Yiddish literature—with the obvious intention of asserting his own right to occupy in it the position of the favorite grandson and the legitimate, dynastic heir. The precedent also influenced the Yiddish-reading public, whose intimate acquaintance with Mendele the Book Peddler made it take fancy pen-names such as Sholem-Aleykhem¹² for granted, and regard personae, narrators-characters, and other similar rhetorical constructions as a direct presentation of the author as an artist as well as a person.

¹² Many of the other pen-names adopted by Yiddish writers during the second half of the nineteenth century were fanciful and "funny." Some examples: *Shimshon-Bar-Yente* (S. Bernshteyn), *Eli Kotsin Hatskhakueli* (Y. Y. Linetski), *Meshugener Filosof*, *Khayim-Barburim* (M. Vintshevski), *Lamed-Vovnik* (M. Spektor), *Yankele-Khokhem* (M. Rombro, better known by his "European" pseudonym, *Philip Krantz*), Rabi Kotsin (Y. Kh. Ravnitski), *Simkhe-Sosn* (M. Freyd), *Lampenputser*, *Lutsifer*, *Lets fun der Redaktsye*, (Y. L. Perets). Some of Sholem Rabinovitsh's "minor" pen-names were already mentioned in note no. 7. Here are some additional ones: *Ester*, *Shulamis*, *Salomon Bikherfreser*, *Salomon Esbikher*, *Der Yidisher Gazten*, *Terakh's an Eynikl*, etc.

All of us, to one degree or another, use the well-known literary pen-names as mere nominal replacements; that is, we use such names as Stendhal, Mark Twain, or George Eliot in the same way we use names such as Flaubert, Tolstoy, and Dickens. This usage may do for the purposes of current reference and is, indeed, unavoidable. It should not, however, be allowed, as it usually is, to dull our sense of the problematic and sometimes quite complicated relationship between an author, his pen-name, and his creative activity. Instead of taking pseudonyms for granted, we should be alerted and intrigued by most of them; for in almost every case where a serious artist adopted one, something of real significance both for the artist himself and for his artistic achievement, as such, has been attempted. This fact has recently been realized by many literary scholars whose intense interest in the function of the dramatic voice in the literary work made them pay more attention to the phenomenon. Once considered the domain of the lexicographer or, at most, the biographer, the pseudonym now holds interest not only for the psychologically-oriented critic, but also for the structuralist and formalist, who regard it as a "device" or as part of the rhetorical structure of the text itself.

Of course, the phenomenon calls for a comprehensive explanation which will take all of its aspects into account—the social, psychological, historical, and personal, as well as the formal and rhetorical. Moreover, this explanation, based on a detailed comparison of the interrelated yet varied manifestations of the phenomenon in different times, national literatures, and genres,¹³ should amount both to a history

¹³ There can be no doubt that certain literary genres are more conducive than others to pseudonymity. The "humoristic" genres, for example, especially those of the comic or satirical *feuilleton*, always called for a thicker and more extensive pseudonymous cover. The traditions of "humoristic" writing, both in nineteenth-century American and in Yiddish literature, offer excellent instances of this phenomenon.

and a "theory" of the pen-name. This, however, is a subject for future research. The critical awareness of the pen-name as part of the work of art as well as a "mask" of the artist is, as was stated above, but a recent one. The scholar's hands are loaded with work both on individual cases and on the nature of the phenomenon as manifested in particular national literatures under particular historical circumstances. The example of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature and particularly that of Sholem-Aleykhem can serve as strong proof of the necessity of such cautious, inductive procedures. Clearly, the phenomenon of the pen-name-persona flourished in this literature under very special historical circumstances. A theorem defining the role the pen-name played in it would not be applicable to other literatures or even to the same literature in a different period.¹⁴ It should also be apparent that even within this specific milieu the case of Sholem-Aleykhem, although it does not stand out in isolation, is rather markedly different from others (that of Mendele Moykher-Sforim, for instance). The history of Sholem-Aleykhem as a pen-name gives rise to a whole series of questions that bear directly on the analysis of the style and structure of the author's works, as well as on the understanding of his attitude towards his position as a Jewish artist and of the unique folk-hero status he achieved in his life-time and retained after death. It is the purpose of this paper to raise a few of these questions, and also, to a certain extent, attempt to answer them, or at least one of them: What are the par-

¹⁴ During the twentieth century, Yiddish literature completely liberated itself from its nineteenth-century "inferiority complex." Still, many of the central figures in it resorted to pen-names (a few examples: Der Nister and Y. Bashevis among the best-known fiction writers; Bal-makhshoves, and Sh. Nigier among the most influential critics; A. Leyeles and L. Volf as founders of new, modernistic schools or "groups" in poetry). An explanation that will account for nineteenth-century Yiddish pseudonyms will have to undergo radical modifications when applied to these and many other twentieth-century ones.

ticular functions and distinctive features of Sholem-Aleykhem as a rhetorical entity? The answer, needless to say, will consist of generalizations supported only by a tiny fraction of the extensive relevant evidence. It will also be a synchronic answer, i.e., it will treat different works from different phases in the author's career as belonging to one unified fictional continuum, and pay but little and sporadic attention to the fine changes the Sholem-Aleykhem persona underwent throughout its thirty-three year progression from the "Ibergekhpate briv" to *Funem yarid* [Back from the Fair], the author's last major work, left incomplete when he died in 1916.

3. It is my contention, to put things bluntly, that the study of Sholem Rabinovitsh's work (as much as that of Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's), has been fundamentally flawed by insufficient differentiation between its author and his creation, Sholem-Aleykhem. When I say insufficient, I understate the case, since the name, Sholem-Aleykhem, has almost invariably been assumed to refer to the author as person and as artist. I do not mean, by this contention, to minimize the value of the great scholarly achievements, as well as of the interesting critical perspectives offered by some of the best Yiddish scholars and critics during the last sixty-four years.¹⁵ Nor do I claim that the difference between Sholem Rabinovitsh and Sholem-Aleykhem has never been noticed. It has, by one or two of the more sensitive interpreters, such as Y. Y. Trunk, who said: "It is simply difficult for us to match the quiet, humble name Sholem Rabinovitsh with the Sholem-Aleykhem-world, which is so full of color

¹⁵ It is generally agreed that it was the critic, Bal-makhshoves (pseud. of I. Eliashev), who launched the serious critical evaluation of Sholem-Aleykhem in his article "Sholem-Aleykhem," originally published in 1908. See Bal-makhshoves, *Geklibene shriftn* [Collected Works], I (Warsaw, 1929), pp. 91-109.

and fantasy and which rings with the sound of play.”¹⁶ But even with Trunk, this intuitive grasp of the incongruous element in the coupling of the author’s everyday, shabby, middle-class name with his persona’s colorful and fanciful one did not lead to a clear-cut dissociation of the historical author from the figment of his imagination, to the separation of the creator from his creation. It rather involved the critic in a lengthy psychological analysis, in which the difference between the two was treated as a change within the author’s psyche, a biographical metamorphosis, which gradually mellowed the “gray” and “philistine” Rabinovitsh into the great “adventurer” Sholem-Aleykhem.¹⁷ While a biographical-psychological approach to the Sholem-Aleykhem persona is perfectly legitimate, it can hardly carry one far when unassisted by a primary distinction between artist and artifice, and by a clear conception of the difference between the psychological development of the artist and the rhetorical development of his artifices—two processes, which are, of course, closely related, but the study of which call for totally different methodological procedures.

I submit, therefore, that the great achievements of the scholars and the critics should be re-examined on the basis of such distinctions. I also submit that the distinguishing or differentiating process should be carried to its logical consequences. It should cut deeper than the notion that the difference between Sholem Rabinovitsh and Sholem-Aleykhem merely separates the author in his authorial, public role from the author as a private person. This will not suffice, although the author himself sometimes thought along this line,¹⁸ and despite the fact that in quite a few specific

¹⁶ Y. Y. Trunk, *Sholem-Aleykhem—zayn vezn un zayne verk* [Sholem-Aleykhem—His Essence and His Works], (Warsaw, 1937), p. 375.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 375-443.

