THE SHLEMIHL AS HERO IN YIDDISH AND AMERICAN FICTION

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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The schlemihl is a Yiddish subspecies of the universal fool figure. Victim of endless misfortune, the schlemihl of Yiddish folk humor converts his losses to verbal advantage and his defeats into psychological victories.

Yiddish storytellers, including Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, and Isaac Bashevis Singer, created versions of the schlemihl-hero to explore the irony of a faith which could coexist with doubt. Irony was both a national and literary means of retaining trust in God and goodness while encountering barbaric forms of persecution.

Though originally alien to America, Yiddish humor penetrated the general culture, particularly after World War II. American Jewish writers, like Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud, used the schlemihl to explore the paradox of failure as success within a secular humanist culture. The schlemihl-stance coincided with the national mood for over a decade; it may not survive the sixties.

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"In two or three decades students of American literature may have to study Yiddish for reasons no worse than those for which students of English literature study Anglo-Saxon."

Irving Howe, 1964.

Acknowledgments

My thanks are extended to Professor Louis Dudek, my advisor, whose encouragement spurred on my enthusiasm for this project, and whose skillful editing tamed it when necessary.

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My joy in this work was marred first by the death of Uriel Weinreich, my former teacher and first advisor on this subject, and later by the death of his father, Max Weinreich. I had the benefit of Dr. Max Weinreich's advice and guidance until December, 1968, a month before he died. From these extraordinary men I learned not simply Yiddish literature, but of what one of their students has rightly called "the aristocracy of the spirit". I doubt that this paper would have met their standards, but I dedicate it to their memory having yet nothing better to offer.

Chapter One: Genesis of the Schlemihl

Sometime during World War I, a Jew lost his way along the Austro-Russian frontier. Wandering through the woods late at night, he was suddenly stopped by the challenge of a border-guard: "Halt, or I'll shoot!" The Jew blinked into the beam of the searchlight and said:

"What's the matter with you? Are you crazy? Can't you see that this is a human being?"

The serious pathos of this joke contains the very essence of schlemihl literature. Absurd as his radical innocence may be, by the normal guidelines of political reality, the Jew is simply rational within the context of ideal humanism. He is a fool, seriously - possibly even fatally - out of step with the actual march of events. Yet the impulse of the joke, and of schlemihl humor in general, is to use this comical, vulnerable stance as a stage from which to challenge the political and philosophic status quo.

Similarly, when an Austrian officer pauses during training drill to ask: "Katsenstein, why does a soldier

give up his life for his country?", Private Katsenstein replies, "You're right, lieutenant, why does he?" [1].

These two jokes, in the same thematic sphere, are about non-military rather than anti-military types. Their responses are not the products of conscious rebellion, but the naive, wholly spontaneous questions of a different culture. It goes without saying that the jokes are not as naive as their subjects would seem to be, structured as they are on a rhythmic counterpointing of two cultures, and two forms of cultural expression, the brusque command, and the innocent query. But the subjects of the jokes are simpletons, provoking our recognition that in an insane world, the fool may be the only morally sane man.

The reader will recognize in this paradox one of the most familiar situations of literature since the fool led Lear to self-knowledge some thirty-six decades ago. The Jewish schlemihl is merely one version of the fool, "a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight." [2]. The schlemihl shares many of the fool's characteristics, and is used in many of the stock situations. As even the

two cited jokes indicate, however, the structural and thematic elements of schlemihl humor are also the outgrowth of a particular culture, relecting specifically its pre-occupations, and its priorities. This essay proposes to discuss the evolution of the schlemihl-figure in Yiddish literature, and his literary function within a limited national milieu. It will also indicate, wherever possible, by means of comparisons and contrasts, the relations between this comic hero and other jesters and clowns, and finally to suggest his influence on modern American culture during the past twenty years.

1. i Traditions of Clowning

Within Jewish culture itself there are several traditions of clowning, and particularly in the modern period, a seemingly endless variety of fools. The earliest sanctioned revelries are associated with the holiday of Purim, for which the rabbis prescribed that a man must drink until he can no longer distinguish "cursed be Haman" from "blessed be Mordecai" (Talmud, Megilloth, 7b). Since the occasion for celebration is the defeat of Haman, the most notorious pre-Hitlerian anti-Semite, at the hands of

Mordecai, an almost unique example of successful Jewish statesmanship, the prescribed state of merriment is indeed extreme. One reading of this Talmudic passage suggests that the rabbis wanted Purim drinking to take a man momentarily beyond good and evil, beyond the realpolitik story plot, into the Messianic ideal itself. Celebrations, on a less exalted plane than their interpretations, included Purim pantomimes even in Talmudic times, and during the Middle Ages, among Italian Jews, masquerading was introduced in imitation of local festival practices. In Central and Eastern Europe, from the end of the 15th century, comic Purim plays became an accepted part of celebration, varying in complexity and polish according to the size and sophistication of the performing group. [3]. At first, in the Purim plays of Central Europe, the comical figures were simply replicas of the German Narr, as their very names- Hans Wurst, Pickelherring - reveal. Their characteristic mode was cynicism,[4]. and they were permitted crude jokes and slapstick burlesque. In Eastern Europe, after the custom had become a tradition, the fools began to take on some of the characteristics of their indigenous culture, and the

joking became more intellectually pointed, more dependent on Talmudic and Scriptural allusions. The Purim Rabbi was a very popular character, providing an opportunity for satire of legalistic over-refinement, and of local communal abuses. In the early nineteenth century, the Purim fool came to be used by reformers as a mouthpiece for social and personal satire.

A still more fertile ground for humor was the institution of the badchen (from the Hebrew, to cheer up), the professional marriage jester. The duration of the traditional marriage feast being seven days, the badchen had ample opportunity to vent his wit on both the rituals of marriage and wedlock, and the foibles of the invited guests. The badchen was often a scholarly comedian whose wit was based on Jewish sources, but, like the court fool, he also used the protective disguise of the simpleton to shield himself from complaints of his heresy. It was the complex duty of the badchen, as master-of-ceremonies, to combine ethical instruction with good-natured scoffing.

In addition to these institutions of revelry and wit, a dynamic folk-humor grew up spontaneously, creating

its own fictional fool-heros, and even a legendary Jewish foolstown, called Chelm. The humor of these stories falls broadly into two categories - those at the expense of the subject, in which his foolishness is revealed, or those in which the fool's wit triumphs to expose the foolishness of his betters.

Chelm stories are almost exclusively of the first variety: Once, during the period of Penitential prayers, the old Shammes (Sexton) of Chelm complained that he was too old and too weak to make the rounds of all the Jewish homes, banging on the shutters to wake all the inhabitants for midnight services. The people of Chelm called an assembly, considered the problem from all points of view, and concluded that it would be best to assemble all the shutters, stack them by the Shammes' house, and have him bang on all of them at the same time.[5.]

Stories of Chelm, showing up the folly of its inhabitants, are usually structured according to a single pattern. A problem must be solved, and the Chelmites come up with a formula that is literally correct, but practically absurd. To capture the moon, the Chelmites throw a burlap

bag over the top of a barrel, and are subsequently incredulous when they hear reports of the moon's presence elsewhere. Or, as the Chelmites try to push a mountain a little further away from their town, thieves steal the jackets they have dropped behind them. The Chelmites conclude that they have pushed far enough, since their jackets are no longer visible. A Chelmite at a bright street-corner looks for a coin he has lost. "Did you drop it here?" A friend asks. "No, I dropped it back there in the dark, but it's easier to look for it here by the light". In the same way that the Hassidic movement protested against the arid intellectualism of Talmudic scholasticism, these Chelm jokes ridicule sophistry, or sterility of thought, when it is dissociated from life. Intellectualism is here turned on its head. It is not merely, as Howe and Greenberg have suggested, that "all the strains of a highly intellectualistic culture were relaxed in these takes of incredible foolishness and innocence". [6.] The intellectualism of the culture is actually being attacked - no less effectively for its humorous form - <u>for</u> its alleged foolishness and innocence.

The fictional and semi-fictional fools of Eastern European Jewry include such figures as Shmerl Snitkever and Yosl Marshelik (Rumania and area of Warsaw); Shayke Fayfer and Froim Graydinger (Poland); Motke Khabad (Lithuania); and the peripatetic Hershele Ostropolier (Ukraine), whose exploits have been recounted and invented for almost 200 years. Their mode of humor is harder to characterize because of the differences between them, and the different types of stories associated with each. Generally speaking, they are clever fools, who literally live by their wits, and fearlessly unmask the hypocricies of the rich who pretend to be righteous, and the limited who pretend to be learned. In certain stories, like the following, they are philosophic fools, using witty interpretations to take the sting out of their anxiety and pain:

- Once a fire broke out in the house where Motke Khabad was living. As the house went up in flames, the inhabitants all rushed outside in a frenzy. Some brought pails of water, but Motke stood there laughing. "What are you laughing at?" they asked him. Motke replied: "I see my revenge on the cockroaches".

- One night some thieves crept into Hershel Ostropolier's house. They searched and searched and found nothing. His wife shook Hershel. "Wake up! There are thieves in the house". "Be still", answered Hershel. "If we're quiet, maybe they'll leave us something when they go". [8].

The fools here triumph by their reinterpretation of an intolerable situation. In his analysis of Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud discusses humor as the highest of defensive processes: "It scorns to withdraw the ideational content bearing the distressing affect from conscious attention...and thus surmounts the automatism of defense. It brings this about by finding a means of withdrawing the energy from the release of unpleasure that is already in preparation and of transforming it, by discharge, into pleasure". [9]. This humorous displacement is evidently at work in these jokes, where an inappropriate response transforms what would have had to have been a desperate moment into a pleasurable one.

The humor of schlemihl-literature shares the anti-intellectualism of the Chelm stories, but more closely

resembles these philosophic fool tales in motif and structure. Schlemihl stories usually reflect the viewpoint of the protagonist, and provide a comic catharsis in a hopeless crisis. They ask the reader to entertain the paradoxical notion that the absurd interpretation of experience may permit optimism, whereas a rational interpretation of the phenomena will never get anyone beyond despair.

There were individual fools, and typological fools among whom are the nar, tam, yold, tipesh, bulvan, shoyte, peysi, shmendrik, kuni lemmel, shmenge, lekish, to name but a small assortment. The schlemihl originally derived from a separate category, the category of the luckless or the inept, like the schlimazl, the goylem, lemekh, general terms, or, more specifically, the nisrof (who was burned out), the yored (who had lost his fortune), the onverer (who had gone into bankruptcy), the farshpiler (who had lost his money gambling), or the plain loy yutslakh, the literal good for nothing. As the foregoing fool stories suggest, the distinction between these categories is blurred; the fool was luckless, and the inept man was

likely to be considered a fool. In a culture teeming with figures of this unhappy sort, "schlemihl" was at first only one of a vast number of almost synonymous types, each of which, nevertheless, represented a somewhat different shade of folly or loss.

I ii The term, Schlemihl

The words, schlemihl, and schlimazl, are clearly related, and were probably used interchangeably for hundreds of years. Schlimazl combines the German prefix for bad, schlim, with the Hebrew word for star or luck, mazl, in its Yiddish pronunciation. The word was used to describe a man bedevilled by bad fortune, a luckless type of the comic variety. A theory about the etymology of schlemihl traces its origin back to Scriptures, Numbers 25, where the hapless Zimvi ben Salu is slain for his association with a Midianite woman. According to the Talmud (Sanhedrin, 82b) Zimvi bore different names, one of them being Shelumiel, meaning, ironically, "My God is Peace". Heinrich Heine refers to a legend that insists a mistake was made and

Shelumiel of the tribe of Simon was mistakenly killed in Zimvi's stead. In either case, the victim was luckless.[10] A more likely source is a cited medieval responsum in which a certain Schemuliel returning home after a year's absence, and finding that his wife has given birth, must abide by the rabbi's decision that the child be considered legitimately his. But perhaps the likeliest explanation is that the word, schlemihl, evolved from the related term, schlimazl, into a form that would merge more naturally into the German speech patterns.

Whatever its exact etymology, the term gained status when it began to be used in German literature. With the publication of the popular Peter Schlemihl by Adalbert von Chamisson in 1813, the word achieved literary legitimacy and wide popularity. Conceived as a fairy tale, Chamisso's book clearly reflected many of the author's personal anxieties, and the choice of this comic Jewish term for the hero's name was probably less a tribute to the children of the Jew, Hitzig, to whom the book was dedicated, than a comment on the "Jewish" insecurities of its decidedly Christian author. Chamisso was born a Frenchman, but his

family was forced to flee the Revolution, and though he spent his youth and adolescence in Berlin, he could never feel himself to be a Prussian. As he wrote to his friend, Madame de Stael, "I am nowhere at home. I am a Frenchman in Germany and a German in France. A Catholic among Protestants, a Protestant among Catholics, a Jacobin among aristocrats, an aristocrat among democrats." [11]

Peter, the persona-narrator, is a comic Faust, who sells his shadow to a sinister man-in-grey in return for Fortunatus' lucky purse. While it is pleasant to have unlimited monies, a man cannot live in society without his shadow, and poor Mr. Schlemihl quickly discovers that he is consigned to loneliness, and the easy prey of black-mailers, until he can regain his useless but indispensable extension of himself.

A novelistic trifle when compared to the work in whose shadow it lies, Peter Schlemihl is effective within its self-imposed limits in evoking the anxieties of exclusion. The moral fable is neatly summarized by the narrator in his own conclusion:

> Remember, my friend, while you live in the world to treasure first your shadow and then your money. But if you choose to live for your inner self alone, you will need no counsel of mine. [12].

