Syracuse University

SURFACE

Religion

College of Arts and Sciences

Spring 1989

Sholem Aleichem: Monologues of Mastery

Ken Frieden

Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/rel>

Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Frieden, Ken, "Sholem Aleichem: Monologues of Mastery" (1989). *Religion*. 55.

<https://surface.syr.edu/rel/55>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Officers

F. William Forbes, University of New Hampshire, *President* (1988-1989)
Christiane Zehl Romero, Tufts University, *Vice-President*
Ida H. Washington, Middlebury, Vermont, *Executive Director*
Judith L. Johnston, Rider College, *Past President*
Edna L. Steeves, University of Rhode Island, *Women's Caucus Representative*
George J. Searles, Mohawk Valley Comm. College, *Two-Year College Rep.*
Judy Elsley, University of Arizona, *Graduate Student Representative*

Executive Council

To 1989—Jackson Bryer, University of Maryland
Kathryn Slott, University of Maine

To 1990—Joan Lipman Brown, University of Delaware
Leo A. Lensing, Wesleyan University

To 1991—Christina M. Gillis, American Council Learned Societies
Jack A. Yeager, University of New Hampshire

Editor: David H. Hirsch, English Department, Brown University
Scott Slovic, Editorial Assistant

Associate Editor: Nelson H. Vieira, Portuguese and Brazilian Studies,
Brown University

Editorial Board: Brown University

Antonio Carreño, Hispanic and Italian Studies
Sanda Golopentia-Eretescu, French Department
George Monteiro, English Department
Anthony Oldcorn, Hispanic and Italian Studies
Carol J. Poore, German Department
Victor Terras, Slavic Languages

Managing Editor: Edna L. Steeves, English Department, University of
Rhode Island

Book Review Editors:

Mark L. Greenberg (English), Humanities Department, Drexel University
Roberto Manteiga (Foreign Languages), University of Rhode Island

Advertising Director: Deborah Greenhut, Rutgers University

Advisory Board: for *Modern Language Studies*

Nehama Aschkenasy, University of Connecticut, Stamford
Morris Beja, Ohio State University
Robert L. Belknap, Columbia University
Lois Cuddy, University of Rhode Island
Peter N. Dunn, Wesleyan University
David Ferry, Wellesley College
Stephen Foley, Brown University
Rene Fortin, Providence College
Mark I. Goldman, University of Rhode Island
Roberto González-Echevarría, Yale University
Mark L. Greenberg, Drexel University
Louise A. Habicht, Southeastern Massachusetts University
Lee Jacobus, University of Connecticut
Sonja P. Karsen, Skidmore College
Lawrence Lockridge, New York University
Volker Meid, University of Massachusetts
Vicki E. Mistacco, Wellesley College
Charles Moser, George Washington University
Alice Petry, Rhode Island School of Design
Gerald Rabkin, Rutgers University
Claudia Reeder, Bryn Mawr
Judith L. Ryan, Smith College
Albert J. Salvan, Brown University
Jack Stillinger, University of Illinois
Richard C. Tobias, University of Pittsburgh
Grant T. Webster, SUNY, Binghamton
Janet S. Whatley, University of Vermont
Don B. Wilmeth, Brown University

Modern Language Studies

Vol. XIX, No. 2

Spring, 1989

Contents

"Julia" and Julia's Son
Edward Gillin

Page 3

Reading as Self-Sacrifice in Claudio Rodríguez's *Don de la ebriedad*
Jonathan Mayhew

Page 12

→ Sholem Aleichem: Monologues of Mastery
Ken Frieden

Page 25

Emerson, Poetry, and Reform
Len Gougeon

Page 38

Natureza e Mulher—Uma Visão do Brasil no Romantismo
Regina Zilberman

Page 50

Middleton's *Women Beware Women* as Anticourt Drama
Albert H. Tricomi

Page 65

BOOK REVIEWS

Page 78

- Culler, Jonathan. *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.
- Debicki, Andrew P. *Poetry of Discovery: The Spanish Generation of 1956-1971*. Lexington, Kentucky: The UP of Kentucky, 1982.
- Díaz-Plaja, Guillermo. *Al pie de la poesía*. Madrid: Editora Nacional, 1974.
- Fish, Stanley E. *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature*. Berkeley: The U of California P, 1972.
- Garcíasol, Ramón de. Rev. of *Don de la ebriedad*. *Insula* 99 (March 1954):7.
- González Muela, Joaquín. *La nueva poesía española*. Madrid: Ediciones Alcalá, 1973.
- Jiménez, José Olivio. *Dies años de poesía española: 1960-1970*. Madrid: Insula, 1972.
- Mandlove, Nancy. "Carnal Knowledge: Claudio Rodríguez and *El vuelo de la celebración*." *The American Hispanist* 4:32-33 (1979):20-23.
- Miller, Martha LaFollette. "Claudio Rodríguez's Linguistic Skepticism: A Counterpart to Jorge Guillén's Linguistic Faith." *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea* 6 (1981):105-121.
- . "Elementos metapoéticos en un poema de Claudio Rodríguez." *Expliación de Textos Literarios* 8 (1979-80):127-136.
- Mudrovic, William Michael. "The Poetry of Claudio Rodríguez: Technique and Structure." Ph. D. Diss., Univ. of Kansas, 1976.
- Persin, Margaret. "The Syntax of Assertion in the Poetry of Claudio Rodríguez." [Unpublished].
- Rodríguez, Claudio. *Desde mis poemas*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1983.
- . *Don de la ebriedad*. Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, 1953.
- . Personal interview. 16 March 1985.
- . "Unas notas sobre poesía." *Poesía Última*. Ed. Francisco Ribes. Madrid: Taurus, 1963. 87-92.
- Silver, Philip. "Claudio Rodríguez o la mirada sin dueño." *Antología poética*. By Claudio Rodríguez. Ed. Philip Silver. Madrid: Alianza, 1981. 7-21.