¹⁸ The author seems to have sanctified, with his own words, the fragmentation of his personality into authorial and personal sections. See the first chap-

cases such separation more or less corresponds to the actual rhetorical structure of his works. The overall picture, to be correctly presented, calls for a deeper severance. What is needed is a perception of the ontological difference between author and persona, of the fact that they exist on totally different levels. True, Sholem-Aleykhem is always presented as an author, or at least as a person whose business involves him in reporting and publishing. This is how he introduces himself,¹⁹ and this is how he is approached by the characters in the stories who seek his authorial advice: "Since you write so much, you must know everything, and only you can give me the right advice."²⁰ This is also how characters approach him who regard him—a man who writes for newspapers—as a

ter of *Funem yarid*, where "Sholem-Aleykhem the writer" is dissociated from "Sholem-Aleykhem the person," *Ale verk fun Sholem-Aleykhem* [Complete works of S.-A.] (New York: *S.-A. Folksfond oysgabe* [People's-Fund edition], 1917-1925), XXVI, p. 17. Also see below, p. 43.

¹⁹ Here is a characteristic self-introductory dialogue:

"What's your name?"

"Sholem-Aleykhem."

"Sholem-Aleykhem?—Then you certainly deserve a *sholem-aleykhem* [the greeting]."

"*Aleykhem veal beneykhem* [the continuation of the greeting]."

"What do you do for a living?"

"What should I do for a living? I write."

"What do you write?"

"What should one write? One writes what one observes."

"What do you get from your writing?"

"What should one get? One gets trouble, indigestion, heartache, disgrace, worries, cold sweat, vexation. . . ."

"And that's all?"

"What else did you expect?"

("Sholem-Aleykhem," in *Yidishe shrayber* [Jewish Writers], *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, V, pp. 9-10.)

For the exact meaning of the greeting and its reply see below, p. 30-31 and note no. 37.

²⁰ From the monologue "An eytse" [A Piece of Advice], *Monologn*, in *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, XXI, p. 75. For characteristic advice-seeking see also Menakhem-Mendl's letter to Sholem-Aleykhem entitled "Vos tut men?" [What's to be Done?], originally published in *Der yid* (1900) and recently republished in *Sovetish heymland* IX (1969), no. 2, pp. 73-75.

source of information about international politics.²¹ Sometimes they ask him to *bashrayb* ('describe') their personal enemies, thus making them the laughing stock of the whole Jewish world;²² sometimes they fulminate against him, recognizing themselves in his caricatures.²³ Many of them count on him to publicize their own personalities, although they may express their wish not to be mentioned in the newspapers. Even Tevye the dairyman, who so often insists that he is telling the stories of his own and his daughters' misfortunes to Sholem-Aleykhem, as a personal friend and on a strictly confidential basis, counts on him to make these stories public, and intimates that a share of the honorarium is due him. He does it even as he goes on arguing that there is no "reason for the whole world to be suddenly informed that on the other side of Boyberik, not far from the *shtetl* Anatevke, there exists a Jew by the name of Tevye the dairyman."²⁴ This authorial aspect of Sholem-Aleykhem is certainly essential to his function in the stories. It should, however, be separated from the actual authorial activity of

²¹ That happens very often in the early feuilletons. See, for instance, the description of Reb Khayim, the innkeeper (who has an interest in the intricate politics of the Balkans), in the series "Bilder fun der barditshever gas" [Pictures from Barditshev Street], *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, I, pp. 458-463.

²² See, for instance, the chapter "Di lezer fun der doziker gas" [The Readers of This Very Street] in the same series; *ibid.*, pp. 463-469. Here is how one of the readers addresses Sholem-Aleykhem (p. 467):

Dear, beloved Sholem-Aleykhem! I beg you! Do it for my sake, and describe in the magazines that roughneck, that bankrupt, who robs the shirt off my back, sending his impudent servants from every corner to attract my customers! Since he became my tenant. . . . He should have rather become a corpse, the dirty bastard! I beg you, Sholem-Aleykhem, you have a knack for it, describe him precisely, so that every one will know that it's he, the Motyukhe, who plays cards all night long! And you write whatever you want about him; it will be nothing but the truth, so help me God, as much as he has helped me until now, for heaven's sake!—You write in the magazines anyway; what difference will it make to you if you describe him, too?

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 464-465.

²⁴ See Tevye's letter to Sholem-Aleykhem, "Kotonti" [I am not Worthy of . . .], *Gants Tevye der milkhiker*, *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, V, pp. 10-11.

Sholem Rabinovitsh, even where it clearly reflects it, for this activity is part of Rabinovitsh's historical commitments, while the whole point of Sholem-Aleykhem's existence is his being dissociated from these very commitments and disencumbered from their burden.

This contention, I know, flies in the face of much of the Sholem-Aleykhem criticism, and, therefore, a demand at this point for some concrete illustration of its viability will be legitimate. Is the present attempt to contest a universally accepted assumption substantiated by any textual evidence? Do the works themselves supply us with the differentia between the historical author and the being indicated by his pen-name?

As a matter of fact, one can easily cull from the vast body of the author's work scores of illustrations that indicate not only the existence of such differentia, but also the author's own awareness of it. Indeed, they indicate the author's wish to share this awareness with at least some of his readers, the more perspicacious ones; for, of course, he could convey it only in cryptic or half-cryptic expressions. In these he actually was on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, he knew how valuable an asset the non-fictional "reality" of his Sholem-Aleykhem was both for the artistic and the non-artistic advancement of his career. By no means could he allow himself to undermine it and jeopardize the intimacy between a rather unsophisticated reading public and this useful image. On the other hand, he had some quite pressing reasons for making the fictional nature of this image perceptible at least to the more sophisticated part of his audience. His usual way of solving the dilemma, or rather of circumventing it, was that of the half-hidden joke, which could either be taken seriously, or be dismissed as a mere *jeu d'esprit*, or go totally unnoticed (by the simple-minded reader). The technique of the cryptic joke (which, inciden-

tally, was also employed by Abramovitsh), was a safe compromise between two contradictory inclinations, and was, therefore, quite often resorted to. Here is a typical illustration of it.

In one of the early feuilletons Sholem-Aleykhem revisits his old hometown (not yet Kasrilevke, the quintessential East European *shtetl* of his later stories). The feuilleton is a simple, preliminary variation on the "you-can't-go-home-again" motif, which later on was to play an increasingly important role in the author's work, and it immediately strikes the note of estrangement. Sholem-Aleykhem finds himself on an altogether unfamiliar street with modern looking houses. "Be good enough to tell me who lives here, in this big brick house?" he asks a Jew who happens to hurry by. A characteristic conversation, to which, I am afraid, my translation hardly does justice, follows:

"Oh yes, here lives. . . . Wait, wait, I'll remember presently. Oh yes. It seems that no lesser person than Monastiryov, Yakov Borisovitsh Monastiryov, lives here."

"A Jew?"

"A Jew."

"Yakov Borisovitsh?"

"The same!"

"Wait a moment. Isn't he Yankl Bereles?"

"Ask me another."

"Isn't he the son of Berele Monastrishtsher?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Now don't be angry with me for asking. Do understand. This Yakov Borisovitsh was a school mate of mine. We studied in the same *kheyder*, and he was. . . ."

"But where do I come into all this?"

"But you must understand how important this is to me. After all, a friend. . . . I mean Yankl, Yankl Bereles was my friend . . . and suddenly Yakov Borisovitsh Monastiryov! What use does he have for this 'yov' of his! . . ."

"No offense meant, but will you please leave me alone? What are you? A preacher? God's attorney? What do you want? What are you looking for?"

"God forbid! Have I said anything? Have I made any claim

on anybody? I just talk to myself. For heaven's sake: Berele Monastrishtsher. A Jew learned in the Torah, a great philanthropist, comes of an elevated family of *rabonim* ['rabbis'] and *tsadikim* ['Hasidic spiritual leaders']...—Suddenly he becomes a Borisovitch Monastiryov! Yov! Do you see?—Yov!! . . .”