But this bit of homiletic advice does not do justice to the real theme of the work, the consequences of an almost arbitrary removal from the bosom of society and human intercourse. The subject's fear of exposure to light, his frequent flights and attempted changes of identity, are all simple but accurate correlatives for the psychic condition of the marginal man. Chamisso's work provided a literary prestige for the term schlemihl - at least within the circumference of the book's popularity - and broadened the implications of the word to include the unfortunate outsider, the individual comically and clumsily alienated from bourgeois conformity.

In this study, we shall attempt to develop a comprehensive description of the schlemihl as a literary hero, based on, but not necessarily limited by, the dictionary definition of the term. It should be noted that in America, folk-usage has introduced a distinction between the schlemihl and the schlimazl, summarized in the rule of

thumb that says, the schlemihl is the one who spills the soup; the schlimazl is the one into whose lap it falls. According to this definition, the schlemihl is the active disseminator of bad luck, and the schlimazl its passive victim. But actually, the distinction can be made more precise: the schlimazl happens upon mischance, he has a penchant for lucklessness, but the unhappy circumstances remain outside him, and always suggest the slapstick quality of surprise. The schlemihl's misfortune is his character. It is thus not accidental, but essential. Whereas comedy involving the schlimazl tends to be situational, the schlemihl's comedy is existential, deriving from his very nature in its confrontation with reality.

I iii The Schlemihl in Early Yiddish Literature

The genesis of the literary schlemihl within the context of Yiddish literature is the tale of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav entitled "A Story About a Clever Man and a Simple Man" (a myse mit a khokhm un a tam) (about 1805?).

Rabbi Nachman, a grandson of Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founding figure of the Hassidic movement, was himself one of the great Hassidic teachers, who turned to storytelling in his later years because he wanted a more effective and more personal means of communicating with his student-followers than Talmudic and Scriptural explications had been able to provide. The stories themselves offer a clue to their purpose. It was not merely that the Bratzlaver, as he is called, wanted to capture the attention of the simple, less educated followers, who would be more at home with an imaginative tale than with a complex analysis of Torah. A reading of most of these stories (and the stories were originally spoken, not read) will convince us that they were hardly intended for the simple. It is more likely that Rabbi Nachman turned to storytelling in an effort to capture the emotional, imaginative involvement of his students, their "soul's response" to his teaching, and not simply their intellectual assent. The superiority of emotional commitment to Torah over intellectual involvement with Torah is the subject to several of his tales.

In assessing the impact of "The Clever Man and

the Simple Man", we must consider the previously unassailable prestige of the Clever Man in Jewish history since the dispersion. The study of Torah is one of the highest mitsvoth, one of the most important commandments, and, moreover, the one which was most deeply respected by the culture at large. The Hassidic challenge of the authority of intellectualism is contained within this parabolic tale of Rabbi Nachman's, the bias of which is totally with the Simple Man, although the Clever Man is undoubtedly the more interesting figure by literary or psychological standards.

Two sons of two neighboring fathers are left orphaned. One is a clever son; the second is a simpleton. The clever son sells his father's house, and goes out into the world where his rich intelligence wins him success at every kind of endeavor. He masters the skills of trade and finance, the art of sculpting, the craft of the goldsmith, the science of medicine, surpassing all others in each of these fields. But his outstanding characteristic is his restlessness, and the same drive that propels him to master a succession of difficult skills, stirs up dissatisfaction and anxiety once those skills have been mastered. His

aesthetic standards are so high that a perfectly tailored suit will displease him because of a minor irregularity in one of the cuffs. His own work is so perfect as to have no proper audience, so that the praise of others is more an insult than a compliment or balm.

In the meantime, the simpleton inhabits his father's house, lacking the imagination to do otherwise. He becomes a shoemaker, but Rabbi Nachman, who was not projecting an ethic of satisfaction in labor, takes pains to tell us what a poor shoemaker he was: his shoes were like triangles. His poverty and lack of skill do not impair, however, the simple man's joy in living. When hungry, he munches on a crust of bread, exclaiming, "Wife, this is the tenderest piece of roast I have eaten in many a day". When thirsty, he drinks water, praising it as superior wine, most excellent mead. His shabby pelt is a fur coat in the winter, a silk caftan on the Sabbath. Undaunted by reality, the simple man lives happily.

Eventually, the two childhood friends are re-united, and the clever man, having no comfortable place to lodge, becomes a sojourner in the simple man's home. The

parable becomes most explicit when the King of the Country, hearing of these two dichotomous types, and curious to meet them, sends separate messengers for the two men. The simple man upon receiving the invitation, responds, goes whence he was summoned, and finding favor with everyone is rewarded by ever more prestigious offices until he is made First Minister of the Realm. The clever man asks his messenger whether he has ever actually seen the King whose invitation he carries, and when his doubts are confirmed, he sets out to expose the messenger's folly. Everywhere people serve the King without ever having seen him, and the clever man's skepticism regarding the ruler's actual existence grows unchecked. He suffers for his incredulity, because people do not take kindly to his challenges and denials, and when he meets the simple man again, after a long interval, their roles have been reversed - the clever man is a lowly outcast, while the simple man is one of the most admired persons in the land.

The clever man inquires into the sources of the simple man's good fortune; the simple man replies that the King made him his minister, and conferred all his prestige

upon him:

> "What," said the clever man, "you too are gripped by this madness and believe in a King! I tell you there is no King".
> "How can you suggest so monstrous a thing?" cried the minister. "I see the King's face daily."
> "What makes you think," jeered the clever man, "that he with whom you speak is actually the King? Were you intimate with him from childhood on? Did you know his father and grandfather and can say that they were Kings? Men have told you that this is the King. They have fooled you". [14.]

This last confrontation is highly appropriate in terms of the story, since the reader has previously noted how easily the simple man creates the illusion he then calls reality. The possibility of his having done this in the case of the king is very real. But at this juncture of the story, the simple man is the author's spokesman, and though he cannot prove the reality of his knowledge, he has the final say in the argument:

> Then the minister said to him, "So do you still continue, then, to live in your subtleties and not see life? You asserted once that it would be easier for you to decline into my simplicity than for me to rise to your cleverness. But I now see that it is harder for you to attain my simplicity".

Although not the end of the tale, this is the moment at which the clever man is overcome, and his later admission of the

king's existence is - as Buber in translating perceived - a decided anticlimax.

Rabbi Nachman's story is even more involved in suggesting the psychological dangers of a speculative intelligence than in warning against the religious hazards of empirical enquiry. The clever man is so demanding that his very best efforts do not quite achieve his impossible ideals of perfection, and he is so concerned with rational proofs that he is finally incapable of responding to an existential summons. The clever man's intelligence, which becomes increasingly negative, or skeptical, as the story progresses, engenders doubt and dissatisfaction, to the point that this talented man seems incapable of any positive action or feeling.

The simple man, not limited by his intelligence, has never even sought to make a distinction between fact and illusion. When the realities are insufficient, he turns to illusions, and when he receives an unanticipated, incomprehensible call, he answers without questioning its legitimacy. His trusting nature permits him to live joyously, without unnecessary defenses. It is one of his great

accomplishments, and one of the nicest touches of the story, that he responds to the frequent taunts of his neighbors with disarming gaiety: "Ay friend, just see how foolish I am! You can be a good deal cleverer than I and still be a proper fool". The story finds the simple man laudable not for his simplicity, but for its by-products, particularly the ability to live richly in the present with no care for "image" nor any need to protect his ego. The clever man is beset by growing insecurity, a fear of erring that is tantamount to a fear of living. Rabbi Nachman was deeply concerned with the dangers of rationalism and empirical philosophy from the European side, and with the stultifying rigidity of Talmudic study as it had developed inside the Torah community itself. His story, reversing the traditional values of the Talmudic culture, warns of what happens to the spirit of the man whose highest resource is his own mind, however great a mind it may be. Since he has not the resources to nurture himself, the simple man is forced to trust to others, so he continues life in his ancestral home and his habit of faith strengthens all aspects of his personality. The clever man seems to be able

to achieve all excellence in his own person, but as soon as the immediate or cosmic environments thrust themselves upon him, he finds himself inadequate to meet their challenges. In short, the story puts the clever and simple men to a pragmatic test, the criteria of which are worldly success, happiness and healthful psychic survival. The simple man is not a natural saint; in fact his living by faith instead of reason seems simply an adaptive compensation for his lack of the power to reason. Nevertheless, and whatever its origins, his trust brings him the trust of others, and enables him to take full advantage of any and all opportunities.

The distinction between rationalism and faith is a popular subject of Yiddish literature even after it is taken over by the secularists. The figure of the simple man continues to be used as Rabbi Nachman here uses it, to demonstrate the real advantages of faith, than which nothing in the modern world seems more foolish, over intelligence, reason, the very highest accomplishments of the unfettered mind. In the secular works, faith is not a matter of religious credence, but the habit of trusting optimistically

that good will triumph over evil, right over wrong. It is also the dedication to living as if good will triumph over evil, and right over wrong.

In Jewish experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such a belief was difficult to maintain for anyone who troubled with empirical or statistical data. Yiddish writers - and the folk that created Yiddish folklore - recognized the foolishness, if they did not admit the absurdity, of such faith when every circumstance of daily life provided evidence against it. Indeed, many writers, like I.L. Peretz in the famous story, Bontsche Schweig, Eliezer Shteynbarg in his fables, I.M. Weissenberg in stories of rural and village poverty, lashed out against the dumb trust of passivity instead of what seemed to them the most necessary response of protest and anger. But there were always those who, like Rabbi Nachman, continued to recognize the psychological advantage of the man who believes in moral truth over the man whose trust is all in socio-political verities. The idea of faith, particularly when treated by writers outside the religious tradition, could only be associated with fools and madmen, since

anyone more practical would see fate's malevolence for what it was. The figure of the schlemihl was employed to present the case of hope over despair, ironically, of course, because the author retained his awareness of reality even if his character did not. The schlemihls, or fools, or simple men, are committed to Messianic reality, and if need be they can reinterpret, distort, or even obviate immediate reality when it contradicts the possibility of the ideal. According to the judgment of society, they are found wanting, but according to the internal judgment of the story, their foolishness is redeemed. Rarely does the literary schlemihl rise to the heights achieved by the Bratzlaver's simple man, because rarely does the modern author share the great Rabbi's full-hearted conviction. More usually, the schlemihl remains the practical loser, winning only an ironic victory, a victory of interpretation.

It might be best to conclude these introductory remarks with a modern anecdote that reflects the life-style of the schlemihl in a contempory situation, and demonstrates the degree to which this stance represents a philosophic attitude towards experience.

The Labor-Zionist movement in the United States in the 1920's published a daily newspaper called "Di Tsayt" (The Times). In response to failing circulation and declining funds, the editorial board called an emergency meeting at which the spokesman of all the pragmatists offered a practical solution: "Friends, what can we do? If our circulation is so small, we must close down". Dr. Nachman Syrkin, a founding leader of the movement protested, "But I fail to understand. If we close down, will our circulation be any bigger?" [15].

In his book on Horse Sense in American Humor, Walter Blair shows to what extent American humor grows from the common understanding that "no one can say anything kinder about a person than 'He's got horse sense'." [16]. Tracing the development of several national comic figures of American folk humor prior to the present century, Mr. Blair demonstrates that the horse sense character inevitably put down the fool, whether dimwit or wooly-headed intellectual. Down to earth types like "the frontiersman" had much to do with "making gumption into a national religion", and hard-headed pragmatists always outwitted or

outmanoeuvered the dreamers and braggards. A forward-looking society, with things to be done, like pioneering America, admired the reality-rootedness of Poor Richard and Davy Crocket, and in a fortification of its values, mocked all enthusiasts.

Dr. Syrkin's witticism, quoted above as an example of schlemihl irony, stands in sharpest possible contrast to this tradition, substituting as it does the standards of the visionary for those of the sensible man. In Dr. Syrkin's situation, and in the similar conditions that gave rise to Yiddish humor, since reality-orientation would have meant the acceptance of defeat, and the recognition that nothing could be done, the common sense character who upholds these views is ridiculed at the expense of the dreamers and the enthusiasts.

It seems clear from this contrast that in the nineteenth century and earlier, Yiddish humor would have been as incomprehensible to Americans as Poor Richard would have been alien to Eastern European Jews. The horse sense character reinforced the values of Adamic America by laughing down all nonsense or "exaggerations", while the

victimized schlemihl of Yiddish humor gave solace through his anti-pragmatic, "nonsensical" reinterpretations of reality. Yet by mid twentieth century, Yiddish humor in general and schlemihl stories in particular had become part of national American comic literature. America became the most fertile new breeding ground for traditional Jewish humor, and Jewish humor became as American as apple strudel.

The questions of how and why these two antithetical humorous traditions met, and with what discernable literary and sociological consequences, are raised within the body of this paper. In attempting an explanation, we shall first trace in detail the development of the schlemihl as character in Yiddish humorous fiction, then follow through his successful transplantation to American soil. Since humor is an important key to the understanding of a civilization and its culture, this comparative study should provoke some serious reflections on the dramatic evolution of American expression in recent years, particularly of those factors that made it hospitable to what was initially so foreign a strain.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1.
There are innumerable Yiddish jokes on this same motif. To offer but two additional versions:
a) The Battle of Tannenberg was at its height when a Czarist officer drew up his company and addressed them. "The moment has come! We're going to charge the enemy. It'll now be man against man in hand-to-hand combat." In the company was a Jewish soldier who hated the Czar and the war. "Please sir, show me my man!" he cried. "Maybe I can come to an understanding with him." Nathan Ausuble, ed., A Treasury of Jewish Humor (New York, 1951), p. 599.
b) A Jew asked his friend, who had just returned from the Russo-Japanese War, to explain how a war is fought. So his friend said: "You see this huge field? Well, it's like this - our men stand on one side of it, their men stand on the other side, and you shoot!" So the Jew asked, "The whole day long?" and his friend answered, "The whole day long, and even at night too". The Jew was astonished. "At night too? How can that be? Someone might, God forbid, get hit in the eye!" Immanuel Olsvanger, ed., Royte Pomerantsen (New York, 1947), pp. 44-45. The translation is mine.