CALL FOR PAPERS

A symposium on Intercultural Perspectives in Poetics and Linguistics is scheduled for Nov. 10-11, 1989 at George Mason University in Washington, D.C. Papers, preferably in English, one-page abstract due April 1, 1989. Send abstracts and inquiries to: Professor Rei Berroa, Chair, Symposium Committee, Dept. of Foreign Languages, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

Sholem Aleichem: Monologues of Mastery

Ken Frieden

Sholem Aleichem's monologues give voice to a diverse cast of characters. Sholem Aleichem is best known as an author who speaks for the common people, or *folkstipn*, because his digressive, free-associative style is most effective when attributed to untrained narrators.¹ A vastly different situation arises, however, when relatively educated monologists narrate and manipulate events; I refer to monologues of this manipulative kind as "monologues of mastery." These monologues preclude an affectionate or even a neutral response, and raise questions concerning the moral content of satire. In two particular cases, when Sholem Aleichem represents the voices of bourgeois characters, he stages an unusual drama of social criticism.

Previous writers have touched on the social and political implications of Sholem Aleichem's work. In a seminal essay entitled, "The Social Roots of Sholem Aleichem's Humor," for example, Meir Viner disputes the claim that Sholem Aleichem did not criticize the Jewish plutocracy of Kiev.² Viner refers to the first period of Sholem Aleichem's creativity, from 1890 to 1895, arguing that he *did* stray from the "path of mercy" onto the "path of judgment." Yet Viner only mentions the "years of reaction" (from 1905 to 1907), and does not analyze the later stories written during these years. A recent article by Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Voices of Ambivalence in Sholem Aleichem's Monologues," continues where Viner left off. Paraphrasing Viner, Wirth-Nesher concludes that Sholem Aleichem strives to preserve neutrality: "the linguistic disguises which Sholem Aleichem has draped around his speakers . . . permit the writer to escape from making the moral choices that his mutually contradictory and eclectic petit bourgeois social views would have eventually necessitated."³ I will dispute this conclusion: while many of the monologues do express basic ambivalences, others convey Sholem Aleichem's sympathies and (especially) antipathies. In short, Sholem Aleichem employs monologues to enact a subtle form of social satire.

Interpreters of Sholem Aleichem's monologues have concentrated on a few major figures.⁴ As a result, critical and popular awareness hardly extend beyond "The Pot," "Advice," "Geese," and the Tevye stories. Reader reception has suppressed or overlooked another, potentially threatening world of Sholem Aleichem's work, which is epitomized by the monologues of mastery. The elements that comprise this mock genre may be found elsewhere, but they are particularly evident in the stories "Yoysef," "Three Widows," and "A Story of a Greenhorn." Rather than attempt a comprehensive discussion of Sholem Aleichem's monologues, I will interpret two of these relatively unknown and atypical tales.

The monologues of mastery are narrated by men whose wealth and education enable them to carry out sinister schemes. They often claim

to be impotent or indecisive; unlike Sholem Aleichem's impoverished speakers, however, these narrators are in a position to dominate events, both in their fictional worlds and in their acts of narration. As they address their monologues to Sholem Rabinovitch's persona, Sholem Aleichem, we search for a clue as to how we should react. But the listener betrays no emotions, except in his occasional, ambiguous smiles. The author's implicit stance lies deeper, beneath the surface of the narrative situation.

"Yoysef" (1905) carries the subtitle: "Narrative of a 'Gentleman.'" This epithet at first appears as Sholem Aleichem's ironic designation, yet it also comes from within the story: "The gentleman—I had no other name," the narrator explains, among the revolutionaries he knows. Throughout, the speaker describes himself and the other characters roughly, in accordance with their differences in status. The ensuing rivalry between two men resonates with political overtones.

The story is simple enough: the gentleman admires and desires a poor girl who is the waitress in her mother's restaurant. She, however, is attracted to Yoysef, one of the social revolutionaries who frequent the restaurant. Hence the drama centers around the question: Who exerts greater power (that is, of attraction), and by what means? Whereas the gentleman is primarily concerned with powers that vie for a woman's love, Yoysef occupies himself with revolutionary ideas.

