

The Inertial Force of Tradition and the Centrifugal Force of History: Tevye and His Daughters

"Gib ikh ir, geveyntlekh, tsu farshteyn mitn seykhl, vi narish dos iz. Git zi mir tsu farshteyn mit ir seykhl, az ikh vel dos keyn mol nit farshteyn."¹ (Hodl, 1904)

In his autobiographical sketch "The Judaic Chaos", the preeminent Russian poet of the twentieth

century, Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), recalls his estrangement from his father's world:

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"My father had absolutely no language; his speech was tongue-tie and languagelessness. The Russian speech of a Polish Jew? No. The speech of a German Jew? No again... A completely abstract, counterfeit language, the ornate and twisted speech of an autodidact, where normal words are intertwined with...the capricious syntax of a Talmudist, the artificial, not always finished sentence: it was anything in the world, but not a language, neither Russian nor German... In essence, my father transferred me to a totally alien century and distant...atmosphere. It was...the purest eighteenth or seventeenth century of an enlightened ghetto somewhere in Hamburg... Everything fantastically abstract, intricate, and schematic... When I was taken to Riga, to my Riga grandparents, I resisted and nearly cried. It seemed to me that I was being taken to the native country of my father's incomprehensible philosophy."²

This cultural and linguistic estrangement expressed by the cosmopolitan and assimilated St. Petersburg poet in his autobiographical prose, appears as a historical parallel to the earlier generational collision described by Sholem Aleichem in his saga novel *Tevye der milkhiker*. In this fictional familial drama the Yiddish writer draws the conflict between a father, who embodies late nineteenth century traditional Jewish life, and his daughters, who represent the secular trends that confronted Eastern European Jews as they entered the modern world. The logical consequence of the daughters' acceptance of Russia's social and political reality and of the father's rejection of the new secular ideals, is a generational confrontation; the confrontation inevitably leads to rebellion, incommunicability and, finally, alienation, the same alienation towards his parent voiced by Mandelstam a generation later. Thus, in *Tevye der milkhiker*, the battle between the father's traditional world and his daughters' untraditional ideas symbolizes the dismantlement of the Jewish collective body, of the shtetl, of the family.

¹ Sholem Aleichem (Solomon Rabinovitch), *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, New York: Folksfond Edition, 1917-23, vol. 5, p. 115.

² Mandelstam, O. *The Noise of Time*, New York: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 85.

Sholem Aleichem wrote the tales of *Tevye the Dairyman* over a period of 20 years; he started in 1894 and continued throughout his life until 1914-16, conveying an accurate picture of Russian Jewish history. The chapters "*Hayntike kinder*", "*Hodl*" and "*Khavé*", respectively written in 1899, 1904 and 1906, revolve entirely around the generational conflict and the collision between traditional practices and the rebellion against them. At the very beginning of the chapter "*Today's Children*", Sholem Aleichem introduces the theme of the *shidekh*, the traditional matchmaking institution that regulates, organizes and controls Jewish life. Tevye, the 'archetype of the common Jewish man', who belongs to the patriarchal and hierarchic world and believes in communal institutions and fixed generational roles, praises his daughters' beauty as a means to attain suitable *shidukhim*: "...ikh vel mit mayne tekhter gevis oysshpiln. Ershtns hot mikh Got ^{te}gebensht mit sheyne tekhter, un a sheyn ponim, zogt ir dokh aleyh, iz a halber nadn... ken ikh dokh shoyh greykhn tsum shenstn shidekh afile in yehupets..." (p. 67). Nevertheless, Tevye's enthusiasm for the possibility of arranging marriages for his daughters dies out at the outset of his autobiographical adventures and is replaced by his distinctive fatalism; through the words of his faithful divine interlocutor, the dairyman of Boiberik seems to be fully aware of the fact that the convenient matches he dreams about will never take place: "*Tevye, red zikh nisht ayn keyn narishkaytn un loz zikh di velt firn vi zi firt zikh!*" (ibid.).