2.
Enid Welsford, The Fool, His Social and Literary History (Mass., 1966), xi.

3.
Algemeine Encyclopedie in Yiddish (General Encyclopedia in Yiddish) (Paris, 1940), II, pp. 392-401.

4.
Maks Erik, di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di eltste tsaytn biz der haskole tkufe (The History of Yiddish Literature from the Earliest Period to the Haskalah) (Warsaw, 1928), p. 147.

5.
J.Kh. Ravnitski, yidishe vitsn (Yiddish Jokes) (New York, 1950), II, p. 101. Other Chelm Stories pp. 100-112.

6.
Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds. A Treasury of Yiddish Stories (New York, 1953), p. 610.

7.
J.L. Kahan, yidisher folklor (Jewish Folklore) (Vilne, 1938), p. 197.

8.
Howe and Greenberg, op. cit. p. 618.

9.
Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1963), p. 233.

10.
B.I. Bialostotski, yidisher humor un yidishe letsim (Jewish Humor and Jewish Fools) (New York, 1963), p. 35. Bialostotski offers several alternate theories for the derivation of the term schlemihl, none more convincing than the others.

11.
Adalbert von Chamisso, Peter Schlemihl in Three Great Classics (New York, 1964) pp. 11-89. Introduction, Leopold von Lowenstein-Wertheim, p. 9.

12.
Ibid., p. 89.

13.
Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, Sefer sipurey masyot (Stories) (New York, 1951) pp. 49-64. Retold by Martin Buber, The Tales of Rabbi Nachman, trans. Maurice Friedman (Indiana, 1962), pp. 71-94.

14.
Buber, ibid., p. 93. Where Buber has taken too great a liberty with the Bratzlaver's text, I have modified the translation according to the original.

15.
Bialostotski, op. cit., p. 46.

16.
Walter Blair, Horse Sense in American Humor (Chicago, 1942), p. vi.

Chapter Two:

Benjamin III - The Mocked as Mocker

The career of Mendele Mocher Sforim presents a paradox instructive for an understanding of modern Yiddish literature as a whole: although the impetus of the Haskalah (the Jewish Enlightenment) drove him to literature, it was not until he sidestepped into ideals that he became a notable writer.

Mendele Mocher Sforim, or Mendele the Book Seller (1836-1917) was originally the persona-narrator of the writer Sholom Jacob Abramovitch. Abramovitch wrote all his major imaginative works under the Book Seller's pseudonym, so that both Hebrew and Yiddish literature refer to him simply as "Mendele".

As a young man Mendele (then still Abramovitch) was attracted to the optimistic socio-economic platform of the Haskalah. The Maskilim, encouraged by the progress of Jewish emancipation in France and Germany, proposed certain reforms which, if implemented by the Eastern European Jewish communities, would bring Jewry out of the shtetl or village

community and into the mainstream of Russian and Polish life. They advocated widespread educational reform, the teaching of secular subjects in addition to Torah, instruction in the local languages, the teaching of crafts, and the establishment of trade schools. They encouraged adoption of Western dress in place of the traditional black kapote. On the part of the Jews there was, of course, considerable suspicion that this way would lead to assimilation and apostacy, but that is not our present concern. The Maskilim were optimists. They maintained that the oppressed state of the Russian and Polish Jewish populations could be altered by a collective act of will. They preached self-help, convinced that a movement outward by the Jewish enclave would be favorably received by the political powers. They programmed for Eastern European Jewry on the basis of Western European data. This optimism reached its peak with the accession of Tsar Alexander II in 1855. It was followed by the most bitter disillusionment when Alexander continued the reactionary policy of his predecessor.

Mendele rode the forward-looking wave and felt the full blast of disappointment when it crashed. A gifted

satirist, he began his literary career by exposing local vices and follies: provincialism masking as tradition; exploitation of the poor by the less poor; the private uses of public monies. His work, like all satire, was based on the implied existence of a moral and ethical social model. The traditional Jewish ethic and the Haskalah's progressive blueprint for reform was the model "good" in Mendele's early work. The deviants, or objects of satire, were those who sinned in terms of Jewish (and universal) law, and those who feared or ignored the challenges of changing times. He presented teachers who beat their students because they could not beat their wives, and set them off against enlightened pedagogues who taught out of conviction and love. He confronted community leaders lining their pockets at public expense (Stoneheart, Leech) with young idealists (Waker, Goodheart) whose concern was genuine communal advancement. Writing out of the conviction that more dedicated, wiser leaders could change the quality of Jewish life, he poked malicious fun at those who seemed to be retarding its progress.

But the extreme poverty of Russian Jewry [1.] and its growing vulnerability in the face of an anti-semitic

governmental policy made this line of chastening useless if not misleading. In 1873, in a social allegory called Di Kliatshe (The Nag), Mendele exposed the Haskalah formula to careful criticism. The nag, representing the Jewish masses, rejects the well-intentioned advice of Israel, member of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the allegorical counterpart of the Haskalah. The Society submits its platform: cleanliness, modernization, and education. The nag says, "the dance does not precede the food"; no creature should have to prove its worth, or earn its right to breathe and eat. Justice demands equal rights for all, and the claim of justice supercedes those of mercy or utilitarianism. Thus Mendele replaced the Haskalah's slogan - first education, then rights - with a slogan of his own - first the right to live, and then education. [2.] It seemed evident that unless the authorities sanctioned and encouraged "progress", the Jews would gain nothing by efforts on their own behalf.

The more Jews became the whipping boy of the Tsarist and local governments the harder it was for the satirist to jibe at their - by contrast - minor imperfections. Social

satire is predicated on the possibility of social reform. Where no reform is possible the purpose of satire is blunted. Social satire can therefore serve only those who control their own destinies, whose actions affect their fate, and Mendele's instrument was inappropriate for his readers, who seemed less and less in control of theirs.

The collapse of his social model posed yet another problem for Mendele the satirist. The ground of all satire, as suggested, is a social and ethical norm freely acknowledged by both reader and author. Fielding, for example, insists that "The only source of the true Ridiculous...is affectation...(which) proceeds from one of these two causes, vanity or hypocrisy; for as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavour to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues". [3.] Implicit in the very vocabulary of the definition (affecting, concealing) is the concept of a stable social norm acknowledged by all though transgressed by many. Fielding may be called a conservative satirist insofar as his model is based on the criterion of integrity in relation to social norms.

Mrs. Slipslop is an object of ridicule because she aspires beyond her proper station. Lady Booby is a deviant because she stoops beneath her proper station, and both ladies are hypocritical in trying to camouflage their vices as virtues. The model of the stable society is represented by Joseph and Fanny who conform to their given positions, but the model also transcends them as the ideal fixed norm against which all "affectations" are judged.

A more radical satirist like Swift may set up a model outside the existing society, but it too remains potentially within the scale of human achievement. A work like the Modest Proposal, which plays off pragmatism against humanitarianism and projects no social model, emerges as irony, not satire.

In the worsening conditions of late nineteenth century Russia, what could the Jewish satirist use as a social model? The Haskalah ideal of an ethical, progressive community was predicated on the rational assumption that better education, greater interaction with the European environment, and more productive economic occupations would lead to an improved existence. But casual and official

anti-semitism, particularly in their character of irrationality and unpredictability belied this vision and made trust in reason seem to be the most unreasonable tenet of all. If the Haskalah model was rejected, there remained the model of the "status quo", the non-Jewish Russian bourgeoisie, including the intelligentsia. To uphold this model, the Jewish satirist would have had to reject his own community, its values as well as its past, just as the Jew who was drawn to this model in his own personal life had to reject his community in order to attain it. Mendele does not seem to have considered this alternative. Unlike Fielding, he could not accept the social structure as a norm to which all should adjust, without first rejecting everything he hoped to achieve as a Jew. Nor could he, like Swift, use an ideal rationally conceived model: his readers might become as rational as the Houyhnhnms but this would not prevent the local citizenry from slaughtering their women and children. His former model destroyed, and no substitute suggesting itself, Mendele gradually moved from satire to social allegory, the novel of ideas (Vinsh-fingerl) and to irony - a kind of satire in which the model

is God, the unrealizable ideal of perfection, and in which the hopelessness of the existing conditions is pitted against the Messianic dream. Once the gap between reality and an improved reality is unbridgeable, the ideal to which the mind turns becomes transcendental. The folk ethos had already produced a humourous tradition of this kind (See Chapter One) and it remained for the writer to play it out in literary form. Mendele continued to depict the misery of the Jewish condition, but he was less inclined to find fault with his people. Whereas he had previously seen only the bodies sunk in the mud, he now began to make out the dim outlines of the foreheads touching heaven.

The change of emphasis I have here described spans many years of writing,but it can be traced through a single work, probably Mendele's best, The Travels of Benjamin III (Masoes Benyamin Hashlishi). The book begins with a schlemihl victim and closes with a schlemihl hero. Its opening chapters are exemplary social satire and its concluding chapters are wholly in the ironic mode. Through the course of the action the target of stinging laughter evolves into a moral hero who mocks his mockers.

The Travels of Benjamin III was intended to be a complex satire of Jewish provincialism and false aspirations. The great Yiddish scholar, Professor Dov Sadan, has warned that one should not read into the book more than it comprises: namely, "a satire of the desire to alter the fate of the Jews along geographic lines", or a satire of nineteenth century Zionism.[4] This may adequately describe the intention of the work, but happily The Travels is one of the many literary masterpieces whose reach exceeded its grasp.

The book is introduced by the persona, Mendele the Book Seller, who explains how and why he is bringing this material to the attention of his readers:

> Last year the English and German newspapers were filled with accounts of the wonderful journey undertaken by Benjamin, a certain Polish Jew, to some distant lands in the East. 'Just think' - they marvelled - ' a Jew, a Polish Jew without weapons or means of transportation, with only a sack on his shoulders and a philacteries-bag under his arm, has visited countries that even renowned British explorers have been unable to reach! Obviously, this was not achieved by merely human powers, but by a power that the intelligence cannot grasp; that is to say, the intelligence is as powerless to grasp it as the power itself is unintelligible. In any

> case, however it came about, the world has Benjamin to thank for the marvels, the great wonders that were revealed through him, and which have quite altered the map of the world.' [5].

The saga then follows Benjamin III and his companion, Senderl the Housewife, in their quest for the Red Jews, the remnant of the ten lost tribes of Israel who, in legend and lore, inhabit the lands behind the River Sambatyon.

Schematically, the satire is at least three fold: a) the action imitates Cervantes' Don Quixote; b) the book is a mock-travelogue; c) the style is mock-Talmudic.

a) The book is clearly patterned after Don Quixote. Part of the humor derives from the identification of Benjamin III with the Knight of La Mancha and of Senderl "the Housewife" with Sancho Panza. The resemblance between the Eastern European bumpkins and the famous adventurers of Spain (which country in Cervantes' time had but recently become Judenrein) adds bite and poignancy to the satire. Is it not bitterly ironic that the Jews after 250 years of self-disciplined exile should find this particular Spanish dybbuk in their midst? And Benjamin is merely the parody

of a parody; whereas Quixote is clearly an "aristocratic" dreamer, Benjamin is a beggar, a pauper representing the whole society of paupers. On the other hand, the similarities between both sets of travellers give the book a certain universalism. Lowly Yiddish, the jargon of the masses, has produced a companion to the great Spanish masterpiece. The Spanish echo lends considerable weight to the satire, and makes it at one and the same time more familiar and more formidable, not unlike the ambiguous effect of Ulysses dwarfing Bloom. The single frame device of evoking Don Quixote produces no simple effect, but in itself introduces an ironic mixture of pride and shame.

b) The book is a mock-travelogue, presumably in the tradition of the Jewish explorers, but actually based on Midrashim, or homilies, and on the material of the "bobbe mayses", folktales and legends that were accepted by the simple-minded as truth. The early explorer Benjamin of Tudela (Benjamin I) was a thirteenth century Spanish Jew who travelled widely through the Mediterranean and the Near East, looking for Jewish communities and writing detailed accounts of those he found. Nearer to the present,

Jacob I. Benjamin, or Benjamin II, spent eight years in Asia and Africa (1846-55) and three years in America (1859-1862), and his published reports were fresh in the minds of Mendele and his readers. Benjamin III, our hypothetical hero, was placed in this illustrious line just as Crusoe and Gulliver pretended to be true explorers in their time. It is doubtful whether any reader was ever meant to take seriously Mendele's fiction, since the very title is clearly satirical, and the style is much too inflated for factual reportage, more so than either Defoe's or Swift's.