The narrator evasively describes the girl who motivates the story: "You yourself probably understand that I will *not* tell *who* she is and *what* she is, and *where* she comes from. She is a woman, a girl, indeed a beautiful girl, and poor."⁶ Despite his evasiveness, the gentleman quickly reveals what he considers to be the essential facts: she is beautiful and poor. He wishes to possess her, but finds that she is not as helpless as her financial and social position lead him to expect. That the gentleman views his beloved girl in capital terms is clear from his glowing account of her laughter, "which alone is worth all the money" one pays to eat in her mother's restaurant. In short, he wants to purchase her on the strength of his financial holdings, and is thwarted when her affections are unmoved by monetary concerns.

The gentleman initially defies the hearer of his tale: "You can laugh at me, you can make a *feuilleton* out of me, even a book, if you wish—I'm not afraid of you" (107). Aware of Sholem Aleichem's usual, satiric practices, the monologist asserts his independence. Nevertheless, the final lines of the story undermine this initial bravado: "Give me your hand that everything I have told you here will remain between the two of us" (133).⁷ From start to finish, the narrator is aware of power struggles, and is especially sensitive to those associated with speech. While he tells a story of his efforts to manipulate others, he strives to manipulate the fictional hearer of his tale, simultaneously manipulating the reader of Sholem Aleichem's story. But by writing the account which his character has supposedly asked him to keep secret, Sholem Aleichem hints at a betrayal of his fictional speaker.

The narrator boasts that women constantly fall in love with him and that matchmakers always chase him. His self-description is, however, unconvincing:

Ikh bin a yungerman a hayntiger, un a sheyner yung, a gezunter, mit a shtikel nomen, un a hibsher fardiener, un a kerbel iz bay mir blote.

I am a modern, handsome young man, healthy, with a bit of a name, and a fine breadwinner, so that a ruble is nothing to me. (108)

The gentleman resorts to this self-portrait in order to authenticate his status, and it becomes a kind of nervous reflex, but his oft-repeated refrain only unsettles the identity it is intended to secure.⁸ Rather than respect his position, we come to see it as a joke: he turns himself into a caricature of the up-to-date gentleman. Whenever he encounters a difficulty, an awkward pause, or a threat to his presumed power, he comically sketches out his profile. Although he claims to have "a bit of a name," in his own story he never receives one, and despite all his efforts, only his rival's name, Yoysef, will be remembered.

For the narrator who is so conscious of his image, class relations are clearly marked by styles of dress. The socialist "Yankelekh" (generic "Jacobs") frequent his favored restaurant wearing long hair and black shirts. In contrast, the narrator wears a smoking jacket with a white vest. The tension between speaker and hearer intensifies with the remark that "you yourself, it seems, wear long hair and a black shirt, and if you think it handsome, excuse me, but you're wrong" (111). This assault places the fictional hearer, implicitly Sholem Aleichem (the fictional persona, not the author Sholem Rabinovitch) at odds with the speaker and closer to the revolutionary intellectuals.⁹ Language becomes a medium of aggression, and the reader may well feel uneasy about the narrator's attacks and feints.

Language also becomes an issue in connection with the Marxist terminology which is so popular among the "Yankelekh." The speaker says that he has nothing against honest talk, but

Ikh hob nor faynt, az me zogt mir, az ikh bin a "bourgeois." Ikh, far'n vort "bourgeois," kon geben a fohr-arayn in bak arayn!

I simply dislike it, when someone tells me that I am a "bourgeois." For the word "bourgeois" I can deliver a slap in the cheek! (112)¹⁰

The monologist is familiar with Marxist terminology, and he uses it to approach Yoysef and his circle. On occasion he even resorts to their key words: "proletariat," "Marx," "Bebel," "react" (*reagiren*), and "conspiratorial" (114, 123, 124, 126, 130). For the gentleman, however, these words merely form the mask by means of which he hopes to attain his ends.

Although the narrator boasts of his good name, he discovers that another name is far better, in the usage of his beloved: "She speaks the name 'Yoysef' with an odd sort of sing-song. Only a bride uses such a sing-song, when she speaks the name of her groom" (110). Impoverished, the desired girl asserts her freedom from the narrator by means of a word, one of her only words which he records: "Yoysef." This word presents such an obstacle that it structures the narrative and provides its title. Like a spell against Satan, the name of the beloved keeps the narrator at a

distance. Since the mildly satanic gentleman cannot become Yoysef in order to correspond to her longings, he wonders how he can eliminate the rival.

The relationship between power and language is explicit in one central scene, when the gentleman attends a revolutionary meeting. While Yoysef speaks, the narrator observes his success as an orator; he is especially struck by Yoysef's sway over her:

That minute I envied him, not so much for the force of his speaking, not for the honor and the applause which he received afterward, when he finished speaking—not for these things was I so envious of him, as for the way *she* looked at him! For such a look of hers, I would give away—I myself don't know what! (117-18)

The narrator decides to eliminate his adversary, whom he credits with rhetorical skill: *me darf zayner poter veren* (120). Having determined that Yoysef's power resides in his language, the narrator resolves to fight him on this ground: "I'll have a chat with him alone" (*ibid.*). When they meet, the gentleman begins by showing off all the Marxist vocabulary he knows. Then he transforms *reagiren* from a political term into a description of bourgeois emotions, to explain that he is not accustomed to "reacting" to a girl in this way. It remains unclear whether the speaker says anything more threatening to Yoysef. We merely see that, in contrast to the gentleman, Yoysef has concerns other than amorous pursuit.