“What I see is that you are either an idler or somewhat of a crackpot, or both.”²⁵

And the impatient interlocutor flees. Obviously, Sholem-Aleykhem established himself in this conversation as a good, loyal Jew, who, although not necessarily an old-style fanatic, is flabbergasted by the total metamorphosis of his once *kheyder* friend. He finds it difficult to fathom the changes that the son of the rabbinical Berele Monastrishtsher must have undergone over the years in order to adopt such an ostentatiously Russified and Christianized name. (Monastiryov actually means ‘of the monastery’.) As he resumes his walk along the modern street, he discovers—by the brass plaques on the brick and stone walls of the spacious houses—other *kheyder* classmates whose names underwent similar metamorphoses. Deciphering Russian names one by one and remembering his once very Jewish friends who now boast them, he encounters a name that is an especially disagreeable surprise to him:

Solomon Naumovitsh: Who can this creature be? A-a-ah? Oh, it's you Sholemke; isn't it? Sholem Reb Nokhem Vevekes son. . . . Fine, fine, very fine indeed. I believe I still remember you when you walked in your little shoes and stockings and had quite a head for the *gemore*. I thought then that you would certainly end up as a *rov* of a small town, or at least as a *shoykhet*, a *moyel*, a *bal metsise*, and what do you know! Here you turn up a Solomon Naumovitsh, of all things. What does your uncle Pinye say to this? And Itsik?—Does he allow it? How come?²⁶

²⁵ S.-A., “Di gas” [The Street], in “Bilder fun der zhitomirer gas” [Pictures of Zhitomir Street], in *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, I., pp. 476-477.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 478: *rov*—‘rabbi’; *shoykhet*—‘ritual slaughterer’; *moyel*—‘circumciser’; *bal metsise*—‘functionary at a circumcision ceremony’.

Sholem-Aleykhem obviously expected Sholemke, whom he remembered wearing the characteristically Hasidic low shoes and white cotton stockings,

Here, to be sure, the author is poking fun at himself. For the fictitious little Sholemke with his good *gemore-kepl* ('the sharp intellect needed for the apprehension of the niceties of the Talmudic text and its even subtler exegesis') and with prospects of becoming an impoverished *klekoydesh* in a small *shtetl*, who instead turned out to be a semi-assimilated gentleman bearing a Russian name and patronymic was, of course, none other than the real Sholem Rabinovitsh. Every reader of his works, especially of *Funem yarid*, the great autobiographical work, will immediately perceive this; the few biographical details that Sholem-Aleykhem mentioned in order to emphasize the contrast between Sholemke's traditional Jewish childhood and his assimilatory adulthood, correspond perfectly to historical facts. One wonders how much of this was sensed by the readers when the feuilleton was published in 1889, long before the biographical development of the author became more or less publicly known. Some of the details could have been comprehended only by members of the author's family. Such, for instance, was the reference to uncle Pinye, a fanatic *khosid*, who had always suspected his brother Nokhem (hence the Russian "Naum") Rabinovitsh, with his reverence for Hebrew and its grammar, of being a *maskl* in his secret heart, and had therefore taken it upon himself to guard his nephews from sinning. He had been especially circumspect with the high-spirited Sholemke, about whose *yidishkeyt* ('Jewishness', 'commitment to the Jewish faith and way of life') he had always had the worst misgivings. As it turned out, his suspicions had been well-founded. The intention of the whole passage, however, was probably guessed by quite a few (although by no means the majority) of the readers, for whom

to become one of the *klekoydesh*, the clerical elite of the Jewish congregation, but in a very small, perhaps grotesquely miserable way. He did not foresee him as achieving a rabbinical reputation and proving a "success" in his clerical vocation.

the sight of the author satirizing himself certainly meant an additional source of enjoyment. But was it mere fun that the author was aiming at? Did he not indicate, by this little private joke, a deep critical self-awareness? Indeed, there was much in Sholem Rabinovitsh's way of life that invited satire, and nobody was more aware of this than he himself. It was not only the contrast between his childhood and adulthood that made for a satirical juxtaposition. An incongruity as glaring and more painful (and therefore rarely touched upon) resulted from his very position as the popular Yiddish artist, the champion of Yiddish literature, the favorite writer of the Yiddish-speaking masses, who conducted his own and his family's life according to the current etiquette of the assimilated Jewish upper middle class. This included, as a matter of fact, the speaking of Russian (not the best Russian at that), and the use of Russian literary culture as an obvious frame-of-reference. It is when we perceive this latent self-criticism, always present in the author's self-portraits, that we begin to understand not only how widely separate the rhetorical entity Sholem-Aleykhem was from the historical being of Sholem Rabinovitsh, but also how essential this separation was for the latter's functioning as an artist and critical observer of contemporary Jewish life. The radical separation of the historical author from his rhetorical representative was made obligatory by the schizophrenic socio-cultural circumstances under which Yiddish writers worked at the time. It is, therefore, no wonder that some symptoms of such a separation can be traced in the work and artistic development of almost every important figure in nineteenth-century Yiddish literature. The more prominent the figure, the more conscious and purposeful the separation seems to be. A serious Yiddish writer could not but feel the nature of his position as an artist addressing an audience to which, in a sense, he did not belong. He had

then, by one way or another, to assume a mask, which instead of being a reflection of himself, often had to be a reflection on himself. The persona not only covered the real face; it also had to expose it.

The illustration I have quoted above should make this clear. It is not that Sholem-Aleykhem, as distinguished from the author, identifies himself in it with the old-style traditional, religious way of life, assuming the role, as his interlocutor says, of a *gots straptshe* ('God's attorney'). He does not; and he is perfectly free to cast a critical eye on traditional Jewish life, to expose its inherent absurdities as well as its deterioration and to make it, in general, the subject of comedy. However, he also does not have to identify with the way of life, with the cultural preferences that "Solomon Naumovitsh" adopted under the pressure of historical circumstances. He is perfectly free to find it absurd, to point out its inner contradictions, to make fun of it. He is not, in fact, bound by the "consequential" logic of a choice between conflicting possibilities. He is free to change his position, and this freedom of his, this ability to avoid the burden of choice between mutually exclusive options, is the essence of his being. While he is certainly an observer of history, he is hardly subject to historical limitations in the sense that all living people and most fictional characters are. Hence his wonderful mental agility and self-sufficiency, the source of the hilarity he radiates. This agility and self-sufficiency Sholem Rabinovitsh had, inevitably, forfeited.

Without an autonomous, an independent Sholem-Aleykhem, Sholem Rabinovitsh could then hardly have become the great humorist he became; nor could his works have attained that dimension of a total Jewish comedy we still sense in them. It was only through devising this free spirit, Sholem-Aleykhem, that the author could, in his best works, overcome his own historical limitations and create a comic

world which is still relevant. Sholem-Aleykhem, although implicitly committed to the Jewish people, as such, and to Yiddish as their natural medium of communication is, within this very wide scope, restricted by nothing and beholden to nobody. His presence is exhilarating because it abounds with the *fluidum* of freedom. This, one suspects, was the main reason why the author, who stumbled throughout his life against so many hurdles, let it invade his personal being, or tried to throw himself into it even as one submerges oneself in an intoxicating element.

4. If not a pen-name, a mere nominal replacement of the author's real name, what then was Sholem-Aleykhem and how did he function in the author's works? Easy answers to these questions are readily available. An artistic creation rather than an artist or a creator, Sholem-Aleykhem must have been a fictional character, and his function obviously was that of the character-narrator, i.e., the fictional personality entrusted by the author with the task of narrating the stories and thus endowing them with the vivacity, warmth, and authenticity of his own dramatic being. This narrative procedure is an old and universally recognized one. It forms one of the major constructions of the so-called "rhetoric of fiction." It had been employed in modern Yiddish fiction before the appearance of Sholem-Aleykhem—most notably in the highly influential works of Sh. Y. Abramovitsh—and our author also had recourse to it many times throughout his career. Nevertheless, I submit that these answers, easy and comfortable as they are, neither account for the phenomenon nor, if you wish, for the "rhetoric" of Sholem-Aleykhem. To be sure, they are applicable to certain works, but on the whole they do not delineate correctly either the nature of Sholem-Aleykhem or his artistic function. Of the

various reasons for this only the two most important ones will be mentioned here.