The name, Benjamin, which is also Herzl's Hebrew name, - Binyamin Zev Herzl, the ideologue of modern political Zionism- lends weight to the interpretation of the book as a satire of Zionism. The book was written long before Herzl wrote The Jewish State (1896), but in his Hebrew version of the work, Mendele seems to allude to this "Benjamin" as yet another deluded explorer. However, Lovers of Zion Societies existed in Eastern Europe several decades before Herzl's political activities began, and whatever "anti-Zionist" sentiment the book actually contains is

directed at those early sentimentalists, not the political activists of the present century. At the same time, the book clearly ridicules the credulity and insularity of shtetl Jews. The legends and superstitions that developed during the centuries of shtetl life reflected the provincialism and distortion of its inhabitants. Benjamin, inveterate reader of these folk-tales, suffers from an inflamed imagination, like Quixote whose brain was fired by the romances of his day. Benjamin tries to act out the legends, and thereby exposes their folly; but he also shows up the folly of the world around him. Like Don Quixote, the book ridicules the absurd romanticism of the protagonist, but it is no kinder to the pragmatists who exploit this folly and so reveal their more culpable sins.

It should be noted that Mendele's criticism is partly that of the progressive rationalist who deplores ignorance; it is also, and this is perhaps less obvious, the criticism of a Jew who deplores superstition as the greatest enemy of the Torah, the Law. Mendele was not calling traditional Judaism into question. He depicted the excesses of folk superstition while attempting to

strengthen the older strain.

c) The introduction, and other passages of the book, are written in the Yiddish equivalent of the mock-epic style: the mock-Talmudic. The Scriptures and the Talmud were taught by means of a Hebrew-Yiddish transposition - "Berayshis, in the beginning, Boro Elohim, God created...". The narrator of The Travels of Benjamin III uses this Hebrew-Yiddish cross movement to inflate the style, and thereby deflate the events.

The blended application of these three schematic methods - parallels with Don Quixote, parodies of travel lore and folklore, and projection of Talmudic style on mundane matters - emphasizes the gulf between the great past (Spain, cosmopolitan Jewry, the Talmud) and the puny present (poverty, isolation, ignorance). Benjamin is the embodiment of that puny present.

So far we are dealing with conventional satire, and Benjamin is the schlemihl-butt of the author's rebuke. I would like to suggest, however, that Benjamin remains the object of satire only as long as he moves within the Jewish milieu. When Benjamin, at the book's conclusion, moves out

into the openly hostile gentile world, not by choice, but by coercion, he ceases to be simply the goat, and becomes the subject of a compassionate irony. The heroic potential of the schlemihl is revealed.

This progression can be demonstrated in three discussions on politics: the first in the bathhouse of Tuneyadevka, the second in the study-house of Teterivke, and the final one at the court martial of Benjamin and Senderl.

In Chapter One, the Tuneyadevka kibbitzers debate the stability of Rothschild's millions, and European politics since the Crimean War. From various sub-committees, arguments are passed on till they reach the highest bench in the bathhouse;

> and there, at the full plenary gathering of local big-wigs they are decided once and for all and irrevocably, so that if all the rulers of the East and the West were to view the verdict with disfavor and ask for reconsideration, it wouldn't do them any good. The Turks were almost sacrificed once at such a palaver - who knows what would have become of them had several right-minded citizens not defended their interest? Rothschild, God help him, almost lost some ten to fifteen million rubles there. But luckily, several weeks later, when the bathhouse statesmen were in high spirits, he was suddenly granted a clear gain of a hundred million rubles!" [6].

Thus the politico-economic impotence of the shtetl is translated into linguistic aggression. Language is Tuneyadevka's forte, Talmudic proofs and counterproofs are its chief commodity, and the pilpulists on the highest judgmental bench are able to replace the world's reality by the reality of their argumentative concern. The map of Europe becomes just another Talmud folio, the Turk and Aunt Vita (Queen Victoria) simply another Reuben and Simon, whose fate will be decided not, as the world might imagine, by force of arms, strength of alliances, power of technology, skill of generals, but by the shrewd arguments of Tuneyadevka's disembodied mind. The author pretends to respect the ultimate seriousness of the deliberations - "Rothschild, God bless him", "But luckily, several weeks later" - leaving the reader to laugh at the discrepancy between hard reality and Tuneyadevka's verbal version of it.

Even at this point, where the absurdity of the deluded kingmakers is most apparent, the satire is mitigated by a contradictory note of, let us say, wonderment. The residents of this backwater shtetl are "jolly paupers, happy beggars, wild men of faith". The bathhouse debate is followed

by a conversation with a typical luftmensch, a dreamer, whose poverty and lack of opportunity are matched by his absolute belief in God's friendship. Although the theme of the happy paupers is usually associated with Sholom Aleichem, we see that Mendele, in this ambivalent presentation of weakness, has already introduced the type. When mocking the disenfranchized Jews who lacked the price of a bread, yet in their imagination could manage Rothschild's millions, Mendele suggests that such delusion might be salutary, and that this process of avoidance or denial might ease the problems of daily living. If the Jews could really aspire to control their environment, their self-delusion would be a wasteful foolishness. But if aspiration were itself the illusion, and they could achieve no control over their environment, then their reaction of sustaining illusion was partly liberating, freeing them from despair, permitting at least the power, the freedom, of thought and speech.

The second discussion of politics in the prayer-house of the larger town of Teterivke is marked by more heated polemic. The immediate topic is the feasibility of

Benjamin and Senderl's trip to the east, but this spills over into well-worn considerations of European alliances, each member of the prayerhouse debating club supporting his usual side. Once again, the fun is at the expense of the Jews who kibbitz at the sidelines of political life, but don't affect or try to affect it in any direct way. The object of the satire is not merely Jewish inaction and ignorance of the world, but the affectation - in Fielding's sense - of an omniscience and power they lack. At this point, Mendele is still writing mostly within the general convention of satire, and Benjamin's travels are a symptom of his society's ills.

The shift of emphasis occurs in the final three chapters when Benjamin and Senderl are waylaid by khappers, kidnappers who abduct Jewish boys and sell them into Tsarist army service. That our protagonists should suffer the fate of these boys is further proof of their childlike innocence and reveals the terrible power of those who prey on the simple-minded. But once the two simpletons are forced into army, and are virtually captive in the Tsarist service, the satire shifts its target:

> Looking at them (Benjamin and Senderl) you would thing it was all an act, that two Jews had turned up in disguise and were poking fun at the soldiers, imitating their gestures, and demonstrating publicly how silly they really were with all their kit and caboodle. [7].

The erstwhile fools are now touchstones of a foolishness greater than their own. In their milieu, fools; yet their folly is wisdom when compared with the more radical stupidity-in-power of their captors. Senderl tries to make good in army terms [8]. but Benjamin rebukes him sharply:

> What good are we to them, or they to us? Honestly, Senderl, tell me as you are a Jew, were the enemy, God forbid, to appear - would the two of us be able to stop him? And if you warned him a thousand times: 'Go away, or I'll go pow! pow! pow!' would he pay any attention to you? Of course not. He'd grab hold of you, and you'd be lucky to get out of his clutches alive. [9].

Benjamin engineers their escape from the army camp, but predictably they are apprehended. The two "soldiers" are then courtmartialed, and Benjamin speaks in their defense at the trial. After describing their forced induction into army service, he introduces his final plea:

> We would like to inform you that we don't know a thing about waging war, we never did know, and we never want to know. We are, praise be to God, married men, and our thoughts are devoted to other things. We can't waste our time on these matters, they don't even concern us. [10].

The team of doctors and officers can barely conceal its laughter. The medical officer taps his forehead to indicate a screw loose. The two Jews are discharged from the army, to their mutual benefit, and so the book ends.

The verdict of the officers, however, does not reflect the verdict of the reader. It is the officers, in their mockery, who are mocked. On the plot level, Benjamin does achieve his goal: he wins release from captivity. On the thematic level, his passivism becomes a pacifism exposing the absurdity of "married men" who do engage in the foolishness of war.

The political impotence of the Jew, his ignorance and childlike conceptions of power, have been exposed and ridiculed repeatedly. Yet when Benjamin becomes the actual victim of a power-system he has hitherto ignored, instead of pushing the satire farther to its logical conclusion, showing that ignorance will lead to victimization and even destruction, Mendele redirects the satiric machinery and vindicates his schlemihl. The laughter that Benjamin evokes in the army environment is enough to make Mendele come to his defense. Or, to put it differently, faced with the alternative

of real power, and all it implies (conformity to the gentile status quo, militarism, anti-semitism) Benjamin's foolishness seems a blessing in disguise, a way of remaining innocent in action as well as in thought.

The book ends most abruptly. In his later Hebrew version of this same work Mendele added a chapter in an attempt to reestablish the earlier tone and set the travellers back on their original adventure. Perhaps Mendele himself was surprised by the turn his narrative had taken. Whatever the case may be, after revealing Benjamin's absolute vulnerability, and after elevating that vulnerability - albeit ironically - to a positive value, there could be little point in reverting to the earlier Jewish milieu, and to the earlier satiric sallies. So the book ends with the heroes having passed through both environments and facing only their fantasy.

Benjamin is a schlemihl: a victim not so much of bad luck as of miserable circumstance. His masculinity, like that of all literary schlemihls, is undermined by his wife and by the aggression of the environment. For the better part of the book he embodies all the psychological

and historical weaknesses the author is ridiculing, and Mendele spares no comic or satiric devices in holding these weaknesses up to view. Then, almost without warning, Benjamin in his simplicity becomes a serious moral alternative to the organized evil that would destroy him. He himself has not evolved in any way. A satire is not a bildungsroman. He is not suddenly a Shakespearean fool, unmasking the widespread folly that men call wisdom, or worship as power. Only the point of view has changed; from the satire that exposes, attacks and pleads for reform, to irony which is more tolerant if less optimistic. The traditional western protagonist is heroic insofar as he attempts to change reality. The schlemihl becomes a hero when real action is impossible and reaction remains the only way a man can define himself. As long as he moves among choices, the schlemihl is derided for his failures to choose wisely. Once the environment is seen as unalterable (and evil) his stance must be accepted as a stand or the possibilities of "heroism" are lost to him altogether.

What can be claimed for Benjamin? He accepts his foolishness in both the local and cosmic dramas. He

forfeits pride, not only the Christian's pride before God, but even that cardinal western virtue of pride in oneself. He retains nothing but the sense of his own human worth and of his particular individual selfhood. A later schlemihl, Malamud's Fidelman, steals his own copy of Titian's Venus rather than the original, because it is his, worse but more personal.

I have tried to trace an evolutionary development from satire to irony corresponding to the development of the schlemihl from object to subject. This progression has been sketched against the background of ever-worsening environmental conditions, and the author's growing pessimism. The schlemihl, who had been around in folk culture, became a potential hero when the ordinary Jew could no longer be regarded as a master of his fate, and when the artist therefore had to move into a world beyond satire, and out of its reach.

Footnotes to Chapter Two

1.
S.M. Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland From the Earliest Times Until the Present Day, trans. I. Friedlaender (Philadelphia, 1920), II, 346ff.

2.
Mendele Mocher Sforim, Di Kliatshe (The Nag) in Ale Verk (Complete Works), 17 vols. (Warsaw, New York, Vilno, 1913) III, Chapter 16.

3.
Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Boston, 1961), p. 10.

4.
Dov Sadan, "Dray yisoydes" (Three Sources), Di Goldene Keyt, XXXIV (1959), p. 51.

5.
Mendele Mocher Sforim, The Travels and Adventures of Benjamin III, trans. Moshe Spiegel (New York, 1949), p. 9 - 10. Where the translation is too free, I have modified it according to the original.

6.
Ibid., pp. 16 - 17.

7.
Ibid., p. 116.

8.
Ibid., p. 117.

9.
Ibid., p. 118.

10.
Ibid., p. 123.

Chapter Three:

Ironic Balance for Psychic Survival

Sholom Aleichem (1859-1916) established a genealogy of modern Yiddish letters when he designated Mendele Mocher Sforim as the zeyde, the grandfather. The title with its implied kinship was accepted by Mendele and ratified by public consent although the two men were barely a generation apart. It acknowledges the resemblances between the two writers, yet emphasizes the relative distance between them. In developing the concept of the schlemihl, as in his writing generally, Sholom Aleichem is directly indebted to Mendele, and plays astonishing variations on the master's theme.

The Soviet Yiddish critic, N. Oislender, distinguishes Sholom Aleichem's environment from Mendele's, pointing out that the upheavals in Russia of the 1880's brought about changes that a two hundred year period would not formerly have wrought. [1.] The Haskalah, which was badly discredited in the 1870's, was totally discredited in the 1880's. The dislocation of Jewish communities was more severe than in the rest of Russia because in addition

to national upheavals, Jews experienced the added factor of the pogroms. According to Oislender there seemed to have been a tacit agreement among Jewish writers of that period to keep silent of the subject of pogroms which means that the sense of unease would presumably have found expression in some sublimated form. In reaction to the growing poverty and political unrest, Sholom Aleichem increasingly believed that the wholesale criticism of Jewish life ought to give way to the "idealization" of certain of its more admirable tendencies and types. Many earnest readers attacked Sholom Aleichem's first humorous sketches, insisting that writers should be producing more serious stuff. They, at least, understood that humor, unlike satire, is an enemy to reform. But Sholom Aleichem, with Mendele's blessing, grew fascinated by the dynamic creativity of the folk and there found the admirable tendencies he sought. (His very choice of pseudonym - he was born Sholom Rabinovitch - shows his identification with the folk image; in contrast, Mendele, "the Book Seller" is a more detached and more intellectual kind of persona).