The next we hear, Yoysef is in trouble with the authorities. Given the political environment of early 1905, one must assume that his trial turns out badly; he is presumably hanged or exiled. The gentleman's obstacle appears to have been overcome. He then makes a ruthless attempt to ambush his beloved's heart in a moment of weakness, but without success. He tells her that she need not *reagiren* (again this word!) so strongly to what has happened; she should forget it all. Although he is momentarily surprised by his power of speech, his efforts fail (130). Soon afterward the girl, her mother, and their restaurant disappear. All inquiries are in vain; their memory is like a dream. The gentleman can only tell the tale of a girl who revealed to him the limits of his power.

The narrator strives to manipulate the hearer of the story at the same time that he pretends to be weak and a failure (108). Yet he evidently plays an active role at some points in his account, and we may wonder whether there is any connection between the narrator's schemes and Yoysef's demise. This question is unanswerable, since it lies beyond the limits of the story. Nevertheless, a passing comment may hint that the gentleman contributed to Yoysef's arrest. He explains that he keeps a record of the conspiratorial activity he observes: "I wrote it out in a notebook" (*ikh hob es farshriben bay zikh in bikhel*) (115). Sholem Aleichem employs irony when he has the narrator add: "Whether it will be of use, or not, I don't know, but certainly it doesn't hurt" (*ibid.*). Of course, certain kinds of notes can have deleterious effects, though perhaps not on

their author. Again, language is the medium in which power exerts itself; writing can be an act of aggression.

Without yet drawing conclusions, I turn to a more intricate version of this basic plot, Sholem Aleichem's "Three Widows" ("Dray almonos"; 1907).¹¹ The narrator of this monologue is similarly wealthy and literate, but the subtitle emphasizes an ungentlemanly characteristic: this is "a story of an old bachelor, an irascible man [*bal kasan*]." Anger is central to the story, in part because the speaker continually provokes the listener, implicitly Sholem Aleichem.

"Three Widows" is the longest of Sholem Aleichem's *Monologn*.¹² The narrator's tense, belligerent relationship to his audience helps hold together the three sections of the narrative. His opening words immediately create a dramatic situation, following something the interlocutor has supposedly said: "You are wrong, my lord. Not all old maids are unhappy, not all old bachelors are egoists. Sitting there in your study with a cigar in your mouth and a book in your hand, you imagine you already know everything!" (165). The reader is drawn into an aggressive scene for the duration of the narrative.¹³ Similarly, the second part begins: "why have I made you wait so long?—Because I wanted to. When I tell a story, I do it when I wish, not when *you* wish" (190). The speaker insists that the hearer sit silently in an uncomfortable chair; and he sets the time and place of their meeting. After he concludes the second section, he tells the listener that to hear the rest of "the story about my 'widow number three,' you should trouble yourself to come to my home. If not—as you wish! I won't drag you by the coattails." He taunts, "You'll come by yourself" (*ihr vet aleyk kumen*) (199). Sholem Aleichem displaces the three sections of his story (originally serialized in more than three installments) onto three separate scenes within the fictional world.

The plot of "Three Widows" parallels the earlier "Yoysef," although the irascible speaker's account borders on absurdity. The monologist begins his story by narrating the death of an acquaintance. He helps the bereaved widow and her daughter Roza, who is born a few months later. Although infatuated by the widow, he explains that indecisiveness prevents him from satisfying his desire to marry her. Meanwhile, as Roza matures, the narrator's infatuation shifts from mother to daughter. Again, however, he never goes so far as to propose marriage. Roza eventually marries a bookkeeper who promptly poisons himself after a business failure. She subsequently gives birth to Feygele, and the earlier pattern recurs. The narrator delays his marriage proposal to the daughter for so long that he finally transfers his attentions to the granddaughter. (In structure, if not in tone, this repetition of events *ad absurdum* associates the story with some of Sholem Aleichem's more familiar, comic tales.) Insensitive to his charms, Feygele marries a chemist who, like Yoysef, is soon arrested for conspiratorial activities and hanged. The speaker continues his close associations with the three widows, and twice interrupts his story to dine with them. As the story ends, he anticipates spending the night at their home. This narrative combines dark humor, perversity, and the absurd, in multiple layers of satire.¹⁴

One early digression on buttons, revolving around a failure to marry, prepares for the events of the story:

What is a button? A button, dear friend, with one of us, with a bachelor, is an important thing! An entire world! Over a button a nasty story once occurred: a bachelor came to look at a girl, and someone pointed out to him with a laugh that he was missing a button; he went away and hanged himself. (168)

According to his account, the bachelor narrator is a master of buttons, of reserve, to the extent that he never seems to undress or to have a lewd thought.