For one thing, the impression they give of defining the technical function of Sholem-Aleykhem within the structure of the author's works is misleading. Of the four major works—*Menakhem-Mendl*, *Tevye der milkhiker*, *Motl Peyse dem khazns* [Motl, the Son of the Cantor Peysel], and *Funem yarid*—only the last one is a story narrated by Sholem-Aleykhem, who, however, appears in it in the capacity of an omniscient author, rather than in that of the character-narrator.²⁷ Two of the others are constructed as cycles of monologues spoken by the protagonists. In Tevye's monologues, Sholem-Aleykhem's presence is felt very strongly, but it is the presence of a hearer, a confidant, who provokes the protagonist's loquacity by his willingness to absorb, and not that of a narrator; for Tevye's stories are supposed to be verbatim reproductions of actual talks addressed to Sholem-Aleykhem.²⁸ Motl, unlike Tevye, is addressing his stories not

²⁷ That is his function in most of the author's novels proper, such as *Stempenyu*, *Yosele Solovyey* [Yosele the Nightingale], *Der mabl* [The Deluge] (the novel was also entitled *In shturem* [In the Storm]), *Blondzhnde shtern* [Wandering Stars], *Der blutiker shpas* [The Tragic Joke], etc., on different levels of authorial conspicuousness. It was perhaps only in the very early novel *Kindershpil* [Children's Game] that the author made his Sholem-Aleykhem play the role of the character-narrator, for there he introduces him as a classmate of the two friends-turned enemies, the fathers in this comic-melodramatic version of a Jewish *Romeo and Juliet*. However, even in this novel the technique of the character-narrator is not sustained, and Sholem-Aleykhem too often lapses into the role of the omniscient author.

²⁸ The full title of Tevye's first monologue, as it originally appeared in 1895, reads:

Tevye the Dairyman

A marvelous story of how Tevye, a poor Jew and father of many children suddenly made good by dint of a strange coincidence worth describing in a book; as told by Tevye himself and transmitted word for word

by

Sholem-Aleykhem

(*Hoyzfraynt*, vol. IV, p. 63.)

to the second person singular, i.e., to an alleged confidant, but to a rather equivocal second person plural presumably representing us, the readers, in a direct way. Sholem-Aleykhem's presence is, therefore, supposedly missing from the stories, or is that of a mere scribe. Since Motl admits his illiteracy—he cannot write and he hardly reads²⁹—it can be understood that Sholem-Aleykhem does the writing for him, although his presence is never mentioned. Actually, we are indirectly encouraged to suspect him of taking a more important part in the forming of Motl's monologues, which cannot be construed (as Tevye's and most of the author's other monologists' can) as a direct, verbatim reproduction of the protagonist's speech. For, while he was taking every possible advantage of the protagonist's naiveté and of the dramatic irony and unintentional comedy offered by his limited, childish consciousness, the author also allowed himself to disregard the limits prescribed by them. He put stories in Motl's mouth, which in content, structure, and vocabulary are clearly beyond the capacities of a nine-year old *shtetl*-boy, deprived of almost any education.³⁰ Thus, Sholem-Aleykhem can perhaps be said to function in *Motl Peyse dem khazns* in the capacity of a ghost-writer, or a *souffleur*.

In *Menakhem-Mendl* no narration, in the strict sense of the word, is done at all; the book presumably consists of letters exchanged by the protagonist and his wife at different times and from different places, not for purposes of narrating

²⁹ See *Motl Peyse dem khazns*, first part, "Fun der heym keyn Amerike" [From Home to America], *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, XVIII, pp. 225, 241. Motl's illiteracy, by the way, strangely contradicts the work's subtitle: "Ksovim fun a yingl a yosem" [Writings of an Orphan-Boy]. The "rhetoric" of Motl, for all its apparent simplicity, is a most tricky one.

³⁰ The opening pages of Motl's first story abound with instances of this methodical inconsistency, which most commentators seem unable to detect. Motl talks here as an ardent reader of Goethe and Schiller (expressions such as *dankbarkeyt tsu der natur* 'thankfulness to nature', etc.) rather than as a boy who has hardly mastered the alphabet. The different linguistic and rhetorical levels of Motl's monologues call for a detailed analysis.

anything but rather for those of communication. The presence of Sholem-Aleykhem here is of a double nature. In the so-called "canonized" edition of *Menakhem-Mendl* it is the mere presence of an editor or of a piratical literary entrepreneur of sorts. He introduces himself as a long-time but hardly intimate acquaintance of the protagonist, who has somehow gained access to his personal correspondence. Having selected from it the parts he deems most interesting, he is now making them public, without bothering to ask for the permission of the protagonist, who at the time of publication is presumably seeking his fortune in that land of promise, the United States.³¹ Readers familiar with the Menakhem-Mendl literature in its entirety, know that Sholem-Aleykhem is also present in it in the capacities of an addressee (Menakhem-Mendl wrote him no less than five long letters) and of a correspondent (he responds with one letter, advising Menakhem-Mendl to try his luck as a matchmaker).³² These different modes of presence by no means exhaust the catalogue of the different rhetorical capacities in which the protean Sholem-Aleykhem functions as he emerges or vanishes, talks or is talked to, reports, is reported on, overhears, eavesdrops, steals letters, is interrogated, cursed, flattered, and declared nonexistent along the extensive list of the author's work. They do, however, sufficiently illustrate my first reason for disqualifying a general description of Sholem-Aleykhem as a character-narrator.

My other reason is that even in the numerous works

³¹ See Sholem-Aleykhem's introductory note to the "canonized" (second) edition of *Menakhem-Mendl*, in *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, X, pp. 10-11.

³² Menakhem-Mendl's letters to Sholem-Aleykhem were originally published in *Der yid* (1900) and *Der fraynd* (1903/4). All of them were recently republished in *Sovetish heymland*, IX (1969), no. 2, pp. 73-94. This republication also includes Sholem-Aleykhem's only letter to Menakhem-Mendl, *ibid.*, pp. 76-78 (originally published in *Der yid*, 1900). The idea that was to be fully developed in the "Es fidlt nisht" [No Luck] section of *Menakhem-Mendl* germinated in this letter.

where Sholem-Aleykhem *is* responsible for the narration, and in which his direct presence is felt everywhere, he can hardly apply for the status of a full-fledged fictional character. I am aware of the fact that the term "character" is far from well-defined, and that it is stretched all the time to suit the particular purposes of one critic or another. Still, it seems to me that the term can hardly be stretched enough to cover Sholem-Aleykhem in most of his appearances. On the whole, Sholem-Aleykhem simply lacks the "materiality," the well-defined relations in terms of space and time and even in sheer behavioral continuity, which we have come to expect of a fictional character, whatever the definition of the term may be. He is too light, too airy to assume the attributes that even a minimalist definition would demand, minimalist in the sense that it does not require a high degree of psychological reality to pass for a full-fledged fictional character. As I have already suggested, lightness and spriteliness are not accidental or even secondary qualities in him, but rather his very essence.

Here a short comparison of Sholem-Aleykhem with Mendele the Book Peddler can be illuminating. Mendele functions in Abramovitsh's works in ways quite often resembling those of Sholem-Aleykhem: he describes, reports, overhears, is made a confidant, makes humorous comments, and most importantly, edits and publishes presumably authentic documents and stories even as Sholem-Aleykhem does in *Menakhem-Mendl* and *Teveye*, in the *Monologn* and in scores of other stories. It is, however, through his sheer "weight" as a fictional character that Mendele's figure differs from Sholem-Aleykhem, and the difference is decisive. True, Mendele is a static character devised to operate a certain narrative-structural apparatus, and is not allowed to develop much beyond the restricted range within which his technical task can be performed. Nevertheless, he is always psychologically real.