It is well, then, to emphasize two points that contribute to the making of Sholom Aleichem's schlemihls. Firstly, his humor, usually described as optimistic, "laughter through tears", is the result of a deeply pessimistic appraisal of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and a conscious decision to ease its suffering. Irving Howe speaks of his "invulnerability to ideological fashions".[2.] Actually, Sholom Aleichem was a warm supporter of the Zionist cause, for example, but he did not ever seem to believe in its efficacy. In certain moments his characters refer to Zionism (tsionism) as cynicism (tsinism). He conceived of his writing as a solace for people whose situation was so ineluctably unpleasant that they might as well laugh. His schlemihls are usually the sympathetic subjects of their little dramas; the point of view of the story is theirs, and it usually prevails.

The second point is that the schlemihl for Sholom Aleichem is not used as a criticism of Jewish life, but as the embodiment of its virtues. Jews, in his work, become a kind of schlemihl people, powerless and "unlucky"; but psychologically, - or as one used to say, spiritually, -

they are the victors in defeat.[3] Maurice Samuels has explained this technique as follows:

> We must be careful to understand the nature of Sholom Aleichem's laughter. It is more than a therapeutic resistance to the destructive frustrations and humiliations of the Exile. It was the application of a fantastic technique that the Jews had developed over the ages to counter the torments and discriminations to which they were continuously subjected. It was a technique of avoidance and sublimation; also a technique of theoretical reversal. They had found the trick of converting disaster into a verbal triumph, applying a sort of Talmudic ingenuity of interpretation to events they could not handle in their reality. They turned the tables on their adversaries dialectically, and though their physical disadvantages were not diminished thereby, nor the external situation changed one whit, they emerged with a feeling of victory.[4]

A closer study of this method is one of the main purposes of this chapter.

To give an example, in 1902, Sholom Aleichem wrote Dreyfus in Kasrilevke, an account of the second trial from the standpoint of a Ukrainian shtetl. Kasrilevke, the town of jolly paupers, is Sholom Aleichem's fictional equivalent for "any one of a hundred Jewish or half-Jewish centres in old White Russia,"[5] and it serves as the locale in many of his works. In this brief story, Zaidl, the only

Kasrilevkite to subscribe to a daily paper, becomes the sole communications medium for the news-hungry inhabitants. Each morning they besiege the post office, waiting for Zaidl to pick up his mail and read aloud the most recent events of the trial. Tension mounts, and on the morning when the verdict is expected, the atmosphere is charged. The conclusion of the story reads:

> When Yarmo, the janitor, unlocked the gates of the post office they all rushed inside at once. Yarmo became very angry -he'd show them who was boss here - and he drove them, with curses and insults, out into the street. And there in the street they waited and waited for Zaidl to make his appearance. And when at last Zaidl appeared, and when at last he picked up the paper and read aloud to them that nice passage about Dreyfus, there arose such a roar, such a protest, that the very heavens must have split. And this protest was not against the judge who had judged so badly; it was not against the generals who had sworn so falsely nor against the Frenchmen who had covered themselves with so much shame. No, this protest was against Zaidl, who read to them.
> "It can't be!" Kasrilevke screamed with one voice. "It can't be! The heavens and the earth have promised that the truth must always come out on top, just as oil comes to the top of water! What will you tell us next? What lies? What stories?"
> "Idiots!" shouted poor Zaidl with all the strength of his lungs, and he pushed the newspaper right into their faces. "Here! See

> what it says here in the paper!"
> "Paper!" cried Kasrilevke. "Paper! And if you stood here with one foot in heaven and one foot on earth we still wouldn't believe you. Such things cannot be! No, this cannot be! It cannot be! It cannot be!"
> Well, and who was right? [6].

The passage is similar in situation to the political discussions of Mendele's bathhouse philosophers. Here, too, the disputants are impervious to the immediate indignities, and sublimate their personal humiliation in the political arena. Here, too, the oppressed replace the world's reality with the reality of their argumentative concern. But precisely because the situations are so alike, the thematic differences become manifest. The Sholom Aleichem story equates the Jews' far-sightedness with faith, whereas Mendele treats it simply as folly. For Mendele, who was aiming his satire at Tuneyadevka and Teterivke, a hard-headed confrontation with reality was the first desirable step on the road to emancipation. For Sholom Aleichem, who was consoling, or better still, cajoling Kasrilevke, reality was the last enemy to be conquered. Dreyfus in Kasrilevke is judged by God's Law; and is God's Truth to be sacrificed for journalism? The tone of the passage, and the concluding question in particular throw the weight of sympathy entirely to the side of

the dreamers. Men like Zaidl, among them, presumably, the reader, who place their trust in objective reality, are bound to the temporal, and hence their truth is but temporary. The inhabitants of Kasrilevke live by the prophetic law. To them the "ought" is more real than the "is", and their truth, though uncorroborated by immediate evidence, is indestructible. The concluding question challenges the reader's pragmatism from the point of view of the shtetl's wild faith. It asks whether trust in the "paper" is any more rational in the long run than Kasrilevke's trust in Divine Justice. From the timeless perspective of God, all will ultimately receive fair judgment; and in this case, as the author hints, even the earthly verdict was eventually reversed.

Taking our cue from this story, we see that Sholom Aleichem's treatment of the schlemihl in his individual or corporate form is not satiric, but ironic. Unfortunately, the word "irony" is used so freely that unless it is defined more closely it will not adequately serve even a descriptive purpose. Sholom Aleichem's irony is rooted in Yiddish folk expression, and it requires some definition

to clarify its intention and effect.

Irony is generally defined as "a device by which a writer expresses a meaning contradictory to the stated or ostensible one".[7] One statement supports two meanings, the literal, or primary meaning, and the implied, or secondary. Structurally, the tone of the irony will be determined by the relative weight of both meanings. If the inversion is total, i.e., if the primary is totally contradicted by the secondary, then the irony is heavy; it then borders on sarcasm, in which the primary meaning is extinct. If the primary is only partly qualified, then the irony may be called light.

The classic expression of Yiddish irony is the saying:

אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים - וואס האסטו געוואלט פון די יידן?

Thou hast chosen us from among the nations - why did you have to pick on the Jews? Although this is a Yiddish saying, the first part is Hebrew: a quotation of one of the most prominent phrases of the daily prayers which expresses a central precept of Judaism. The Yiddish question then draws attention to the ironic implications of the quoted

phrase. Concentrating for the moment on the construction of the proverb, we see that it is in two parts, affirmation followed by question. The affirmation is in the sacred language, the jibe is in the vernacular. The form is dramatic, and the challenge, forcing on the affirmation a meaning contradictory to the ostensible one, is in the traditional Jewish form of mild aggression, a question.

Since the saying is presented as point-counterpoint in two voices, its very structure obviates the possibility of a total inversion. The question does not eliminate the primary meaning that prompted it; it introduces ambiguity where absolute clarity once prevailed.

Yiddish irony often takes the form of statement and counterstatement, to the same effect. Two voices on two levels offer contradictory interpretations of the same phenomenon. Absolute faith - in the hóly tongue, in Biblical majesty - against absolute skepticism, - in the interrogative voice, in marketplace Yiddish. Meaning and countermeaning lock horns. Here the primary meaning is challenged by the secondary, but the final authority of the primary is never eradicated. As in the saying, "God

will provide - if only God would provide until he provides", faith is punctured but not sunk. It seems to me that this is the most prevalent kind of Yiddish irony. It is precisely this type of faith-rooted irony from which the development of the schlemihl originates.

I should make it clear, however, that Yiddish humor includes variously weighted ironies. The proverbs "He who lies on the ground cannot fall" or "Dying while young is a boon in old age" are two of many Yiddish examples of meiosis in which the redemptive undertow is lacking. Black humor, or galgenhumor, is heavily indebted to this technique which might be described as unpleasant understatement of fact. There are also countless examples of heavy irony, e.g., "If psalms were a cure, they'd be sold at the drugstone", in which the skeptical countermeaning completely demolishes the implied position of faith. [8].

But since the schlemihl is our subject, we will limit discussion to his particular kind of humor, and return to the conclusion of Dreyfus in Kasrilevke. Its irony is based on the same polarization of faith and fact that we

find in the proverb on the chosen people, and is resolved on the same side. In this story it is the author who puts the events into the ironic mode. He draws our attention to the discrepancy between the ideal and the actual, but as the statement here is that of the actual, his counter-statement is one of faith. Again a question is asked - "Well, and who is right?" - only this time its aggression is aimed at the scoffers. The Sholom Aleichem story contains a double-irony: the ideal pits itself against the reality, but is finally vindicated by that reality. Were Dreyfus not finally acquitted in the human courts of law the schlemihl-position as to God's justice would have been less convincing.

Of the numerous variations Sholom Aleichem played on the schlemihl subject, the most intriguing is the figure of Menahem Mendl. He is usually subtyped as a luftmensch, a schlemihl whose particular specialty is living on air. The luftmensch is the schlemihl in his economic dimension. Menahem Mendl is an exhaustive study of such a man.

Menahem Mendl is the title of an epistolary novel

which Sholom Aleichem wrote between 1892 and 1913.[9] The book consists of an exchange of letters between Menahem Mendl, the errant husband and Sheyne Sheyndl of Kasrilevke, the steady wife. The two voices of the ironic proverbs we previously discussed are here expanded into two full-blown characters, one voicing trust and optimism, the other convinced that "Kreplach in a dream are not kreplach, but a dream".

Menahem Mendl aspires to great wealth, yet throughout the book he fails successively at a long list of occupations: as an investor in stocks, in bonds, in commodities; as a stockbroker, sugar-broker, factorer; as an agent for houses, manors and estates, timber forests, small factories; as a journalist, marriage broker, insurance agent. Sheyne Sheyndl, reinforced by the prodding and proverbs of her mother, upholds the pragmatic standard, urging her husband to sell and come home. But she is bested - just as Zaidl is bested - by the appeal to faith, hope, single-minded trust. As in the proverbs just referred to, weight of emphasis see-saws between Menahem Mendl's credulity, and Sheyne Sheyndl's practicality. The see-saw

comes down eventually on the side of the dreamer; by the end of the series of letters, Sheyne Sheyndl is silent and only Menahem Mendl's letters are given, a possible suggestion that the argument has been decisively won, or at least that the husband is the more interesting combatant.

In an earlier dialogue of this kind, the conversation between Chauntecleer and Pertelote in Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale" there is simply no appeal against the wife's prescription of "digestyves and laxatyves". Chauntecleer's romantic idealism, there associated with his vanity, must be purged. Applying a model of rational behavior to which neither Chauntecleer nor Pertelote conforms, Chaucer plays off husband against wife, using Pertelote's matter-of-factness to puncture the inflated singer, and, to a lesser degree, Pertelote's own brittle self-assuredness to expose herself. But the husband is clearly the loser.

Menahem Mendl is similarly conceived, except that the author's point of view, based on his personal experience, is more tightly merged with the hero's. Chauntecleer and Menahem Mendl, though birds of a feather, do not flock

together. Sholom Aleichem himself had lost his fortune (plus the fortune of his in-laws) on the Kiev stock exchange, and his own subsequent hustling for bread was the typical experience of the Jew. A modern historian has estimated that "in many communities up to 40 percent of the entire Jewish population consisted of families of so-called Luftmenschen, that is persons without any particular skills, capital, or specific occupations".[10] In those desperate times Sholom Aleichem, as suggested, did not believe one could properly chastize the luftmensch for living on air, since there was no more nourishing substance available. So the practical voice of Sheyne Sheyndl is drowned out by the passionate day-dreaming of her husband. Menahem Mendl, unlike Chauntecleer, is never forced to confront the harsh danger of his real situation. The schlemihl, in spite of an unbroken record of failures, succeeds in his determined hope. Menahem Mendl wrests victory from defeat not by any tangible achievement of his purposes, but simply through his continuing capacity to dream. It is as though the schlemihl were inverting the famous dictum of Theodore Herzl, and saying, "If you

will it, is <u>is</u> a dream".

Here again we note that the schlemihl's humor is the product of an anti-rational bias which inverts the rational model underlying so much of English humor, substituting for it a messianic or idealist model instead.

The characteristic features of the schlemihl are exemplified in the figure of Menahem Mendl. To begin with, his masculinity is never considered: it is thoroughly extinct. The traditonal male virtues such as strength, courage, pride, fortitude, are prominent only by their absence. Wife treats husband like an overgrown, overly-fanciful child. Behind the wife stands the more formidable mother-in-law, and together they could undermine the virility of an Ajax. Here is but a sample of the barrage that assults our hero:

-"A sick man will get better, a drunkard will grow sober, a black man will turn white, but a fool will stay a fool".

-"If you don't have fingers, you can't thumb your nose".

-"A shlimazel falls on the grass and breaks

his nose".

-"Remember what I say, Mendl, they'll bring you home either in chains or in a winding sheet, as you deserve".

Of course the familial pattern of subjugation and humiliation is a socio-political model in miniature. Like all Russian Jews, with the exception of a privileged few, Menahem Mendl was confined to the Pale of Settlement, and could not legally trade in Yehupetz (Kiev) without a pass.

> When you write to me, write to me in Boiberik, because I'm not allowed to be in Yehupetz. So I keep moving all day along Creshtchatek Street near the exchange, and in the evening I hop down to Boiberik. [11].

His vulnerability makes him equally susceptible to subtler social pressures. In the ice-cream parlour of Odessa, a hovering waiter must be appeased by successive orders of ice-cream, and the resultant intestinal malfunctioning then makes it impossible to visit the ice-cream parlour. Even in the synagogue, since he is an outsider and a provincial, Menahem Mendl is rebuked for praying too loudly.

But like the characteristic schlemihl, though he cannot win through action, he scores in his reactions.