Our speaker shows all the twists and turns of an unreliable narrator. His claim to speak "from the heart, without tricks" only arouses suspicions. He is evasive, self-contradictory, and at odds with established ethical norms: he withholds details (e.g., 166, 177-78), contradicts himself (e.g., 167/180-81/201), and repeatedly mocks social conventions (e.g. 185). Like the narrator of "Yoysef," he is an individualist and an outsider.¹⁵ He even predicts that the hearer will label him "an old bachelor, an irascible man," anticipating the criticism he knows he provokes. Still, the success of this fiction derives from the problematic (rather than entirely and obviously reprehensible) position of its speaker.¹⁶

As he speaks, the narrator taunts the hearer: "I don't ask your opinion!" (167); "I won't enter into discussion with you" (172); "What does it matter to me what you think?" (173). He has only harsh words to say about "your writers" (197). The first widow's daughter grew and blossomed "like a delicate rose," he says, alluding to her name and mimicking "the language of your novelists, who know as much about the blossoming of a rose as a Turk knows about the *rabonan kadesh* [the prayer for the masters and disciples of the law]" (171).¹⁷ Later, he refuses to narrate sentimental details, which "the novelists employ in order to squeeze out a tear from the foolish reader" (189; cp. 195). In particular, he rejects the word "love," which "your writers" have spoiled by indiscriminate use (197; cp. 210). These polemics cover up his cool reactions to the lives of his loves and to the deaths of his rivals.

The speaker carefully monitors the hearer's reactions to his story. This is one result of the story's unusual tone, which is closer to black humor than is usual in Sholem Aleichem's work. To offset this atmosphere, the gentleman narrators befriend women whose infectious laughter brings light to an otherwise dark universe: "She laughs, and everything laughs. . . . The table laughs, the benches laugh, and the walls laugh—all of life laughs" (109-10). The grim mood of "Three Widows" is lightened by laughter for, when beset by difficulties, "they laugh": "With them everything is laughter! All of life is laughter" (183; cp. 191).¹⁸ The redeeming laughter of the three widows differs sharply from the potentially critical or ironic smiles of the hearer. Hence even this silent reaction is unacceptable: "I dislike it when one smiles. You can laugh as much as you wish, but not smile" (200; cp. 168, 187; 107). In this case, most of the laughter occurs within the story rather than on the part of the reader. Somewhat proud of his education, the irascible man explains why, as guardian of the three

widows, he receives the name "Cerberus": "They gave me the name 'Cerberus,' a dog, that is, that stands at the entrance to paradise" (176). Inadvertently reversing the classical myth, possibly because for him the widows' home is a paradise, he betrays the fact that he has turned it into a hell for all other suitors.¹⁹

"Three Widows" ends in a situation of charged ambiguity. The irascible narrator often refers to his inability to fulfill his desires, saying that despite his infatuation for the first widow, "I had no courage to tell her" (181). There is no way to test his honesty, because the fictional world exists only in the story he tells. Yet internal inconsistencies unsettle the surface effects. The monologist claims never to satisfy his longings for those he calls "my three widows," but he manages to completely dominate their lives, apparently spending most of his days and even some nights with them. This is the conclusion of the story:

You're ready to go? Come, I'll go with you. I have to be with my three widows. Just a moment, I want to arrange to have the cat fed, because sometimes I can sit there until morning [*ikh kon mikh dort farzitsen biz tog oykh amol*]. We play Yerulash, sometimes Preference. We play for money. And you should see how everyone wants to win! And when someone makes a bad play, one doesn't show any mercy, neither they toward me nor I toward them. With me, if someone makes a bad play in cards, I'm capable of trampling on them, tearing them to pieces! What does your smile mean, for example? I know what you think now. I know you through and through and laugh at your grandma! You're thinking about me now: "An old bachelor, an irascible man." (212)

In the context of his confessional love story, the hostile relationship between the narrator and his three widows has never before been so evident. It cannot be purely coincidental that one of their card games is called "Preference." The narrator claims that he has never been able to express or enjoy his preferences. Why, then, does he haunt the widows' house, deep into the night?²⁰

There is no basis for further speculation on what "actually" happens between the narrator and his widows. He tells us that he has wasted his life—as a result of his timidity with regard to women. And yet in another sense he has victimized the three widows, constantly hovering nearby, a bourgeois Cerberus, always on the verge of proposing marriage and always delaying. The questionable nature of the irascible man's attentions becomes clear, from the standpoint of the first widow, when she once asserts that she has wasted her life because of him (178). Although the narrator is a master in the ethereal world of chess strategy, he claims to suffer defeat in real life (177-78). Even this resignation may be a guise which conceals a deeper strategy. Instead of choosing one of the three widows, he possesses all three, both as a sinister benefactor and as their narrative inventor. No amount of scrutiny can fully penetrate the story's layers of deceit, but the speaker himself alludes to Bismarck, saying: "Words were given to us in order to mask our thoughts" (196).

"A Story of a Greenhorn" (1916), which closes the volume of *Monologn*, intensifies the earlier voices of mastery. On one level, it epit-

omizes Sholem Aleichem's scathing critique of America, and (more specifically) of business practices on the Lower East Side. But this monologue also reworks the narratives of manipulation by the gentleman and by the old bachelor. The subtitle of this satire informs us that in it "Mr. Baraban, business broker, tells how he taught a lesson to a greenhorn, who married for the sake of business" (251).²¹ This narrator, whose name means "drum," pounds out a self-righteous account of his wrongdoings. Whereas the gentleman and irascible man have a somewhat ambiguous moral standing, Mr. Baraban has no positive features. This one-sidedness produces a more straightforward and less subtle effect of social criticism.