The moving cause of each story is not constituted by a successfully arranged marriage, but rather by the breakaway from the traditional institution of the *shidekh*. The matchmaking institution, the preservation of which would have guaranteed Tevye the well-being of his family and the fulfillment of his paterfamilias status, is replaced by its very opposite, that is, 'romantic love'. Sholem Aleichem chose the romantic love theme as the narrative plot for Tevye's stories most likely to render the uncontrollable, disruptive and irrational force of history, and to reveal the father's powerlessness, as a symbol of tradition, vis-à-vis the overwhelming power of his daughters' love, as a symbol of the secular world. Hodl, who falls in love with a Russian revolutionary activist and follows him in exile, and Khavé, who converts to Christianity for the

sake of a non-Jewish socialist writer, both represent the centrifugal force of history. Tevye, who is unable to oppose the inevitable events that will bring his daughters to break away from him ("...zibn kinder nekeyves... ale oysgeshpilte, gerotene, kluge un sheyne, frische, gezunte, ikh zog aykh - sosnes! oy, halevay voltn zey beser geven myese paskudnitse, volt efsher geven beser far zey un gezunter far mir", p.122-3), symbolizes the inertial force of tradition. Though fully aware that his traditional world is under the threat of disgregation through the encounter with modernity, Tevye can only react by voicing his own resignation: "Zol ikh ir...faln afn haldz, betn, khaleshn far ir, zi zol nisht forn? veys ikh, az s'iz aroysgevorfn... di tekhter mayne,- farkokhn zey zikh in emetsn, iz mitn guf un mit der neshome un mitn hartsn un mit layb un lebn!" (p.115); his inability to 'control' his daughters' feelings and lives becomes a metaphor of his powerlessness and lack of understanding in relation to history. Just as he is unable to oppose Hodl's and Khave's love, respectively for Feferl and Khvedke, and prevent their breaking away from the family, so is he unable to face the historical reality and hinder the centrifugal force that is dismantling his traditional society. Thus, in *Tevye der milkhiker* history clearly destroys the shtetl by destroying the family: in order to convey the relentless and unyielding centrifugal motion of history, Sholem Aleichem resorts to the irrationality of love and the loss of effectiveness of the institution of the *shidekh*.³

The generational gap becomes mostly apparent in the different languages used by Tevye and his daughters. Tevye's language is a comic mixture of colloquial phrases, proverbial expressions and traditional Hebrew quotations from scriptural and rabbinic sources. When his understanding is in disagreement with his children's decisions, when he wants to comment on their rebellious actions, when he needs to face a troubling or unpleasant situation, he resorts to a

³ Though Tevye thinks in conventional terms about arranged marriages and conceives them as dependent on questions of wealth and social status, he does not restrain from criticizing the matchmaking institution. In the chapter "*Hodl*" for example, he cannot tolerate the way in which the matchmaker Ephraim refers to his daughter, and replies, "Vos heyst...ikh zol zi brengen tsu firn? brengen...brengt men tsu firn a ferd...afn yarid, oder a beheyme tsu farkoyfn..." (p. 104). This social criticism of the matchmaking institution is a clear vestige of the Haskalah literature.

scriptural, Midrashic or Talmudic quotation. In short, by turning to the ancient Hebrew context, Tevye attempts to escape reality. Throughout the chapters of *Tevye der milkhiker*, Tevye succeeds in finding a *medresh* or a *posek* for every single situation in which he finds himself, for the most comic event as well as for the most tragic one. In "Hodl", while bickering with his wife over the impelling question of marrying off their seven daughters, Tevye is about to make use of his distinctive sui generis '*psukimkayt*'⁴ ("Et...s'iz blote, Golde! undzer khakhomim...hobn dos oykh bavorent; s'iz faran...deroyf oykh a medresh...", p. 96), when Golda interrupts him and says: "Tekhter...dervaksene, zenen aley n a guter medresh" (ibid.). In "Khava", as he is desperately struggling to drive away the image and memory of his daughter, he escapes the reality of her conversion by concealing his pain through the praying of *minkhe*: "...bikhdey zikh tseshlogn di rayoynes, heyb ikh on af a nign... ikh daven...minkhe af a kol... nor vos kumt aroys funem davenen un funem zogn, az ineveynik in hartsn zingt zikh an ander nign: 'Kha-ve! Kha-ve!'" (p. 138-9). In both cases, the reliance on scriptural texts is Tevye's device for avoiding to overtly deal with reality. His attempt to arrest, or ignore, the dismantlement of the shtetl by means of the non-action language of psalms and Pentateuch with Rashi's commentary, appears as lofty and impractical as tilting at windmills.