In a not untypical letter, Menahem Mendl begins by informing his wife that although his dealings in houses have come to nought, by a lucky coincidence he is now an agent for estates. He was aroused at midnight by the landlady of his rooming house frantically giving warning of the approach of police, whose practise was to raid the area in search of unlicensed Jews. Hiding in the attic, uncomfortably flat on his stomach, he enters into whispered conversation with a fellow fugitive, who suddenly remembers that he has left his papers under his pillow. The natural question follows, "What papers?"; and this introduces the subject of estates, since as it happens the man in hiding with Menahem Mendl is an agent for estates. By the end of their night of concealment they are in partnership together, and Menahem Mendl is enthusiastically hopeful once again. Oh yes, he adds in a postscript, the whole escapade was a false alarm. A neighbour mistakenly hammered a warning on the windows, but wasn't that a lucky error!

The situation is grotesque. Kafka's heroes find themselves challenged by the same irrational, impersonal, unpredictable, and ubiquitous forces of hostility that

assault the individual without ever confronting him in his individuality. But whereas Kafka's heroes, Gregor Samsa, K, Karl Rossman, accept, or internalize, the hostile outside order, struggling to conform to it if they are still part of its machinery, or to adjust to it if they have slipped from grace and face a challenging authority, Sholom Aleichem's heroes do not confuse their own ethos with that of the environment. Menahem Mendl is fully prepared for a "pounding at the window", and his instinctive response is to flee and hide. But he is so completely dissociated from his enemy, real or imagined, that his own course of life goes on, uninterrupted, in fact even stimulated, by the external danger. Kafka's heroes are themselves a part of the universal horror confronting them. Sholom Aleichem's heroes are continually confronted by horror, but within a universe of meaning.

Thus Sholom Aleichem's schlemihl, for all his simplicity, or naiveté, or weakness, or dreaminess, or predisposition for misfortune, or whatever tendency it is that makes him a schlemihl, has a very firm sense of his distinct self. His sense of personal identity and worth

is not seriously disrupted by the bombardment of environmental harrassments. The schlemihl represents the triumph of identity despite the failure of circumstance.

The full power of that identity is communicated to the reader by having him tell the story in his own voice. Sholom Aleichem generally employs the technique of monologue of which the epistolary form is but a variation. This not only projects the rhythms and nuances of character, but also indicates strongly the extent to which language itself is the schlemihl's manipulative tool. Through language the schlemihl reinterprets events to conform to his own vision, tames them, controls them. It is an extension of the child's learning to control the environment by naming it. One need only read Menahem Mendl's joyous explanations of the stock market to appreciate the extent to which language manipulation is used as a substitute for real knowledge or control of the worldly situation.

Moreover, the richness of the language in some way compensates for the poverty it describes. There is in the style an overabundance of nouns, sayings, explanations,

in apposition. Even the names are all multiple - Menahem Mendl, or Meir-Motl-Moshe-Meir's. To communicate the simple information that he is out of the "timber-business" Menahem Mendl writes:

> This is to let you know that the forests have turned into a barren steppe. Loy Dubim Veloy Yar (a Hebrew expression meaning "there are no bears, there is no forest"), there is no forest, there are no trees, there is no river, it's a hopeless case! It was useless to stir up trouble for others and for myself. I sprained my feet for nothing; I wore out my boots over nothing. I realized, my dear wife, that forests are not for me, and dealing with such splendid liars is beyond me. They can dream up a market-place in heaven, and arrange for you to fall into the lower depths!.... [12].

The exuberant self-indulgence of this description of disaster takes the sting out of the failure itself. This is not what Maurice Samuels has called "theoretical reversal", although Sholom Aleichem's characters, especially Tevye the Dairyman, often achieve spectacular verbal triumphs through wit. Here, by the very lushness of his account, Menahem Mendl transforms the event of failure into a declamatory success. If we measure life, and language, by intensities of experience rather than by objective tests of achievement, the schlemihl is no loser. Enough is always

too much in Menahem Mendl.

Obviously, the author is in part aiming his satire at the life-style that substitues verbal riches for tangible comfort. He reveals, in Sheyne Sheyndl's accounts of blood-spitting, sickly children, social ostracism, and vicious poverty, the full price each family paid for a schlemihl as breadwinner. Yet on the deepest level, Sholom Aleichem is making poverty the metaphor for spiritual wealth, and using the superabundance of language, particularly the rich veins of wit and humor, to suggest the cultural affluence that may be nourished by physical deprivation. The schlemihl is the bearer of this ironic meaning.

The conclusion of Menahem Mendl is an epitome of inversions, the quintessence of irony. The schlemihl-hero becomes an agent for life-insurance, "the kind of business in which the more people die, the better it is for both the dead and the living". As Menahem Mendl explains it, the insurance business makes of death itself a blessing - not, heaven forbid, because of rewards in the life to come, but right here and now - by permitting a man to make

a living out of death. One can clearly detect that by this point the author was finding it difficult to sustain the buoyant note of earlier episodes, and the subject of death is dominant and pervasive. Not only is dying the basis of the hero's occupation, it is the immediate cause of his adventure, since he alights from the train in a particular Bessarabian town in order to say Kaddish on the anniversary of his father's death. As usual, Menahem Mendl is taken in by swindlers, true connoisseurs of innocence, and he considers himself fortunate when he has escaped with his life. But this time, as if the saying of Kaddish were an intimation of his mortality, we follow him to no further adventures. In a postscript to his final letter, he announces his intention of going to America, ever optimistic of making his fortune, and bringing his family to join him.

The implication of this concluding episode is that even from the ultimate victimizer of innocents, Death, some slim pickings can be won by the human being scrambling for life. The automatic response of the schlemihl-hero, pushed into a confrontation with mortality, is given philosophic expression in the daily phrases of Jewish liturgy:

> The dead do not praise God, Nor those who go down to silence.
> But we shall bless God, henceforth and forever, Hallelujah.

I.I. Trunk, in his book on Tevye and Menahem Mendl as Expressions of Eternal Jewish Fate, distinguishes between these, Sholom Aleichem's two major heroes. Menahem Mendl, he says, is pure instinct. Unlike Tevye the Dairyman, he does not experience ironic resignation, or ironic faith: he "expresses the elemental life instinct which does not see its tragic perspectives". [13.] But Trunk would probably agree that taken together, Menahem Mendl and his wife, Sheyne Sheyndl, create the ironic juxtaposition that does allow the reader to judge the fierce optimism against a tragic perspective. Together they represent the two extremes of faith and failure, she, material hopelessness, he, "the faith which is not grounded in any reality".

Menaham Mendl might be called "the purest" of Sholom Aleichem's extended schlemihl studies because of his entirely limited self-awareness, and his total insensitivity to the incongruities of his situation. Almost all his letters begin with the formal, letter-manual formula, followed immediately by a personal outburst of anguish:

> First of all, I'd like to inform you that, God be praised, I'm well and am enjoying life and peace. And may blessed God arrange matters so that we should always hear from one another only good news and glad tidings. Amen!
>
> Secondly, you should know that all week long I've been lying sick in Boiberik, that is, not dangerously sick, God forbid, - just suffering from a nasty illness. What happened is that I fell on my back, so that I'm now unable to turn from one side to the other....[14].

This reads like a deposition in proof of Bergson's contention that "the basis of humor is rigidity, clashing with the inner suppleness of life....something mechanical encrusted upon the living". [15.] Menahem Mendl's failure to recognize the discrepancy between "firstly" and "secondly", and his mechanical adherence to form even when it bears no relation to actuality, provokes our laughter. But the religious phrasing of the dry formula eventually suggests something else as well. Comic as it is, the continued repetition of these phrases implies more than an ignorant rigidity; it becomes symbolic of the simultaneous presence of two contradictory kinds of experience - the inherited, traditional, and unquestioning knowledge of God, and the daily experience of misery and frustration. Menahem Mendl is humorous because he is so consistently

blind to these contradictions. At the same time Sholom Aleichem wants us to recognize that this very blindness rules out metaphysical doubt or despair. The "rigidity" that makes Menahem Mendl comical also keeps him throbbingly alive.

Menahem Mendl is a naked attempt to go beyond satire, and to draw from an example of the most pitiable, laughable creature of society a model for psychic survival.

Footnotes for Chapter Three

1.
N. Oislender, "Der yunger sholom aleichem un zayn roman, Stempenyu" (The Young Sholom Aleichem and his novel, Stempenyu), Shriftn fun der katedre far yidisher kultur bay der alukrainisher visnshaftlekher akademie, Kiev, I, 1928, p. 13. See passim, pp. 5 - 72.

2.
Irving Howe, A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics (New York, 1963), p. 207.

3.
The term is introduced in a discussion of masochistic elements in Jewish jokes, in Theodor Reik, Jewish Wit (New York, 1962), p. 220.

4.
Maurice Samuel, "The Tribune of the Golus", Jewish Book Annual, XXV, 1967-68, p. 54.

5.
Maurice Samuel, The World of Sholom Aleichem (New York 1956), p. 26.

6.
Sholom Aleichem, "Dreyfus in Kasrilevke", A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, trans. Hilda Abel, (New York, 1953), pp. 191- 192.

7.
Karl Beckson and Arthur Ganz, A Reader's Guide to Literary Terms (New York, 1960), p. 99.

8.
An interest theory about the development of Yiddish proverbs of this kind can be found in N. Oislender,

Gruntshtrikhn fun yidishn reyalism (Basic Characteristics of Yiddish Realism) (Vilna, 1928), p. 24. Oislender suggests that the Messianic ideology began to give way to a more realistic weltanschauung, and that the proverbs reflect the rise of realism over idealism. The ironic proverbs which are discussed in this chapter tend to reflect an ongoing struggle, although the examples of meiosis fit in very well with Oislender's theory.

9
For a detailed bibliographical account of the individual episodes as they appeared in various Yiddish periodicals, see Max Erik, "Oyf di shpurn fun menakhem mendl" (On the Trail of Menahem Mendl), Bikhervelt, Warsaw, 1928, Vol. I, pp. 3-10.

10
Salo Baron, The Russian Jew Under Tsars and Soviets (New York, 1964) p. 114.

11
Sholom Aleichm, Ale verk fun sholom aleichem (Complete Works of Sholom Aleichem) (New York, 1937), Vol. II, p. 47. Translations are the author's except where otherwise specified.

12
Ibid., p. 124.

13
LI. Trunk, Tevye un menakhem mendl in yidishn velt goyrl (Tevye and Menahem Mendl as Expressions of Jewish Fate) (New York, 1944), p. 30.

14
Sholom Aleichem, Ale Verk, p. 68.

15
Henri Bergson, "Laughter", Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher, (New York, 1956), p. 89.

Chapter Four:

The Schlemihl as Holocaust Survivor

There is a tendency in modern Jewish scholarship to locate sources of contemporary Jewish culture in the Bible. As noted earlier, the term "schlemihl" has been dignified with this most kosher of etymological origins, and a recent article on "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor" has attempted the same for its subject. [1.] The author, Israel Knox, cites laughter at idolatry, particularly Elijah's mockery of the priests of Baal, as the paradigm of Biblical irony. When the sacrifice of the priests of Baal remains on the altar, Elijah

> mocked them, and said: 'Cry aloud; for he is a god; either he is musing, or he is gone aside (attending to a call of nature) or he is on a journey, or per-adventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked'. [2.]

Commenting on this passage, Professor Knox writes that "the distinctive quality of Jewish humor is the will to righteousness" a quality that unites this early ironic outburst with much later ones, like that of the Maggid of

of Kosenitz who pleaded with God: "Dear God, if you do not want to redeem your people Israel, then at least redeem the Gentiles". [3.] According to the author, Jewish humor (covering both examples) is rooted in tragic optimism which grows from the simultaneous perception of two contradictory realities - "that the world is moving towards Messianic fulfilment, and that the future comes one day at a time".

Interesting as this thesis is, it concentrates so steadily on establishing precedent and similarities, that it ignores the equally revealing and crucial differences between the roots and branches. Let us look further at the two examples given:- Elijah's outburst is associated with one of the most convincing - one might say primitive- proofs of God's active presence to be found in the Scriptures. Elijah was indeed intent on righteousness, wanting in this instance to establish the claim of the one true God, to laugh idolatry off the stage of history. His irony arises from the felt conviction that it could be done. The mockery of Elijah reflects his triumph in this situation.

Implicit in both these examples is the concept of election, but the Maggid's relation to the Gentiles is

based on God's inactivity, on the continued superiority and domination of the non-elect. Elijah's religious conviction is reinforced by his experience, giving him the solid ground from which he can laugh at others. The Maggid's equally strong religious conviction is not supported, but rather negated by his experience, so that he can direct his laughter at no-one save himself. Modern Jewish humor reflects the tension of having to reconcile a belief as absolute as Elijah's with an experience of failure as absolute as that of the priests of Baal.

The schlemihl is a natural outgrowth of this tension, being the situational equivalent of the defeated people, incapable of despair. In his prayer, the Maggid is also playing the fool (since a redemption of the Gentiles would mean an end to persecution of the Jews and would thus equal a redemption of the Jews, at least in terms of this world) and is releasing his aggression in the form of ironic humor. The will to righteousness, when challenged by the obvious failure of righteousness, protected itself by "ironying out" the situation, and thereby preserved the faith while permitting itself an aggressive outlet.