Like "Yoysef" and "Three Widows," "A Story of a Greenhorn" opens in reaction to the interlocutor: "You say: America is a land of business—nevermind. It has to be like this" (*Ihr zagt: Amerike iz a land fun biznes—nevermind. Es darf azoi tsu zayn*) (253). But where "Three Widows" initially attacks psychological theories, this monologue refers to the practices of newcomers and states a moral:

After all, to go and marry and sell oneself for the sake of business—that is really, excuse me, swinishness. I don't preach morality, but I'm telling you, it's a fact that ninety-nine percent of greenhorns among us marry for the sake of business. That vexes me, and when I catch such a greenhorn, he doesn't get away from me in one piece. (Ibid.)

By beginning with a relatively uncontroversial moral judgment (i.e., one should not marry for money), the speaker forestalls our recognition of his own immorality. Mr. Baraban tells a tale of his unethical actions, under the mask of self-righteous criticism. This dual presentation produces the strained irony of the story, which the narrator calls a "comedy" (255). As in the other monologues of mastery, the drama centers around a desired woman, and recounts the elimination of a competing man.

An unsuspecting newcomer visits Mr. Baraban, the business broker, together with his wife. They ask for assistance in opening a stationery store. Because Mr. Baraban happens to have a laundry up for sale, he convinces the greenhorn to go into the laundry business. What most impresses the monologist is the greenhorn's well-favored marriage to a beautiful girl with a fine dowry.

Although the girl is a passive observer of the ensuing spectacle, she is the source of its drama. Mr. Baraban describes her enthusiastically, as he first sees her: "with him a woman—what shall I tell you?—blood and milk. Beautiful as the day and fresh as an apple, just off the tree" (253). His outrage against the greenhorn flares up when he compares their assets:

The bastard has only a few hundred dollars in his pocket and a woman at his side—fine gold! Why does he deserve it? Mr. Baraban, the biggest business broker of the East Side, has to have a wife, excuse me, a monster and what's more a Xantippe; and God has to send such a jewel to the greenhorn. (257)

In "Yoysef," the gentleman monologist learns the limits of his wealth, since his beloved is attracted to a poor intellectual. Mr. Baraban refuses to

acknowledge forces greater than capital; in Sholem Aleichem's notion, the American milieu tends to confirm this view.

By a series of swindles, the business broker succeeds in completely bankrupting the greenhorn who, like the other monologists' competitors, is imprisoned. As the story closes,

I picked a lawyer for his wife who demands from him, on her account, three things: 1) her money, the thousand-dollar dowry; 2) a divorce; and 3) until she receives a divorce from him, he shall support her in accordance with the laws of the country. (259)

Radicalizing the leanings of other wealthy speakers, this last monologist embodies the triumph of evil. Mr. Baraban unabashedly eliminates his opposition and takes control of the woman's affairs, through the mediation of a lawyer. Financial power yields personal power, and a self-assurance that blinds the caricatured speaker to the possibility of seeing his actions in a negative light. The story ends in *medias res*, since we do not know what may ensue between the usurper and the woman whose life he dominates.

After perpetrating a violent scheme, Mr. Baraban narrates his misdeeds complacently and even moralistically. His language is as violent as the actions he relates; this violence is directed both against people and against language itself. Specifically, the business broker wrecks the Yiddish language by slipping in English words at every turn. This perversion of Yiddish reaches such proportions that the volume of *Monologn* includes an extensive dictionary of *farenglishte* words. Sholem Aleichem's monological narrators betray themselves in the language of their narrations.

Despite the power of the master monologists, we finally resist their attempted domination. Like the implied hearer of these stories, the Sholem Aleichem persona, we leave their narrators with a grimace. This happens in part because we question their actions, and also because they undermine themselves through inconsistencies and questionable language. Each of the bourgeois speakers puts on airs and presumes to know more than he does. They boast of their knowledge, but garble Marxist jargon, place Cerberus at the gates of paradise, and (in "A Story of a Greenhorn") do obvious violence to the Yiddish language.

Monologue is an appropriate form for these stories, whose speakers live monologically. Dialogue hardly enters into their experience, for they never exchange words or thoughts. We seldom hear a dialogue; the desired women appear almost entirely mute. The monologists are wont to impose their wills, not to suit their actions to others' needs. They are openly hostile to whatever the captive audience may say, preferring to do all the talking themselves, without interruption.

In the erotic realm that is both suppressed and decisive in these stories, the monologists present themselves as voyeurs. They desire beautiful women from afar, but never seem to get beyond appearances. Ultimately, they desire only their own desire, in a fantasy that cannot be

disturbed by any opposing will. Thus these monologists never procreate; their only offspring are words, words, words. They never escape the limits of the mastery they desire.

