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Introduction

SHOLEM ALEICHEM, Mr. How-Do-You-Do, was the first (and probably the last) true folk writer the Jews have ever had. In earlier times, to be sure, a satirist like Linetski had cornered the market for a while with his antihasidic blockbuster *The Polish Lad*, or dime novelists the likes of Dik and Shomer had successfully catered to a loyal female audience, but never had a professional writer become both a household name and a household presence. On both sides of the Atlantic, Sholem Aleichem's stories were read aloud as part of a Friday evening or Saturday afternoon ritual, and even the most unsophisticated listeners could laugh at the trilingual wordplay that now requires lengthy annotation. The verbal antics of his best-known characters Tevye, Menakhem-Mendl, Motl, Reb Yuzifl and the anonymous Traveling Salesman were followed as closely as the Perils of Pauline.

For all that Sholem Aleichem seemed to have always belonged in the public domain, the translation, editing and posthumous publishing of his works became something of a family monopoly, so that his prodigious output appeared in truncated form and bore an official stamp that we are only now beginning to unfix. If the pace and scope of recent (re)translations of his work into Hebrew and English are any indication, the new Sholem Aleichem oeuvre that emerges may bear little resemblance to that which was commonly known before.

For the critics, meanwhile, Sholem Aleichem's enormous popularity and the chaotic state of his canon made their job that much more difficult, given, especially, that modern criticism thrives on artfulness and alienation, while the Sholem Aleichem persona, as well as his most popular creations, seemed utterly artless and exuberant. Brenner spoke for the intellectuals' quandary when he claimed that the "true" Sholem Aleichem

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wasn't a writer at all, "but rather a unique poetic and folk amalgam, a living essence of the folk itself." For lack of anything better, the critics resurrected the cliché of laughter-through-tears that had already been applied to Gogol some sixty years earlier.

A critical tradition gradually did emerge, however, in three separate stages. At first there were occasional essays written in honor of Sholem Aleichem's jubilee (in 1908) and then on his death (in 1916). But not until Yiddish Studies were received into the Soviet system did Sholem Aleichem come into his own as a bona fide subject of research. Here was the perfect choice for Marxist scholars anxious to invent a "progressive" cultural heritage (or *yerushe*). Hebraists had a rival claim on Abramovitsh, the "grandfather" of modern Yiddish literature, while Peretz was more than a little suspect as a neoromantic reactionary. All one had to do in Sholem Aleichem's case was to ignore his Zionist leanings and to stress the realistic component of his art. With these limitations in mind, a group of exceptionally talented scholars—Dobrushin, Erik, Nusinov, Oyslender, Spivak, Wiener and others—produced detailed studies of individual works and, most importantly, began to reissue them in critical editions. This last project, a *Complete Works of Sholem Aleichem* (which logically should have come first), would only be revived in the 1980s—this time in Jerusalem and Cincinnati.

The strands of Sholem Aleichem scholarship severed by the war and the Stalinist purges were picked up again by the Israeli scholars Dov Sadan, Dan Miron and Khone Shmeruk. In his seminal essay "Three Foundations," Sadan relocated Sholem Aleichem within nineteenth-century Jewish literary traditions. Miron traced a rise-and-fall pattern that structured many of Sholem Aleichem's seemingly structureless works, and he subjected the Menakhem-Mendl and Motl cycles to a radical rereading. Shmeruk unravelled the textual history of *Tevye* and *Motl Peyse dem khazns*, showing the interface of aesthetic and social determinants. This predictable shift of emphasis from questions of what the texts mean to how they mean what they mean was then carried over by the next generation of scholars.

By uncovering new levels of meaning and artistry in Sholem Aleichem's work, the critics made new translations of that work possible. In the popular anthology *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*, edited by Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse (1979), two translations in particular broke new ground. Sacvan Bercovitch (a closet Yiddishist), preserved the speech rhythm, the manic obsessiveness and the coarseness of Yente the dairy vendor's brilliant monologue ("The Pot"), while Hillel Halkin found ingenious solutions to render Tevye's trilingual wordplay—rhymes and all ("*Hamaadil beyn koydesh l'khoyl*, some make hay while others toil"). Halkin's translation of the complete Tevye monologues, slated to be published by Schocken Books, promises to unseat Tevye from his sen-

timental perch "on the roof." The success of these translations grows not from more flexible norms of literary English, but from a new understanding of Sholem Aleichem, a very un-English writer.

In 1975, Dan Miron and Ruth R. Wisse initiated a plan for a *Sholem Aleichem Reader* that would include a full complement of essays old and new covering all three stages of critical research. The present issue of *Prooftexts* is but a sampling of the materials commissioned and edited by them. Of the older essays, all but Wiener's were translated by David G. Roskies. My own, original essay, was also written especially for that volume (in 1976). Michael Stern's essay, on the other hand, was generated by the call for papers issued last year by the editors of *Prooftexts*. A selected research bibliography is appended to provide a foretaste, so to speak, of the volume-in-planning.

It is a pleasure to thank Profs. Miron and Wisse for allowing *Prooftexts* to prepublish this material on the occasion of Sholem Aleichem's seventieth *yortsayt*. It is our hope that the present offering will stimulate new scholarship, will catch the eye of some enterprising publisher, and will awaken readers to a Yiddish prose master who only now is beginning to occupy his rightful place in the pantheon of modernity.

FOR FURTHER READING

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