Moreover, Tevye's use of this peculiar linguistic instrument automatically intensifies the battle between tradition and modernity and increases the generational lack of communication. When Hodl tells him that she is about to leave him forever and join Feferl who has been arrested for illegal political activities, Tevye replies with a '*posek, vi geveyntlekh*': "Ikh ze aroys..., tokhter mayne, az du bist mekayem, vi in der heyliker toyre shteyt geshribn..., varfst avek,...tsulib

⁴ Tevye's distinctive use of quotations is perceived as old-fashioned, anti-communicative and impractical not only by his daughters (Khava: "An antik!...af altsding hostu a posek!", p. 125; "Un az ikh zog dir, herstu mikh den? dir az me zogt...entferstu bald mit a posek. farhakst dem kop mit psukim un dermit kumstu op...", p. 131) and by his wife (Golda: "Der milkhiker borsht...iz efsher aza tokh-zakh, vi ale dayne tokh-zakhn...", p. 126), but also by the majority of the characters he encounters in his storytelling (Ephraim: "E...reb tevey ir heybt shoy n mit ayere medroshim?", p. 103). His way of confronting reality seems in fact to be in conflict with the Jewish and non-Jewish milieu as a whole, and not perforce with the younger generation and women alone.

That is because he never wants into contact with someone more learned than himself - except Gr SA, to whom he unloads his entire arsenal!

a feferl, tate-mame...un lozt zikh avek in eyn ort, vos me veyst nit vu, ergets in di midboryes, aponim, afn farglivertn yam, dort, vu Aleksander Makedon...iz geforn...un farblondzhet af a vayter vispe...tsvishn vilde mentshn..." (p. 114). Thus, the revolutionary Feferl becomes Alexander the Great, and Siberia, the probable location of his imprisonment, is transformed into a faraway desert^{ed} land inhabited by savages. Again, this is Tevye's formula for facing, or better, for not facing reality, for rendering history less dramatic, for covering up his incomprehension and disapproval of the events, for drowning his pain in humor and irony ("Ven iz geven bay aykh...dos knas-mol? un far vos hot ir nisht gerufn mikh oykh af der simkhe? ikh ker mikh...on do a shtikl mekhutn, tsi neyn? ... ir farshteyt, ikh lakh un verem esn mikh, totshten mayn layb.", "Hodl", p. 106)⁵. This is Tevye's mask to conceal his inability to act: when disappointed in reality, he addresses the old world of tradition and comments about life with bitterness, irony and resignation.

Just as Tevye appears as the hero of reaction and the repository of the 'language of inertia', so do his daughters become the heroes of action and the repositories of the 'centrifugal language' of history; as much as he is anchored to tradition and embedded into the old world, Hodl and Khava are part of modern Russia and share the secular ideals of the new generation. Belonging to separate worlds, embodying an opposite *Weltanschauung*, employing different styles and languages, Tevye and his daughters inevitably fail to communicate. The tendency on the part of the father to quote biblical and Midrashic sources clashes ^{with} ~~against~~ the daughters' political slogans and enthusiasm for the ideals of the Revolution; his fatalism and allegiance to the lore of the people contradict with the children's acceptance of the socialist cause and their will to change the world. Tevye's philosophy of non-action is conveyed through the leitmotif of

⁵ As Meir Wiener points out, "Tevye shmuest gelasn un shmeykhlt nokh derbay - un durkh zayn shmeykhl vert ersht rekht klor di groyzamkayt fun di laydn... tevye, der shmeykhlendiker iev mit zayne beneymesdike vokhedike reyd, iz punkt azoy tragish, vi der veynendiker iev mit zayne patetishe rhyd"; in M. Wiener, *Tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur in 19'tn i'h*, vol. 2, New York, 1946, p. 335.