Although it is tempting to interpret Sholem Aleichem's monologues of mastery on the mimetic plane, with an eye to clues of unreliability, even the unreliable narrator is only a fictional persona. Sholem Aleichem directs a wide range of narrative strategies toward irony at the expense of his monologists. When they are "low" characters, this irony achieves the effect of light comedy or humor. But when the speakers are more imposing personalities, the irony cuts deeper, challenging the social contexts that empower them. In the monologues of mastery, monologue has become a luxury—and a delusion—of the rich.²² Their wealth is no extraneous detail; it buys greater freedom from constraints and power to manipulate events. But these monologues are invariably unsettled by discrepancies. Allied with perversions of desire, the monologists are overthrown by their forced dependence on others.

Social criticism in literature often depicts corruption in one form or another. Sholem Aleichem's "monologues of mastery" employ a subtler means: in these stories the depiction itself is corrupt. There is no distance between the narrative voice and the world that is described. The monologists inadvertently turn their words against themselves, uncovering bourgeois foibles from within. Monologue, when it is a luxury of the rich, acts as a double-edged sword.

Emory University

NOTES

The Lady Davis Fellowship Trust, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture generously supported the research leading to completion of this essay. The author also thanks Dan Miron and Avrom Novershtern for conversations that influenced the writing of this paper. An earlier draft was read at the Eighteenth Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies, on 15 December 1986. Transliterations of quoted passages follow the original Yiddish texts, even where spellings do not conform to current standards set by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

1. Compare Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Schocken, 1973), p. 179. The monologists' personae should not be confused with the Sholem Aleichem persona, which Dan Miron discusses in "Sholem Aleikhem: Person, Persona, Presence," *The Uriel Weinreich Memorial Lecture*, 1 (New York: YIVO, 1972).
2. M. Viner, "Di sotsiale vortseln fun Sholem Aleikhem's humor," in *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19tn yorhundert* (1931; rpt. New York: Yidishe kultur farband, 1946), pp. 235-37.
3. Hana Wirth-Nesher, "Voices of Ambivalence in Sholem Aleichem's Monologues," *Prooftexts*, 1 (1981), p. 170.
4. See, for example, I. J. Trunk, *Sholem Aleikhem: zayn vezn un zayne verk* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1937), pp. 161-224, and Victor Erlich, "A Note on the Monologue as a Literary Form: Sholem Aleichem's 'Monologn'—A Test

Case," in *For Max Weinreich on his Seventieth Birthday* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), pp. 44-50.

5. "Yoysef" was first serialized in *Der veg*, September 22, 24, 25, 1905, and in *Dos yidishe togeblat*, October 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 1905. Without substantial changes, the story was reprinted in Sholem Aleichem's *Nayeste verk* (Warsaw: Progress Edition, 1909), vol. 1, pp. 21-41. These earlier printings bear lengthier subtitles than the Folksfond edition, and do not place "Gentleman" in quotation marks. In *Der veg* and the Progress edition, the subtitle reads: "Narrative of a Gentleman and Retold Word for Word by Sholem Aleichem." *Dos yidishe togeblat* presumably chose its own punning title: "Narrative of a Gentleman and Retold Incidentally in 'Veg' [Underway] by Sholem Aleichem." In a letter to Sholem Aleichem of September 7 (August 25), 1905, Bal Makhshoves mentions having received a copy of this story from him.
6. Sholem Aleichem, "Yoysef," in *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem* (New York: Folksfond edition, 1917-25), vol. 21, p. 108. Further references to this volume of *Monologn* are by page alone. I am not aware of any translation of "Yoysef" into English.
7. Despite the narrator's hasty claim to autonomy, he admits that he broke off his studies and married a girl after being threatened by her brother (107). The gentleman tells us that he suffered for three years with her before regaining his freedom. From start to finish, in fact, he is aware of power struggles, and is especially sensitive to those associated with speech; even Yoysef's powers appear to him primarily rhetorical (in the original sense of the word). On the relevant, yet problematic, concept of the unreliable narrator, see Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). Booth defines the unreliable narrator as one who does not speak or act "in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)" (p. 158). Unreliability need not be confined to matters of mimetic detail, but can extend to moral views, judgments, and standards of character.
8. Compare 109, 112, 115, 118, 122, 123, 128, 130, 132.
9. In his essay on "The Social Roots of Sholem Aleichem's Humor," Viner refers to a letter in which Sholem Rabinovitch discusses his malaise within his own social circle, consisting of wealthy people "who value my finances much higher than my literary talent" (op. cit., p. 242). See *Dos Sholem Aleikhem bukh*, ed. I. D. Berkovitch (New York, 1926), p. 287. Of course, Sholem Rabinovitch's situation should not be uncritically identified with the fictional situations of Sholem Aleichem.
10. Compare Hana Wirth-Nesher, op. cit., p. 169.
11. "Dray almonos" was first serialized in *Dos yidishe togeblat*, June 2-17, 1907 and in *Der fraynd*, June 14-July 7, 1907. Collected in Sholem Aleichem's *Nayeste Verk* (Warsaw: Progress Edition, 1909), vol. 2, pp. 65-102. A translation of "Three Widows" is contained in *Stories and Satires by Sholem Aleichem*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), pp. 182-213. For the purposes of this analysis, I have retranslated all quotations in an effort to approximate more closely the tone of the original.
12. Agreeing with Dan Miron's *Sholem Aleichem: Pirkey masa* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1970), pp. 58-9, note 76, I reject I. J. Trunk's overly general definition of Sholem Aleichem's "autobiographical monologue" and "written monologue." See I. J. Trunk, op. cit., p. 166.
13. At the same time, Sholem Aleichem employs irony against himself when he has a fictional character criticize his own paper-thin conception of the

world. In effect, this critique may grant a greater illusion of reality to the provoking speaker, who pretends to understand the real world better than does his creator.