When we enter into the contemporary phase of our subject, the question, however, poses itself: at what point will failure break the back of faith? The destruction of European Jewry during World War II, the systematic slaughter of millions of people and the annihilation of thousands of communities has necessarily changed our attitude towards the schlemihl as the victor in defeat. How does one retain the notion of psychic survival when its cost has been physical extinction? As long as the Jews were suffering from the old ills of hunger and humiliation, as long as pogroms were sporadic, the notion of a "triumph of identity despite failure of circumstance" dominated Jewish humor. But when the entire populations of Kasrilevke and Tuneyadevka had been reduced to the ash of crematoria, does it not become a cruel sentimentality to indulge in schlemihl humor and to sustain a faith in the ironic mode?

And yet, strangely enough, the schlemihl has survived even the holocaust; he is alive and doing well in the USA. Although the schlemihl has become almost too painful a subject for Yiddish fiction - which since the war has struggled through chronicles and lamentations with under-

standably little inclination for humor - he has found a home in American fiction and popular culture. The transplantation of this figure from Europe to America is the subject of the following chapters. The connecting link between cultures could be symbolized by the story, "Gimpel the Fool", written in the 1950s by the Yiddish master, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and translated into English in 1958 by the American novelist, Saul Bellow.

"Gimpel the Fool" is a rare example of the schlemihl figure in post-war Yiddish fiction. Gimpel tam, the epithet used in the original, is more correctly if less adequately translated as simpleton. The protagonist as his own narrator describes his youth and manhood in the shtetl of Frampol:

> I am Gimpel the fool. I don't think myself a fool. On the contrary. But that's what folks call me. They gave me the name while I was still in school. I had seven names in all: imbecile, donkey, flax-head, dope, glump, ninny, and fool. The last name stuck. What did my foolishness consist of? I was easy to take in....[4].

He equates his foolishness with gullibility, the inclination to believe and trust in all that he is told. So he is married

off to the town whore who is passed off as a virgin; accepts her explanation that the birth of their first-born son seventeen weeks after the wedding is the result of a familial genetic quirk; "fathers" six children not one of whom, as he later learns, is really his own; and forgoes the one real temptation to revenge himself against his mockers. The struggle between faith and skepticism is much more explicit in Gimpel than in any of his schlemihl-predecessors, a reflection of the much grimmer historical period within which he was created. As the opening sentences indicate, Gimpel is fully conscious of the distinction between the figure he cuts in the world and his own self-conception. Bashevis Singer has introduced the fool in Shakespearean ambiguity, a character who may be choosing to play the fool in order to retain his moral sanity in a mad, dishonest world.

As the story progresses, Gimpel's decision to remain gullible becomes ever more deliberate. Coming home unexpectedly one night, and finding a stranger asleep with his wife, Gimpel realizes that "another in my place would have made an uproar", but he refrains from doing so lest

he awaken the sleeping child: "A little thing like that - why frighten a little swallow?" [5].

Later he resolves always to believe what he is told, in spite of the mockery and humilation to which this credulity exposes him: "What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe in; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in." [6].

The association of trust in one's unfaithful wife with trust in a God - also possibly unfaithful - widens the philosophic implications of Gimpel's struggle, and indicates that Singer is probing a metaphysical and not merely a psychological condition. There is, throughout the narrative, deliberate ambiguity about what is alternately referred to as Gimpel's "faith" or "gullibility". Sometimes it's the result of having been genuinely duped; once he plays dumb to prevent innocent suffering; another time he chooses a life with love and without dignity to a life with dignity and without love. Finally, as the story nears its conclusion, Gimpel undergoes a moral crisis. When Elka, his wife, dies, admitting her deceptions, Gimpel is bereft of both dignity and love, and it is then that his soul goes

up for grabs:

> One night, when the period of mourning was done, as I lay dreaming on the flour sacks, there came the Spirit of Evil himself and said to me, 'Gimpel, why do you sleep?'
>
> I said, 'What should I be doing? Eating kreplach?'
>
> 'The whole world deceives you, ' he said, ' and you ought to deceive the world in your turn.'
>
> 'How can I deceive all the world?' I asked him.
>
> He answered, 'You might accumulate a bucket of urine every day and at night pour in into the dough. Let the sages of Frampol eat filth.'
>
> 'What about the judgment in the world to come?' I said.
>
> 'There is no world to come', he said. 'They've sold you a bill of goods and talked you into believing you carried a cat in your belly. What nonsense!'
>
> 'Well then' I said, 'and is there a God?'
>
> He answered, 'There is no God either.'
>
> 'What', I said, 'is there, then?'
>
> 'A thick mire'. [7]

Gimpel is tempted to do the devil's bidding, but upon his wife's intervention - in a dream - he repents. Her face black from hellfire, she chides him for losing faith so easily. "Because I was false, is everything false too?" Is faith contingent upon human proofs? Gimpel's soul, whose essential quality is the ability to believe, would indeed have been lost had he satisfied himself with a mean revenge. He withstands the cheap psychological victory offered by the devil's revenge, and sets out into the world

voicing a formulated philosophy:

> the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night. ....No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world. At the door of the hotel where I lie, there stands the plank on which the dead are taken away. The gravedigger Jew has his spade ready. The grave waits and the worms are hungry... When the time comes I will go joyfully. Whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived. [8].

Despite the obvious ironies of the story, the ending is presented "straight", or at least we are certain that Gimpel is not speaking ironically. In order to preserve his belief he has already sacrificed virility, pride, reputation, and the sweetness of revenge. He now calls the reality of the entire universe into question, preferring faith in the afterlife to cynicism in this one. Whether or not this coincides with the point of view of the story remains for the individual reader to decide, but I would argue that it does. Although the reader may be left to appreciate the ultimate irony of Gimpel dying to find that no True World exists after all, he cannot easily turn in

detachment away from the persona whose point of view he has shared all along. To clarify this, we may compare the ending of Gimpel with a familiar Jewish joke about old Shloime's death-bed address to his children: "my whole life I endeavored to behave according to the Law and deprived myself of most pleasures, and lived a poor and miserable existence. I was always hoping that I would be rewarded in the beyond. I would laugh if there were nothing in the beyond." [9].

In both story and joke uncertainty lies at the heart of the relation between speaker and audience. In Shloime's case we suspect - as he does - that his misery may have been in vain. But in Gimpel's case we believe - because he believes -that his misery was surely not in vain.

Reading "Gimpel the Fool" our rational prejudice is confronted with an appeal to a deeper truth, deeper because it frees a man from despair, permits him to live in harmony with his conscience, to practice goodness, and hope for justice.

The tone of the story changes noticeably between opening and conclusion, as the character evolves from

simpleton to saintly storyteller. The broad humor of the first three sections is saved from coarseness only by the delicacy of the irony. The situations are the stuff of bedroom farces, but since the schlemihl husband is amusing us at his own expense, there is a poignancy to our laughter. By contrast, the conclusion is sober. A contemplative monologue supplants the lively narrative. The schlemihl youth grows into a mystical wanderer in a process that illuminates the connection between the two. Just as the schlemihl, through simplicity, ignores the pragmatic demands of society, so the mystic, through contemplation, rejects these same demands. The schlemihl's naive substitution of his illusory world for the real one resembles the mystic's supranaturalism, a perhaps accidental resemblance that is shaped by Bashevis Singer into an organic relation. In "Gimpel the Fool" the schlemihl-figure is explicitly raised to a higher level of significance by the association of a personality-pattern with a metaphysic.

The anti-rational motif permeates Bashevis Singer's work, and exerts an obvious influence on his style. In the Gimpel story, and elsewhere,[10.] he uses the persona of a

naive storyteller as a convenient means of blurring the distinctions between appearance and more respectable forms of belief. Singer has emphasized that he is commited to the philosophy of "As if":

> The 'as if' is so much a part of our life that it really isn't artificial...Every man assumes he will go on living. He behaves <u>as if</u> he will never die. 11.

The "as if" clearly forms the basis of Gimpel's philosophy, and less systematically articulated, it is every schlemihl's method of coping with reality. Taken by Singer to his most exalted extreme, the schlemihl defies all rational distinctions and even the limits of life in his determination to remain fully human. The mystic's supranaturalism reflects his quest for God; but Gimpel's appeal to a transcendental standard is merely the result of having sought to live harmlessly among men.

The story "Gimpel the Fool" suggest that even in the post-war period, though man's heretofore unsuspected genius for evil has made the schlemihl-pose untenable, authors may still turn to it in reaction to the alternative of toughness and pragmatism. In non-humorous fiction of

this type, the schlemihl is called a saint. Andre Schwartbart, in his holocaust novel, Le dernier des justes, introduces as his hero a "lamed vovnik", one of the mythical thirty-six righteous men in whose grace the world continues to exist. The lamed vovnik, like Gimpel, remains true to human ideals by consciously denying the tyranny of reality. Before Ernie Levy dies in Auschwitz, he shepherds a group of orphaned children to the gas chambers telling them of the kingdom of heaven where there is eternal joy, plenty to eat, and warmth unending. To an angry and cynical nurse who protests against these vicious lies (and even here male is believer, female is skeptic) Ernie says, "Madam, il n'y a pas de place ici pour la verité." [12.] He too determines to live "as if" in order to lessen suffering, and because there is simply no place for reality, for truth, in a cattle car on its way to Auschwitz.

The schlemihl in humorous fiction, the saint in rhetoric heightened towards tragedy, reflect the actual response of almost an entire culture. Throughout the process of annihilation, the majority of Jews refused or were unable to "face reality". [13.] The hymn of the concen-

tration camps was the Ani Maamin: "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. And even though he is slow in coming (he is taking his own sweet time) yet even so, I believe". The song contains the same ambivalence that characterizes Yiddish proverbs, but desperation has made the faith more fervent. European Jews, whether we see them as saints or schlemihls, tended to resort to the same techniques of denial and avoidance, sublimation and rationalization, that the culture had so successfully developed through many centuries. And in this wilful dream they were destroyed.

Our study of the schlemihl must take the real implications into account. The author's schlemihl-character may, in his innocence, ignore the ultimate implications of his stance, but the modern reader will hardly be able to do so. Knowing the final outcome, in the present century, the modern reader will be suspicious of passive responses, the consolations of faith or irony, or a predilection for suffering.

If historical events have made us wary of the schlemihl-position psychoanalysis has also put us on our guard. The schlemihl, after all, is reconciled to the

cardinal sin of psychoanalysis, namely, failure. "Psychoanalysis", writes one of its notable practitioners, Theodor Reik, "would characterize the schlemihl as a masochistic character who has the strong unconscious will to fail and spoil his chances". [14.] Or, explaining the popularity of the schlemihl pose in modern culture, another social critic calls it an excuse, an apology, and a rationalization. "To be a schlemihl is to have a stronghold for retreat". [15.] Each of the three times that this writer has studied the story "Gimpel the Fool" with a class, students have rejected the protagonist, saying, "he's just rationalizing. He can't make it, so he denies distinctions rather than face up to his inadequacy".

Now, it is necessary to distinguish between the idea of the schlemihl in real life, and the literary embodiment of that idea within a particular thematic context. The psychoanalyst treats the schlemihl concept as a neurotic symptom, and he tries to determine the causes of a patient's failure in life situations. The author on the other hand, may or may not be aware of the "masochistic need to fail" that dominates the subconscious of his character, and the

knowledge of any such process may be irrelevant in his story. The irony of "Gimpel the Fool" rests on our ability to perceive the failure as a success. It is a philosophical equation. The story calls into question the normal definition of these antonymous postions. Gimpel's anti-pragmatic philosophy mocks at our need for classification and rational explanation of which the tendency to define Gimpel as a masochist is a good example! Thus a discussion of Gimpel as a failure, the psycholanalytic verdict, is really irrelevant; from a literary standpoint it is merely a way of avoiding the real meaning of the story. Even if in our personal lives we subscribe to the moral code of a Beowulf, we should be able - as readers - to appreciate also the challenge of the unheroic. The reader can find pleasure in schlemihl-irony only if he suspends, not his disbelief, but his know-how.

Mendele Mocher Sforim's traveller, Benjamin III, evolved from an object of ridicule into an ironic subject when he stepped into an environment more ridiculous and certainly more sinister than the one that had produced him. Sholom Aleichem seemed to accept the sinister environment

as a given fact, and rendered what a critic has aptly called, "a judgment of love through the medium of irony". [16.] Recreating the familiar schlemihl-figure in the aftermath of the holocaust, Singer made him a character of semi-fantastic fiction. Since the schlemihl is above all a reaction against the evil surrounding him, he must reject more and more as the evil increases; Gimpel, as we have seen, is prepared to walk into eternity in pursuit of unsullied goodness.

Footnotes for Chapter Four

1. Israel Knox, "The Traditional Roots of Jewish Humor", Judaism, XII, no. 3 (Summer, 1963), pp. 327-337.

2. Kings, I, 18:27.

3. Knox, op. cit., p. 333.

4. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Gimpel the Fool", trans. Saul Bellow, in Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Irving Howe, (New York, 1966) p. 3.

5. Ibid., p. 10.

6. Ibid., p. 12.

7. Ibid., p. 17.

8. Ibid., p. 19.

9. This joke is cited in Jewish Wit, op. cit., p. 65.

10. See "The Wife Killer", "Esther Kreindel the Second", "A Wedding in Brownsville", in Selected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

11. "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer", Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, Commentary, XXXVI, 5 (November, 1963), p. 365.

12. André Schwarz-Bart, Le dernier des justes (Paris, 1959), p. 337.

13.
Cf. "People do not easity accept the fact that they are going to be killed; if they have the know-how to resist, they will defend themselves as best they can. If, on the other hand, they have unlearned the art of resistance, they will repress their knowledge of the true situation and will attempt to go on as though life could not change. The Jews could not resist. In complying with German orders they therefore tried, to the utmost of their ability, to ignore all evidence of danger and to forget all intimation of death. They pretended that nothing unusual was happening to them, and that belief became so crucial that they did anything to perpetuate it". Raul Hilberg, The Destruction of the European Jews (Chicago, 1961), p. 667.