Indeed, he is more so than all the other characters Abramovitsh created put together, and it is this instant and absolute reality of his that makes him the real starting point of modern Yiddish literature. He has his own uncanny ways of being equivocal, of mediating between the author, a modern European positivist, and the traditional, religious society he portrays; but he is nevertheless deeply and significantly anchored in history. His socio-economic "place" in the traditional Jewish world is clearly defined. His physical and mental idiosyncracies, his ways of relating to other people, his specific ways of being cunning, his intentional bathos, his love of nature, his concepts of time, place, and causality are vividly conveyed by the author. Moreover, Mendele is always fully human in his vulnerability. He can be deeply offended (as in the case when an antisemitic policeman shaves off one of his sidelocks, in *Fishke der krumer* [Fishke the Lame]); he can be enraged (when his carriage collides with that of another Jewish book peddler, *ibid.*); fearful (when he loses his way in a forest, *ibid.*); and perplexed. He worries about his finances (as in the short story *Biyeme haraash* [In the Days of Tumult]), etc. All these attributes of reality are lacking in Sholem-Aleykhem, whose existence is almost never rendered in socio-historical terms. We know he is a writer who publishes in Yiddish newspapers, but his actual financial or social relationships with newspaper owners or with editors are never described. We know that he travels very frequently, that he is actually always on the move, but we do not know why. Above all else, we cannot think of him as a vulnerable and constrained human being. His freedom, equanimity, and good spirits are his trademarks. On the one or two very rare occasions that he loses them, he is not himself anymore, and we, the readers, are nonplussed; we feel that the very basis of his existence as a comforting presence has been undermined. Such, for in-

stance, is the case in the monologue "An eytse" [A Piece of Advice], where Sholem-Aleykhem, instead of showing the young man who asks for his advice a way out of his perplexing dilemma, gets himself entangled in it, loses his temper, and physically attacks his interlocutor. But "An eytse" is, in more ways than one, an exception among the author's works. (It is also exceptional, for example, in its detailed description of Sholem-Aleykhem's physical environment: his study, desk, pens, bric-a-brac, etc., which endows his presence with an unusual "materiality.")³³ On the whole, however, Sholem-Aleykhem remains free, uncommitted, unrelated and unburdened. This does not mean that he is a less vivid creation than Mendele, but does indicate that his vividness is of a different order from that of the book peddler. This is clearly indicated by the very difference between the two names. While "Mendele the Book Peddler" includes both a definite personal name and the indication of a specific occupation, the name "Sholem-Aleykhem" is a spoof, a mere pun. Of course, it includes the first name, "Sholem," and thus, when used as a name it starts deceptively as the real thing. However, the added word "Aleykhem" undermines this impression of nominal "reality." Instead of qualifying the common first name by a surname, patronymic, placename, or an indication of an occupation, i.e., instead of making it more specific, it turns it into an idiomatic expression, as 'hello' or 'how-do-you-do'.

Here the comparison between "Sholem-Aleykhem" and "Mark Twain" suggests itself, for as we now know Clemens' pseudonym was as much of a joke as Rabinovitsh's was. Like "Sholem-Aleykhem," "Mark Twain" was not a name but rather an expression. The author's acquaintances (during

³³ Y. Y. Trunk sensitively pointed out some of the peculiarities of this monologue. See his *Sholem-Aleykhem—zayn vezn un zayne verk*, pp. 199-207.

his wild carousing days as editor of *The Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City) interpreted "Mark Twain" as an appeal or a directive to friendly bartenders to mark two drinks to the author's account. In those days Clemens used to take his drinks two at a time, and being fresh from his long service on the Mississippi, he would drawl like a Mississippi leadsmen: "M-a-r-k twain!" instead of ordering the marking of two.³⁴ However, the difference between "Mark Twain" and "Sholem-Aleykhem" is more significant than the resemblance. The first was a private joke, intended to remain unknown to the general public. We know that when Clemens was asked to explain his pen-name later on, he tried his best to cover his own traces, pretending that it was "the *nom de plume* of one Captain Isaiah Sellers, who used to write river news over it for the New Orleans *Picayune*."³⁵ The greeting *sholem-aleykhem* was, of course used by every Yiddish-speaking Jew, and its incongruity as a name was, therefore, meant to be sensed and relished. "Mark Twain" sounded like a real name; "Sholem-Aleykhem" sounded like an intentional hoax.

5. A somewhat closer examination of this greeting may be worthwhile at this point. For it is perhaps the semantic contents of the name "Sholem-Aleykhem" that more than anything else can prove the clue to the nature of the mercurial being whose flights we are trying to trace. Of old Hebraic origin,³⁶ the greeting literally means 'peace be with

³⁴ Paul Fatout, "Mark Twain's Nom de Plume" in *Mark Twain—a Profile*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), pp. 161-168; also Fatout, "Enter Mark Twain" in *Mark Twain in Virginia City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 34-49.

³⁵ From an open letter of Clemens to J. A. McPherson (1877). See Fatout's article in Kaplan's collection, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³⁶ The preposition *al* ('on') follows the noun *shalom* ('peace') in the context of a greeting or wish but twice in the Bible and in an identical form: *shalom al yisrael* 'peace shall be upon Israel' (Authorized Version, Psalms 125,5, 128,6). The regular Biblical greeting connects *shalom* with the preposi-

you' (actually 'on you'), and it is answered with the same words in reverse order (*aleykhem-sholem*). Thus, greeting and reply form a symmetrical a b b a pattern.³⁷ In both of them the second person plural is used, indicating respect. All this goes to show how formal and ceremonious the *sholem-aleykhem* greeting basically was; a fact which is illustrated by its ritualistic use in the opening line of the hymn, with which the angels of peace were greeted by every Ashkenazic Jew upon his return from synagogue on Friday evening. These angels, according to old midrashic tradition, were escorting the holy Sabbath to every Jewish home and, of course, were to be greeted by the head of the family as the most welcome and venerated of guests. *Sholem-aleykhem* was then the formal greeting one offered an important personality (in the Talmud it is recommended as the greeting due a teacher from his disciples) and a welcome guest. A considerable residue of these formalistic and ceremonious qualities was retained even in its daily usage in Yiddish speech. It never degenerated into something as casual and automatic as 'hello' or 'how-do-you-do'. One would not waste it on a neighbor, an acquaintance, or a family member one sees daily or meets regularly. It is reserved for the special occasion of welcoming someone who has been long missed, or of getting to know a total stranger who has just happened to come to town, for according to traditional etiquette, the stranger, even when poor and undistinguished, is to be treated as an important and welcome guest.³⁸ Of course, the

tional prefix *le* ('to'). However, in post-Biblical Hebrew *shalom al* became the normative form of greeting. (See, as a Talmudic instance, *Berakhot* 27b and Rashi *ad. loc.*)

³⁷ The greeting could be replied to, on special occasions, with the Biblical *aleykhem veal beneykhem* (Psalms 115, 14: 'on you and your children'). See a characteristic example of modern Yiddish use of this elaboration in note no. 19.

³⁸ See, for instance, the opening passages of Yisroel Aksenfeld's *Dos shtern-tikhl* [The Headband], the first modern Yiddish novel, where the narrator

actual degree of cordiality conveyed by the greeting, and by the handshake which as a rule follows it (to the extent that the expression *a sholem-aleykhem* may mean 'a handshake'), was determined by the real importance of the person greeted as well as by the good will and friendliness of the greeter. Hence the difference between a mere *sholem-aleykhem* and a *breyter sholem-aleykhem* (a 'hearty', literally a 'broad' one).³⁹ The expression was also used ironically, for formality and ceremony will always invite their reverse. Thus, *sholem-aleykhem*, uttered in a certain tone of voice, is a reaction to the unexpected appearance of something not exactly welcome, particularly to that of a person one would gladly do without.

These points are raised here not for the sake of ethnographic information, but because almost all of them were touched upon by the author in his use of the greeting as the name of his rhetorical representative.

(a) By choosing a formal greeting for a name, the author was first and foremost asserting the comic, prankish, and

jocosely delineates the differences between a *kleyn shtetl*, a *shtot*, and a *groyse shtot* in the Russian-Jewish Pale during the first half of the nineteenth century. The differentiating feature of the "big town," as he puts it, is that *do barimt zikh itlekher, az er hot eynem fun der ander gas gegeben sholem-aleykhem vayl er hot im gehaltn far a fremder* ('here everyone boasts of having greeted someone from the other street with a *sholem-aleykhem*, mistaking him for a stranger'), Aksensfeld, *op. cit.*, ed. M. Vinet (Moscow, 1938), p. 52.