14. At every turn, the present scene of narration is relevant to the events narrated. From the start, the speaker challenges his hearer to grasp the paradoxical tale he will relate; psychology, he says, is incapable of explaining such hard realities: "Why are you telling me about psychology? If you want to know the true psychology, you should sit down and listen carefully to what I tell you" (165). Only after listening to the tale, the speaker claims, may the hearer express an opinion on the origins of sadness and egoism, or concerning the character of old maids and bachelors.

The narrator demands freedom to narrate without interruptions, almost as if he were outlining the rules for Freud's talking cure. Sholem Aleichem knew little or nothing about Freud in 1907, but from our contemporary standpoint, the scene of monologue in some ways resembles a psychoanalytic interview. At several points, in fact, the narrator toys with the prospect that he is *meshuge* (166, 171, 178-79, 181, 185, 191, 208). He directs the hearer to trade places with him, so that while he narrates he may recline in a rocking-chair; "by the way, it's better for you right there, you won't fall asleep" (166; cp. 186). Moreover, the speaker says: "I'm speaking out my heart to you, and with you I want to analyze, to find out: where is the worm?" (185). The hearer's brief reactions are not recorded, however, but only implied by the monologist's words. Thus the burden—and power—of interpretation rests with the reader, which gives the story a large measure of its interest.

15. He also makes slurs against the Jewish people (172, 187), unlike the gentleman narrator who admits in passing that he is, in spite of everything, a Jew (120).
16. In the narrator's telling of his tale, one early point of contention is his relationship to the first widow's husband: "I was acquainted with her husband. Not only acquainted, but friendly (*bafraynt*). That is, I don't say that we were friends. I say that we were friendly" (167). Later in the story, the narrator refers back to this "friend" (169, 180-81, 201); his relationship to the widow makes this a potentially sensitive point.

Similar to Sholem Aleichem's other monologists, the irascible man digresses frequently and employs a linguistic catchword to bring himself back to the main thread. His rather Germanic reflex is the connective adverb, "alzo" (e.g., 166, 167, 169, 171, 172, 173, 176, 177, 182, 184, 185, 190, 201, 203). By means of this word the speaker indicates that he is returning to the earlier narrative line, but his digressions remain apparent.

17. Compare "Yoysef," 110, 120.
18. In these monologues, laughter also occurs at the expense of their narrators, within the stories they tell. See, for example, the mother's play on the word *farzorgt*, in "Yoysef" (110). These stories are neither humorous nor comic in the usual senses, because we do not laugh heartily *with* or *at* their speakers. (In *Sholem Aleikhem: zayne vikhtigste verk, zayn humor un zayn ort in der yidisher literatur* [New York: Yidisher Kultur, 1928], Shmuel Niger differentiates between laughter *with* humorous characters and *at* comic characters [pp. 102-4].) Wealthy rather than poor, the domineering speakers do not represent *folkstipn* with whom we laugh in order not to cry. Nor do they make the best of an imperfect world; they add to the world's imperfections. They have the means to overcome most obstacles to the fulfillment of their desires. In fact, Sholem Aleichem's fictions depend on the power of these

speakers to impose their narrative wills. The gentleman, the irascible man, and the business broker are authors, not only of their monologues, but of devious plots within their narratives. Hence these monologists enable Sholem Aleichem to exercise his mastery of form by transferring the burden of mastery to them. We may, in consequence, admire the compositions while disliking their fictional inventors.

19. To the extent that the narrator is obviously manipulative, his efforts fail to achieve their desired effect. We end the story with a critical smile on our lips, and with an uneasy awareness that we have been had. This conclusion is analogous to that of a "A zekhs-un-zekhtsig," in *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleichem* (New York: Folksfond Edition, 1917-25), vol. 28: *Ayzenbahngeshikhtes*, p. 171.
20. Curt Leviant's translation perhaps aims to spare innocent readers when it mistranslates the words that contribute most to our recognition of the speaker's unreliability. It translates "ikh kon mikh dort farzitsen biz tog oykh amol" (212) by "I'm liable to spend the whole day there" (*Stories and Satires*, op. cit., p. 213). Granted: given the narrator's equivocations, day is night and night is day. But "biz tog" does mean "until dawn." "Farzitsen" here means "to sit," although (especially when applied to women) it can also mean "to remain unmarried." This is exactly what the narrator does, summed up in a phrase: he stays with the widows night and day, and remains unmarried.
21. "A mayse mit a grinhorn" was first published in *Di varhayt*, January 16, 1916, with a long subtitle that was probably not written by Sholem Aleichem. An English rendition is contained in Sholem Aleichem, *Some Laughter, Some Tears: Tales from the Old World and the New*, trans. Curt Leviant (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), pp. 243-48. Again, I retranslate all quotations.
22. Compare my *Genius and Monologue* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 178.