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'powerlessness in relation to history and impossibility to change the world', which associates him with the literary figure of the ba'al-guf. "Ot hob ikh gevolt zayn a kluger, gedreyt dem posek aher, gedreyt dem posek ahin, gezen es helft nisht, hob ikh tsugenumen di hant funem hartsn un hob gezogt tsu zikh aleyn: 'Tevye, bist a nar! du vest di velt nisht ibermakhn'" ("Khave", p. 120).

The protest and rebellion embraced by his daughters, via Feferl and Khvedke, and their acceptance of 'the struggle for the welfare of humanity', is voiced by Hodl in her letters to Tevye: "Es vet ufgeyn di zun un es vet vern likhtik, vet men im umkern tsurik mit nokh a sakh azelkhe vi er. un demolt veln zey zikh ersht, zagt zi, nemen tsu der rekhter arbet un iberkern di velt mitn kop arop, mit di fis aruf" (ibid., p. 121). Thus, Tevye the *luftmentsh* is passive, abstract, rooted in folk beliefs, popular proverbial knowledge, religious texts, and is able to express his rebellion exclusively to and through God; on the contrary, Hodl the revolutionary is passionate, active, pragmatic and aggressive; to her father's *psukim*, Hodl replies resorting to the stereotypes of the socialist ideology and devotes herself uncompromisingly to Feferl's cause: "Er iz a *mentsh*, vos katori far zikh art im nisht, dos gantse tuekhts zayns iz nor...yenems toyve, der velts toyve - un der iker far yegie-ka-paymnik, di bal-melokhes" (p. 117).

✓ Even more than Hodl's, Khave's language appears charged with artificial propaganda and ideological stereotypes. The affectation of her style seems to reveal the fact that she became the spokesman of ideals without having assimilated the political slogans and, perhaps, without fully sharing them. To her father's inquiry about Khvedke's identity, Kahve responds with an admiration which is an end unto itself: "...bay mir zaynen ale *mentshn* glaykh; nor az er aleyn iz a *mentsh* nit keyn geveyntlekher - dos veys ikh far gevis... Khvedke...dos iz der tsveyter Gorky" (p. 124); moreover, when Tevye asks her who the first Gorky was, she makes use of an artificial phrase, as if she herself does not actually know who the Russian novelist is, and says: "Gorky...dos iz haynt kimat der ershter *mentsh* af der velt" (ibid.). The anti-communicative and absurd conversation between father and daughter continues with Tevye's attempt to apply to Gorky/Khvedke the parameters of the shtetl and define him according to the standard cultural

references of the traditional world: "*Vu zitst er...der tane dayner, vos iz zayn gesheft un vos far a droshe hot er ^{gedarsht} ~~gedarsht~~?... ot dos iz er...der tsadik dayner, reb Gorky? ikh volt gemegt shvern, az ikh hob im ergets gezen...oder bay der ban trogn zek, oder in vald shlepn kletser*" (p. 125). The cultural gap and opposite *Weltanschauung* represented here by Sholem Aleichem, render the conversation between Tevye and Khave similar, and for the reader just as foolish and humorous, to that between a deaf and a mute.