³⁹ Significantly, Tevye the dairyman uses this expression (along with other elaborations of the conventional greeting) only in his last monologues, allegedly heard by Sholem-Aleykhem after twenty years of an acquaintance that developed into a real intimacy. Most markedly, the monologue "Lekh lekho" [Get Thee Out (after Genesis 12,1)] written in 1914, after five years during which Tevye had not seen Sholem-Aleykhem, is opened with the greeting in its most elaborate form: *a sheyner, a guter, a breyter sholem-aleykhem oyf aykh, pani Sholem-Aleykhem! Aleykhem ve'al beneykhem! Ikh kuk shoyt oyf aykh lang aroys* ('A fine, good, hearty *sholem-aleykhem* to you, Mr. Sholem-Aleykhem! *Aleykhem veal beneykhem!* I have been looking forward to seeing you for a long time'). *Gants Tevye* in *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, V. p. 199.

“contrary” nature of his persona. A being, whose very name consists in an incongruity or in a pun-like misuse of language, is bound to be “funny.” Thus the name Sholem-Aleykhem, appearing under the title of a feuilleton or a story, conditions the reader’s reading of the work and directs his expectations from it. As the name becomes popular and is frequently used, this primarily “funny,” incongruous quality of it is, of course, in constant danger of erosion, even of complete obliteration. One suspects that most people who wrote on Yiddish literature became so familiar with the name Sholem-Aleykhem that they altogether lost the sense of its original absurdity. However, the author tried as hard as he could to keep the name’s edge sharp. In order to recharge its waning comic potential and refresh the reader’s perception of its preposterousness, he employed various gimmicks, such as that of comic misunderstanding, the semantic short-circuit created by the identity of a name and a greeting. Thus, Sholem-Aleykhem, met by strangers, is asked for his name. When he answers, he is understood as greeting his interlocutor. His greeting is, of course, accepted and reciprocated with the appropriate *aleykhem-sholem*, and then he is asked again, rather impatiently, to disclose his name, etc., etc. This simple little comedy of errors—which as a rule falls flat even in the best translation—is repeated again and again in different comic contexts. The most hilarious instance occurs in *Dos naye kasrilevke* [The New Kasrilevke]. Here, Sholem-Aleykhem, on one of his “you-can’t-go-home-again” visits to the town of his childhood, returns in the wee hours of the night to his hotel-room to encounter a gang of new-style *kasrilevker* house-breakers. Of course, they take whatever money he has, which is very little, but after they are through with their paltry and not altogether convincing show of brutality, they start a more relaxed conversation with their victim and inquire, as every good Jew will, after his name. He answers, is misunderstood

by them, etc.⁴⁰ The recurrent employment of such gimmicks should not be interpreted as a mere recourse to easy techniques of getting a laugh from an audience ready to laugh almost at anything, but rather as the author's persisting intention to protect the basic comic feature of his persona, which is the semantic absurdity of its name, from fading.

(b) As persistent as this, and in some way perhaps even more important, is his intention to evoke, by the use of the name Sholem-Aleykhem, the connotation of Jewish hospitality. Through this name the author was actually humanizing and Judaizing the technical procedure of publication. He was inviting the reader to consider the feuilleton or story not as so many words printed in a magazine, coming from far-off St. Petersburg (where the *Folksblat* was published), but rather as the spoken words of a human being, a guest, a talkative and friendly acquaintance one meets from time to time and greets, of course, with *a breyter sholem-aleykhem*. If we remember that Sholem-Aleykhem used to make his almost weekly appearances mostly on Fridays—Friday being the day on which the literary supplement of a Jewish newspaper is bound to appear—we can see how the author was linking the publication of his works with long and deep-rooted Jewish traditions. Was not his story or feuilleton an equivalent of the “guest for the Sabbath” without whom no Friday festive dinner could be considered complete? Moreover, as a welcome guest, who brought with him merriment and good-will, he was actually a companion of the Sabbath angels. As their name, *malakhe hashalom* (‘angels of peace’) indicated they

⁴⁰ See the chapter “Kasrilevker banditn” [The Bandits of Kasrilevke], in the story “Dos naye Kasrilevke” [The New Kasrilevke], in *Alt-nay Kasrilevke* [Kasrilevke—Old and New], *Ale verk*, Folksfond edition, XIII, pp. 120-125. By the way, in this scene of “robbery” Sholem-Aleykhem does not for a moment lose his equanimity, his attitude of an amused observer. It is an excellent instance of his invulnerability. The fact that he is poor, and that whatever money he has is being taken from him, is not presented as a threat either to his physical or spiritual autonomy.

were supposed to chase all the worries and irritations of weekly existence out of the Jewish home, and offer, instead, joviality, pleasure, and serenity. As a matter of fact, Sholem-Aleykhem's weekly appearance actually became for millions of East European Jews an almost institutionalized part of the Sabbath joviality. For it was on the Sabbath that the father of the family, or one of its other members, would read the new feuilleton or story, with proper comic intonation and mimicry, to the whole laughing family. Sholem-Aleykhem *was* a Sabbath guest in the actual sense of the words, and the author meant him to be one. In any case, he never missed an opportunity for drawing attention to this aspect of his being. After intervals in publication he would, for instance, start a new series of stories or humoresques with a scene of a hearty, if somewhat disorderly, meeting with a guest who had been missed for a long time. For example:

"A guest! A guest! Sholem-Aleykhem! A guest!"

"*Aleykhem-sholem.*"

"Where are you coming from? Where have you been all this time? How are things? What's up with this, that, and the other, with us, with you, with . . . with . . . with . . . ?"

"How can I answer all of you at once, good brothers? Let me catch my breath first, and then little by little every one of your questions will be answered. *Tishe yedesh—dalshe budesh* [‘the quieter you ride, the further you will go’]. Now, as for your first question.”⁴¹

On other occasions, Sholem-Aleykhem, who is always supposed to be traveling, would break a long silence, caused allegedly by a particularly long journey, with a letter reassuring his readers that he had not forgotten them and that they

⁴¹ From "Kurtse antvortn oyf lange fragn" [Short Replies to Long Questions] *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, vol. I, p. 470. See a similar opening in the feuilleton "Stantsye Mazepevke" [Mazepevke Station], where Sholem-Aleykhem is "attacked," the moment he gets off the train, by a crowd of impatient readers: "*Aleykhem-sholem*, Reb Sholem-Aleykhem, a guest, a guest! How are you? How are the wife and the kids? What's new? Where are you coming from, and what brings you here?" (*Hoyzfraynt*, III, 1893, p. 157.)

were still going to have good times together. For example:

Do confess, my dear sisters and brothers, loyal readers of the *Yidishes folksblat*, do confess that although I am not worthy of it some of you have already begun to miss me. . . .

Confess, little sisters and brothers, that many of you have more than once looked for me down here on the ground floor [of the newspaper], where we once used to meet almost weekly. I even know that a few of my good friends have already begun to feel somewhat happy about it: "What's that? No more Sholem-Aleykhem?—Good riddance. . . ." Don't worry, little brothers, I am here! Don't you be too happy, dear friends; here I am!⁴²

(c) As the passage just quoted suggests, the author was not averse to evoking ironic or sarcastic connotations connected with the *sholem-aleykhem* greeting, i.e., to emphasizing the nuisance aspect of his persona. While he certainly wanted this persona to represent the welcome and merry guest, he also wanted it to call to mind the fellow who crops up where he is least expected or wanted; the rogue, who can always be counted on to play a trick, to set a trap and indulge in all sorts of light, not too painful mischief. In any case, he let the people who came into contact with Sholem-Aleykhem or read his works shower upon his head imprecations and abusive epithets such as *shlimazl* ('ne'er do well'), a *shlak* ('an insufferable nuisance'; literally—'a stroke'), a *farshlepte krenk* ('a dragged out, protracted disease'), a *meshumed* (literally, 'a converted Jew'; figuratively, 'a rascal, a miscreant'), a *meshulakhes* ('a plague', literally, 'visitation') and most often a *lets* or one of the *leytsim*. In order to appreciate the full thrust of this last epithet, which becomes Sholem-Aleykhem's nickname, one must take into account not only its present watered-down meaning, which is that of a buffoon or joker, but also its long history of semantic virulence. It begins with the Biblical warning not to sit in the seat of the scornful, the scoffers (*leytsim*), and reaches its climax in popular demonol-

⁴² "Funem veg" [From the Road], *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, II, p. 208.

ogy, which identifies the *leytsim* with a distinct order of minor demons. This last meaning is definitely what many characters have in mind when they refer to Sholem-Aleykhem as a *lets*, especially those characters whose secrets or personal correspondence was made public by him.⁴³ Sholem-Aleykhem himself hints, at least in his early appearances, at his devilry by introducing himself many times in Biblical Hebrew as coming *mishut boorets umihishaleykh bo* ('from going to and fro in the earth, from walking up and down in it'), i.e., by quoting Satan's reply to God's question ("From whence comest thou?") from the first chapters of the Book of Job.⁴⁴ The image conjured by this allusion is, of course, one of a devil at large who is both facetious and bent on mischief.

As a matter of fact, it was this aspect of the Sholem-Aleykhem persona that dominated "Di vibores," "Di ibergekhaps briv," and other early works in which its basic features took form. It is also this aspect that indicates what was probably the origin both of the persona and of its name. At this early phase of the author's development, he was working within the framework of a "style" or a "tradition" in Yiddish comic and satirical writing, which although the historians have paid but little attention to it, was at the time highly influential. Its most celebrated representative was Y. Y. Linetski, whose savage but also hilarious anti-Hasidic satire *Dos poylishe yingl* [The Polish Boy] was the rage from the days of its first publication (1867) and throughout the 1870's. Linetski's speciality was the virulent satirical attack, unsophisticated and crude. Yet it was quite overwhelming by its combination

⁴³ The "Ibergekhaps briv," for instance, are full of such epithets: *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, I, pp. 68-69, 79, 82, 122, etc.

⁴⁴ See, for example, the opening paragraphs of the first letter in "An ibershraybung tsvishn tsey alte khaveyrim" [A Correspondence Between Two Old Friends], *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, I, p. 165; the chapter "Di simkhe" [The Celebration] in *Bilder fun der barditshever gas*, *ibid.*, p. 438; "Kurtse antvortn oyf lange frag'n," *ibid.*, p. 470.

of ferocious partisanship, tremendous verbal energy, and exaggerated caricature, which often sublimated a wildly distorted picture of historical reality into a grotesque vision. Linetski's persona (for like any other important Yiddish writer at the time, he consciously cultivated one) was modeled after the figure of the traditional *beyzer marshelik* ('wicked-tongued wedding jester'), who tells his captive audience the bitter truth about themselves and makes them swallow it, even enjoy it while being outraged by it, because he manages to make it funny, hilariously so. No Yiddish writer tended to present himself in terms of nuisance value more than did Linetski. His persona, *Eli Kotsin Hatskhakueli*, always paraded his awareness of his reader's willingness to tear him to pieces, as well as of their fear of his venomous pen. He developed the drama of his relationship with the readers around the image of the unexpected guest, whose visit amounts to a visitation. His best collection of *kartines* ('pictures, sketches'), *Dos meshulakhes* [The Visitation], which appeared in 1875 after a lull in his literary activity, was characteristically opened by a long chatty monologue entitled "Sholem-Aleykhem," which consisted of sarcastic apostrophes to the various categories of reader-victims, who are informed that the respite they were granted is over, and that it's now time to get ready for the flailing they richly deserve. Each of the apostrophes is opened with the *sholem-aleykhem* greeting and is developed by an ironic rhetoric of the hearty, noisy reunion of host and guest, who have been longing for each other, until it reaches a bathetic climax.⁴⁵ When Sholem Rabinovitsh started to write in Yiddish, he not only knew this collection but actually relished it. He was particularly taken (as he said in several letters)⁴⁶ with its final piece, which indeed was its *piece de*

⁴⁵ Eli Kotsin Hatskhakueli, *Dos meshulakhes* (Zhitomir, 1875), pp. 3-10.

⁴⁶ See his letters to Linetski of March 19/20 and 27, 1888, in *Sholem-Aleykhem—zamlung fun kritische artiklen un materyaln* (Kiev, 1940), pp. 234-235.

resistance. This was a little dramatic farce entitled "Di vibores," in which the efforts of the rich leaders of a certain Jewish community in the Ukraine to win an election with threats, bribery and chicanery were brilliantly exposed.⁴⁷ There is but little doubt that this was our author's starting point when he wrote his own "Vibores," and there is a very strong probability that the pen-name he adopted for the publication of this Linetskian satire was suggested to him by Linetski's introductory monologue in *Dos meshulakhes*.

Sholem-Aleykhem's early career was directly influenced by Linetski's persona, much more than by the better-known Mendele Moykher-Sforim.⁴⁸ A residue of this influence was never to be completely obliterated, and the impudence of the irreverent truth-teller was to become an indispensable ingredient of the Sholem-Aleykhem flavor. However, from the very start the figure was devoid of Linetski's acerbity and verbal brutality, as well as alien to his overreaching anti-traditional bias. It was endowed instead with the rudiments of gentleness of carriage and melodiousness of phrase, traits which were to flourish in the mature works. Thus Sholem-Aleykhem presented from as early a work as the "Ibergekhapte briv" a metamorphosed version of the nuisance persona, a lighter and mellower image of a havoc-wrecker. Where Linetski's persona was cudgelling and trouncing, Sholem-Aleykhem dealt his lighter blows as part of a game. The former engaged in combat with his readers; his entrances and exits were martial, arranged as surprise attacks and strategic withdrawals. The latter played hide-and-seek with his readers, and his entrances and exits were those of a Puck-like sprite. What he left be-

⁴⁷ *Dos meshulakhes*, pp. 58-71.

⁴⁸ Linetski's influence over Sholem-Aleykhem has not yet been recognized by most Yiddish scholars outside the Soviet Union, and has not been properly studied. For the fullest account now available, see H. Reminik's "Linetski un Sholem-Aleykhem," *Shtern*, XV (1939), no. 9, pp. 80-90.

hind him was not seeping venom, but rather a breeze of playful mystery.

(d) It was mystery, indeed, although of the lightest brand, and devoid of any sinister aftertaste. As much as this may sound out of place in a description of a literary persona whose hallmark was convivial, chatty familiarity with the reading public, a persona through whom the author actually achieved unflagging rapport with millions of readers, mystery or at least mystification was to remain an essential element in the Sholem-Aleykhem phenomenon. In fact, it was precisely the particular combination of familiarity and mystery that determined the nature of this phenomenon and made it an authentic part of the folklore. Sholem-Aleykhem was a kindred spirit, a reassuring guest, who could be counted on to relieve, for an hour, the dead weight of the terribly constrained existence of the contemporary Jew by his aura of freedom and vague promise of transcendence over all constraining circumstances. But in order to be reassuring in this way, in order to convey this promise, however vaguely, he also had to possess a guest's unfamiliarity, to be a stranger, a being free to assume new forms and able to evade any final, "placing" definition, which would immediately expose its limitations and strip it from any remnant of mystery. The mystery element in Sholem-Aleykhem was pronounced especially in the early works, but it lingered on in the late ones, informing the whole body of the author's works. One of the imaginary writers of the "Stolen Letters" reported:

Yesterday evening I entered the house of a rich man where I found a large group of young people sitting around the table and reading our letter in the *Yidishes folksblat*. The laughter brought the house down. They invited me to join them so that I, too, would enjoy the feuilleton. Afterwards I asked them what they thought of "The Stolen Letters" and their answer was that Reb Velvele [who happens to be the writer of the present letter—D. M.] was crazy but not at all stupid. . . . One expressed the opinion that the whole thing was nothing but a fabrication by the cor-

respondent, Sholem-Aleykhem, who had himself written the letters. Another said that this was impossible, since such a fabrication would amount to fraud, for which Sholem-Aleykhem could be sent to jail. A third person said that Sholem-Aleykhem was not afraid of being accused of fraud, for he, too, was a disembodied soul roaming in the *oylem-hatoyu* ('limbo'). [The addressee of this letter is allegedly a dead person who wanders in limbo. D. M.] The fourth one said that this was not possible either, because a person such as Tserderboym [the publisher and editor of the *Folksblat*—D. M.] would have nothing to do with either madmen or dead men. . . . The fifth one . . . but I am not going to tell what every one said, because it is not worth repeating.⁴⁹