The generational conflict and the lack of communication resulting from the different languages employed by traditional and modern world, are apparent in regard to the issue of education. Speaking of his daughter Hodl, to whom he is closest, Tevye extols her intellectual abilities and knowledge of Russian. At the same time though, he seems perplexed by her skills and cannot make out the reason for her eagerness to study nor for that of the younger generation in general: "...*bikhlekh shlingt zi, vi haleshkes. vet ir dokh fregn a kashe: vos far a mekhutn iz Tevye's tokhter mit bikhlekh, az der tate ire handlt gor mit kez un mit puter?... ot dos freg ikh dokh bay zey, bay di fayne bokherim...vos keyn hoyzn...iz nishto, un shtudirn glust zikh zey... fregt zey: vos shtudirn? ver shtudirn? zoln azoy tsygn visn in fremde gertner shpringen!*" (p. 96). The impossibility to carry through a sensible conversation on the part of the spokesmen of the two opposite worlds, occurs again on the occasion of the fortuitous encounter between Tevye and his future son-in-law on their way to Boiberik. Again, the absurdity of the anti-communicative exchange between the Russian Revolutionary party activist and the '*tilim-khumesh-folksvertlekh* quoter', provokes laughter: "...*ver bistu...? 'ver ikh bin? ikh bin... a mentsh' 'ikh ze...az nisht keyn ferd; ikh meyn vemens bistu?' 'vemens...zol ikh zayn? ikh bin gots' 'ikh veys...az gots... ikh meyn...fun vanen shtamstu, tsi bistu a undzerike, tsi efsher fun der lite?' 'shtamen...shtam ikh fun Odem...*" (p. 98).

The anecdote that better illustrates the chasm existing between the two generations results once more from Tevye's inability, or unwillingness, to move away from the microcosm of the shtetl and grasp the historical reality. His blindness vis-à-vis Feferl's true activity appears

unreal, grotesque and anti-historical. Until the very end of "*Hodl*", he is resolutely convinced that his son-in-law is the member of a band of thieves, and not the impassioned revolutionary, who, together with Hodl, will save Russia. At the dawn of the 1905 Revolution, with the high level of politicization among Jewish students in Yehupets/Kiev, and with an acculturated daughter who had probably attended a Russian girl's high school, Tevye's question "*Farshtey ikh nit dem seykh, az vi bald keyn ganev nit un keyn shvindler nit, haynt far vos zshe zitst er, far vosere maysim toyvim?*" (p. 111), is simply paradoxical.

At times Tevye speaks ironically with intention; at times he misquotes purposely and is aware of his own mistakes; at times his misquotations are due to an insufficient rabbinical learning; at times it seems that he is laughing together with the reader; at times the reader seems to be laughing about him without his knowledge. Whether Tevye is unable to understand because of his naiveté, or pretends not to understand⁶ in order to deride Golda, Ephraim, Hodl and reality in general, remains Sholem Aleichem's mysterious device, his artistic secret. In any event, by means of this device, Tevye becomes Sholem Aleichem's instrument to mock and criticize at the same time the world of tradition and that of revolution. De facto, Tevye accepts and rejects elements from both worlds: on the one hand he is unconsciously drawn towards Feferl and cannot refrain from strongly sympathizing with Hodl's suffering; on the other hand he is critical ~~about~~ ^{of} the matchmaking institution and is willing to buy a ticket for Yehupets so that he can reunite with Khava who has just converted to Christianity. Tevye's character allows Sholem Aleichem to juxtapose the traditional world to the contemporary one and convey the conflict between parents' convictions and children's actions. Through Tevye's lively and absurd 'dialogued monologues' the author depicts a civilization in the process of being dismantled,

⁶ As he himself admits: "*Forstu...zikh gezegeben mit im?*" - *azoy zog ikh tsu ir un makh zikh tamevate*"; p. 113.

where communication can no longer subsist. Finally, through the fatalist *Weltanschauung* and the perpetual quotations, Tevye's autobiographical stories become a satire of the political question among Russian Jews at the beginning of the century, of their search for a secular Messiah, of their attempt to take history into their hands. Since the world depicted by Sholem Aleichem is always realistic and the content of his works is dramatic as much as the style is ironic, the outcome is inevitably grotesque: the new political saviors achieve very little success: Feferl is exiled, Khave converts to Christianity and Hodl appears more like a suffering Dostoevskian Sonja, rather than a modern version of the biblical heroine Ester.

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