This obviously is a satire on the provincialism of contemporary Jewish society, but like many of our author's satirical thrusts it reaches deeper than facile social criticism. The reader of the feuilleton, who is wise enough to see through the fabrication of "The Stolen Letters" and to identify Sholem-Aleykhem as their writer, is not wholly in the right, while the naive reader who is superstitious enough to pronounce Sholem-Aleykhem a disembodied spirit, free from all human subordination, is not as wrong as he may seem. Sholem-Aleykhem, the persona, was actually meant to be taken as a comically mysterious being with fantastic mobility, who is everywhere and nowhere in particular, "going to and fro in the earth and walking up and down in it." He also was depicted as possessing an uncanny knack for unearthing secrets. How could he function otherwise in his capacity of a literary purveyor? How could he, for instance, publish the "Stolen Letters" allegedly exchanged between a man who had recently died and his friend, who since he had started to receive letters from the other world, had been pronounced insane? Mere journalistic indiscretion and a developed sense for sniffing out hidden documents could not suffice in such

⁴⁹ From Letter VI of the "Ibergekhapte briv," *Ale verk*, Soviet edition, I, p. 105.

a case. A reporter had to establish connections with “sources” in higher circles and have his “channels of information” reach very far indeed!⁵⁰ And how could Sholem-Aleykhem, without an uncanny power of penetration, rewrite the letters of Menakhem-Mendl and his wife. Menakhem-Mendl himself is utterly flabbergasted by this feat, as he confesses in this first letter to Sholem-Aleykhem. True, he concedes, Sholem-Aleykhem met him milling around the stock exchange quite often; still: “How remarkable! Every time I meet you it seems to me that while I see you, you never as much as notice me. Later, it turns out that you not only see *me*, but also see *through me*.”⁵¹

6. Neither the author, nor a full-fledged fictional character, the Sholem-Aleykhem figure must then be referred to, as it has often been throughout this paper, as a presence. It is a presence informed by some immanent characteristics, but much too liable to metamorphosis and much too slight to pass

⁵⁰ The author was using the correspondence of the madman and dead man to present his readers with a comprehensive satirical view of contemporary Jewish society “in its true colors,” i.e., from the vantage point of absolute, objective truth as revealed to the soul after death in the other world, which both in Hebrew and Yiddish is referred to as “the world of truth.” The other vantage point, that of the relative, subjective, but still revolutionary truth of the madman, or the man society pronounces mad for breaking away from the net of accepted lies in which all “normal” people are caught likewise is presented. There was nothing new about the author’s choice of this satirical technique. Both the dead and the allegedly insane as truth-tellers are as old a convention as satire itself. Anti-traditional satire in nineteenth-century Yiddish and Hebrew literature employed these conventional figures *ad nauseam* (A. Volfson, T. Feder, Y. Erter, Y. L. Levinzon, Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, Y. Y. Linetski, A. B. Gotlober, M. L. Lilyenblum, et al.). In many ways the “Ibergekhapte briv” were a mere continuation of the satirical literature of the *Haskalah* movement. What was new about it, however, was the softening of the anti-traditional line, and more importantly, the role the *lets*, Sholem-Aleykhem, played in stealing and publishing the letters. The “supernatural” machinery of this specific satirical convention enabled the author to develop the characteristics of his persona.

⁵¹ From “Vos tut men?” [What’s to be Done?], *Sovetish heymland*, IX (1969), no. 2, p. 73.

for a character, and much too fanciful and free from biographical and historical commitments to be taken for the direct representation of the author. Assuming new faces and rhetorical functions as freely as a skilled and versatile actor, it nevertheless conditions the vast, variegated fictional world the author has created, unifies it and actually serves as an axis around which everything turns. It functions in different ways under different circumstances and for different purposes, but it is also one and indivisible. It represents many things, but it makes them look like different aspects or parts of a single, more comprehensive entity.

In some of his introductions to his major works, written late in his career, the author himself came as close as he could to a definition of this entity. In the introductory chapter to *Funem yarid*, he almost divulged his secret. There he explained the particular rhetorical structure of this autobiographical work written not as an autobiography, i.e., in the first person, but rather as a "biographical novel" narrated by an omniscient author: "It will turn out that I shall speak of myself as a third person, that is: I, *Sholem-Aleykhem the writer*, shall tell you the true biography of *Sholem-Aleykhem the person*—as it would have been told, for instance, by an outsider, a total stranger who, however, had been everywhere with him, who together with him had been through the seven circles of hell."⁵²

This, on the face of it, can be construed as nothing more than an elementary explanation of literary technicalities; an explanation intentionally simplified because offered to a reading public unacquainted with even the rudiments of literary-critical jargon (as, indeed, was the majority of our author's readership), and therefore in need of dramatic, situational renderings of such basic concepts as the omniscient author or the third-person narrative technique vs. the first-person

⁵² See note no. 18.

one. However, it was meant not merely to serve as such an explanation, but also to go far beyond the elucidation of the particular formal or technical nature of *Funem yarid*. For one thing, the author went out of his way here to make even his most naive readers see that there was a difference between Sholem-Aleykhem the persona (“Sholem-Aleykhem the writer”) and Sholem Rabinovitch (“Sholem-Aleykhem the person”). But the intuition conveyed here was even more comprehensive than that. This one realizes by comparing the introduction to *Funem yarid* with other late perspective-opening introductions, such as the ironic prefatory note to the so-called “canonized” edition of *Menakhem-Mendl* (1910). The resemblance between the comments on the relationship between Sholem-Aleykhem the writer and the person, and those on the relationship between Sholem-Aleykhem and Menakhem-Mendl, is striking. Menakhem-Mendl, Sholem-Aleykhem says, is (not unlike the autobiographical hero of *Funem yarid*) a “true” and “uninvented” figure whom the author had known for years and followed along his pilgrimage from one stock-exchange to another. Like him he withstood many crises, went bankrupt, and finally emigrated to America. In short, he was his companion “through the seven circles of hell.”⁵³ This, of course, was hardly a piece of bona-fide biographical information. It was rather a metaphorical rendering of a relationship with more than one facet to it. On the one hand, the author clearly implied that there was more than a casual affinity between himself and the protagonist, who while being the butt of his satire was also his self-portrait. (One is reminded of Flaubert’s dictum: “Madame Bovary—c’est moi.”) On the other hand, he also implied that Sholem-Aleykhem’s complete familiarity with Menakhem-Mendl, his inside knowledge of his life experience (which as we saw, Menakhem-Mendl himself could not com-

⁵³ See note no. 31.

prehend), should never be understood as an identification with him. Sholem-Aleykhem, the persona, knows everything about Sholem Rabinovitsh and Menakhem-Mendl; he has followed them everywhere and seen them through imaginary successes and very real disasters, but he exits in a sphere totally different from theirs. The recurrence of the image of the journey through "the seven circles of hell" in both introductions is highly significant. It conveys the author's basic conception of direct experience, of "life" undistanced as a terrifying progression from one disaster to the other. Experience as such is infernal; the Jewish experience is doubly so. The vocation of Jewish art is to transform it, to endow it with some sense, to redeem its unbearable pain and absurdity. This can be done only by presenting it in comic terms, and this, in turn, can be achieved only by a free spirit, who while sharing this experience can also remain a "total stranger" to it. A Dantesque duality of protagonist (experience) and an accompanying presence (art, especially comic art) is therefore essential for a real presentation of "The Jewish Comedy." Thus Sholem-Aleykhem, a comic Vergil, shadowy, immaterial, a disembodied soul sees Menakhem-Mendl, Tevye, Motl, and scores of other protagonists, including Sholem Rabinovitsh, through the hell of existence in general and of Jewish existence in particular. He indicates, by his very existence, a possible road to freedom, perhaps the only road to it: the transforming path of art, the transcending trip of the comic spirit.