The same point is made repeatedly in imaginative literature dealing with the holocaust, e.g. in Tadeusz Borowski, "The Man with the Package", This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen, (New York, 1968), pp. 127-131.

14.
Reik, Jewish Wit, p. 41.

15.
Albert Goldman, "Boy-man, schlemihl: the Jewish element in American Humor", Explorations (London, 1967), p. 14.

16.
Howe, op. cit., p. 209.

Chapter Five: Transition to America

When we first look for parallels, no atmosphere seems more unlike the repressive, poverty-ridden Eastern European Jewish town than the open American society of the mid 20th century. From about 1880 onward, masses of Jewish immigrants fleeing pogroms and hunger came to what they called "The Golden Land", and in spite of hardships far greater than they had anticipated, their children did indeed grow up to opportunities the parents had once associated with a Messianic age. Yet, somehow, the policies of tolerance, and the slow, steady climb into the middle, even upper-middle class, have not prevented Jews in America, including those of the third generation, from sharing many of the insecurities of their European forefathers. For one thing, the greater freedom encouraged a geographic and economic mobility which necessarily weakened communal and family cohesion. Not having to worry about annihilation, the community was threatened by corrosion from within, called variously acculturation, accomodation, or assimilation. The break-up of traditional Jewishness was occurring simultaneously in Europe also, but there at least the older generation still stood on familiar ground, whereas in

America all were newcomers, and the older immigrants were far less sure-footed than their adaptable young. Sociologists have noted the degree to which, when parents must rely on their children, great anxiety is felt by both.

In spite of incomparably greater freedom, Jews were not absolved of their century-old culpability for the problems of western civilization merely by the American constitution. Subtle forms of discrimination persisted, and widespread outbreaks of anti-semitism continued to recur during critical periods. All this, added to the incalculable psychological after-effects of the destruction of one-third of their co-religionists by the Nazis, helps to explain why American Jews do not sit as comfortably as statistical surveys of their creature comforts suggest they should.

The ambiguities of the Jews' position is reflected in the continuing vitality of Jewish humor, most of it structurally and thematically similar to its European source. American Jewish humor is remarkably like Yiddish humor, and to the degree that the English language could not reproduce the ironic inflections and nuances of the Jewish expression

or joke, English was reshaped- gramatically and phonetically - in the Yiddish mold. [1] The schlemihl-figure, one of the basic characters in the Yiddish repertoire of humor has continued in America to play his dual role as palliator (thank God I'm not as simple as he is) and projection (there's something painfully familiar about that fellow).

The borscht-circuit routines of a comedian like Mikhl Rosenberg were heavily indebted to character-sketches of this type. When Getsl attended a baseball game - believing Yankl Stedium to be a new cantor, the audience laughed at a greenie even greener than itself; at its own pitiable attempt to embrace a new culture; and at the new culture whose games were essentially so frivolous. The immigrant-as-schlemihl, obviously an outgrowth of Yiddish humor, continued the habit of challenging the environment in the very process of being baffled by it. So, for example, Leo Rosten's sentimental <u>Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N</u> wins its heartiest laughs from the broken English of the adult student: "Ve got Memorable Day, Fort July,...and for de feenish from de Voild Var - Armistress Day". But the real foil of the book is the pedantic WASP instructor, Mr.

Parkhill. The title of the book refers not only to what Hyman Kaplan learns, but to the warmth and unembarrassed heartiness he teaches. [2.]

Of course, the immigrant-as-schlemihl may be accepted as an inevitable extension of European Jewish humor, since the immigrant is not yet dissociated from his roots, and his situation is still precarious. How firmly the schlemihl remains entrenched in the American Jewish consciousness can better be shown by reference to the humor of a much later and quite dissimilar situation, the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of June, 1967. The State of Israel is acknowledged as the birthplace of "a new Jew". Certainly during that way, if not before, the cliché of a bronzed warrior emerged ready to replace the older cliché of a wizened rabbi. Yet in the bookstores of New York, alongside chest-thumping accounts of "victory" were items like Irving of Arabia: an unorthodox interpretation of the Israeli-Arab War [3.] which shows a soldier going off to battle with his mother in the background, pleading, "Marvin, please. Take your galoshes"; or the poster of a shrunken hassid emerging from a telephone booth in a familiar cape bearing the

the inscription "Super-Jew". A portion of the American Jewish public, perhaps as an instinctive reflex of self-protection, continued to trace the old outlines under the new events. Better to stick to the identification with the schlemihl-loser than to risk believing in a newfound strength. Or perhaps from where he sits, the American Jewish humorist perceives the continuing vulnerability of the Jewish position, for all its seeming might. Whether through fear or perspicacity the cartoonists provided a war as it would have been fought (or not) by American Jews, juxtaposing the success theme of Israel with the submission and adaptation themes of Europe. The humor of cartoons like that of a soldier being sewn together out of material scraps, each donated by the Segals or Cohens or Goldbergs in loving honor of the Crespis, or Feldmans, or Levys, derives from the recognition that whatever the Israeli has achieved, the American Jew remains the compromiser. His business is not war, but <u>shmates</u>. It might even be that the Israeli's proficiency in warfare has only reinforced the American Jew's contrasting perception of himself as schlemihl.

As the foregoing examples suggest, the schlemihl-figure made the transition from Europe to America at the level of popular culture. Not until the 1950's did American Jewish authors consider the type a suitable protagonist for serious writing. When we read, for example, Joseph Mersand's 1939 account of Traditions in American Literature: A Study of Jewish Characters and Authors,[4] we learn that in the works of Jewish novelists before World War II "the element of humor...is a rarity" and that social problem plays dominate the stage. Mr. Mersand's discussion of Jewish characters includes a list of then-familiar stereo-types: 1. Teacher; 2. Attorney; 3. Physician; 4. Purveyor of entertainment; 5. Labor Leader; 6. Man of courage; 7. Philosopher; 8. The Jewish mother. The author is unimaginative but correct in mixing professional categories with character types, since the problem novels and dramas he analyses do, in fact, treat these categories interchangeably. The labor leader is invariably a radical, self-sacrificing in the cause of justice; the attorney is a crusading child of immigrants, and of superior intelligence; the purveyors of entertainment are cocky and ill-mannered, etc. The schlemihl

is absent from the gallery, even in the few satires of the period. To realize how prominent this character type has since become, one need only briefly consider American Jewish writing of the post-war period - Bellow's Seize the Day and Herzog, Bruce Jay Friedman's Stern, Malamud's The Fixer and A New Life, Murray Shizgal's Luv, Billy Wilder's The Apartment, Philip Roth's story, "Epstein" or his novel, Portnoy's Complaint.

The shift of sensibility reflected by the emergence of this unlikely American hero was gradual, and was the by-product of revolutionary changes in American thinking over the past three decades. In Jewish humor and middle-brow culture the schlemihl was continuously popular; but when America as a whole began to experience itself as a "loser" after World War II, a process we shall soon discuss, the schlemihl was lifted out of his parochial setting, to become a national figure.

* *

One of the most characteristic novels of the 1920's

and the most acclaimed novel of its author, is The Sun Also Rises. At the acknowledged risk of setting up a straw man, we could begin a study of the schlemihl-figure in American fiction by referring to the antagonist of that book, the Jew, Robert Cohn. Hemingway poetically and with precision intertwined the two thematic lines of the novel, each introduced by its caption: "You are all a lost generation", the verdict of Gertrude Stein; and "One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever...", the lofty, impersonal judgment of Ecclesiastes. Sympathetically, Hemingway portrays the impotent members of the lost generation, unable to overcome the physical and psychological wounds sustained in the war. They may move, the book suggests, beyond self-pity to the manly grace of the quoted passage from Ecclesiastes if they learn restraint and self-control. As has often been noted, the aesthetic and moral core of the novel can be located in Romero's capework and in his ability to hold "his purity of line through the maximum of exposure". [5.] Of this code Robert Cohn is the foil.

Cohn betrays all the book's standards, especially

the aesthetic. There is in his life-style no containment, no purity, not even any line. When he drinks a lot, Cohn gets drunk and sick. When he falls in love he is as shameless as Swann, the hopeless victim of his emotion. He is, in Mark Spilka's phrase, "The last chivalric hero", [6.] but in a book built on the premise that love is dead, any man who surrenders himself to it is a fool, or at least "a case of arrested development". Where restraint equals manhood, emotional self-indulgence must be puerile, and Cohn in his Princeton jersey remains the eternal adolescent. The verdict on him is thumbs down all around. "I hate him", says Jake. "I hate him too", says Brett. "I hate his damned suffering". [7.]

Studied phenomenologically, Cohn is almost a classic schlemihl. We recognize in his impressionable reading of W.H. Hudson exactly the same escapist, dreaming qualities that made Benjamin III such a devoted reader of "bobbe mayses" and Don Quixote a victim of romances. He is the same patsy for overweening women, bullied by Frances who wants him, and by Brett, who doesn't. He accepts humiliation, he is accused of reveling in it. He is a tactless

blunderer, seemingly unconscious of the derision he inspires in Harvey, Mike, Bill, the chorus.

But Cohn remains a schlemihl-manqué, because the book realizes neither the humor of his condition, nor any irony in his failure as compared with the "success" of the in-group. Romero the Bullfighter is still the traditional Western hero in this work, a man of dignity, truth-to-self, physical courage, romantic polish, masculine beauty, the old-fashioned virtues. His portrait affirms the possibilities of heroism in the traditional sense of the word, the possibilities of success and of tragedy. The protagonists, Jake and Brett, are incapable of achieving his sublimity, but they at least recognize the higher standards he embodies. Whereas Cohen, who "had a chance to behave so well", behaves shamefully, and shows no understanding of manhood or manners. He is among tough guys, a sniveller. Hemingway writes about the schlemihl from the standpoint of the gentile Westerner, and concludes that his qualities are wholly defeatist and distasteful.

The widespread anti-semitism among American writers in the early decades of this century derived in part from

their apprehension that something was corrupting the American Adam, something was corroding American ideals, and that the "something" was associated with the Jew. Cohn's is the most thorough portrayal of the menace (and for this reason the least offensive) although for mythical intensity Fitzgerald's Wolfsheim, the man who undermined American morals by fixing the World Series, takes the prize. In addition to the usual reasons for, and expressions of hostility towards Jews, there was a new component in America; the arrival of large masses of Eastern European Jewish immigrants coincided with rapid urbanization, and with the end of political isolationism, with the dying away of an older way of life. Some observers saw a relation of cause and effect between these two sets of events. Henry Adams writes in distress from Washington in 1914:

> The atmosphere really has become a Jew atmosphere. It is curious and evidently good for some people, but it isolates me. I do not know the language, and my friends are as ignorant as I. We are still in power, after a fashion. Our sway over what we call society is undisputed. We keep Jews far away, and the anti-Jew feeling is quite rabid. We are anti-everything and we are wild up-lifters; yet we somehow seem to be more Jewish every day.[8]

Adams uses the word "Jewish" in the broadest sociological sense, making a connection between the new "Jew atmosphere" and all that threatens "what we call society". Similarly, twelve years later, when Hemingway created a Jewish character to stand in opposition to all he called society, the two versions were not as disparate as we might believe. The myth of American innocence was being sullied, and what could explain it away better than the myth of Jewish guilt? By negative implication Jews became the symbols of encroaching commercialism, middlebrowism and emotionalism: "the Jew at the bottom of the pile".

The association of these changes in American life with Jewishness seems to have remained, but today the judgmental weight of the words "Jew atmosphere" has been inverted. Explaining the move of the Jewish writer into the centre of American culture, a contemporary critic, Leslie Fielder, is almost bored by the obvious:

> The background is familiar enough: the gradual breaking up of the Anglo-Saxon domination of our imagination: the relentless urbanization which makes rural myths and images no longer central to our experience; the exhaustion as vital themes of the Midwest and of the movement from the provinces to New York or Chicago or Paris; the turning again from West to East from our own heartland back to Europe; and the discovery in the Jews of a people essentially urban, essentially Europe-oriented, a ready-

> made image for what the American longs to or fears he is being forced to become.[9]

The accusation once levelled against the outsider has become his password into the inner circle of belonging. America is, after all, the oldest republic in the world. If the Russian Jew was once insecure because of pogrom threats and the arbitrary disfavor of government, metropolitan Americans fear a nuclear pogrom and the arbitrary disfavor of their gun-toting neighbours. Menahem-Mendl the luftmensch represented the insecurity of the middleman, then still a marginal economic type; nowadays the majority of Americans are employed in services - selling and waiting on tables; in management communication, personnel selection, decorator centres, marketing research and analysis, message headquarters, - similarly "living on air", only in a nattier suit. Moreover, Americans inherit a tradition of political messianism, the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy. The tension of maintaining faith in the democratic process, while living in a political slough of despond is not at all unlike the ironic traditional tension of the Jew. And if the Jew's experience resembles the normative American experience, then it stands to reason that the schlemihl, who embodied so much

of the irony of the Jewish situation, can become the ironic vehicle on a national scale.

So it is hardly surprising that Saul Bellow, in one of those unspectacular passages that can later be pointed to as a turning in cultural history, should have opened his first novel, Dangling Man, by throwing down the gauntlet to Hemingway:

> There was a time when people were in the habit of addressing themselves frequently and felt no shame at making a record of their inward transactions. But to keep a journal nowadays is considered a kind of self-indulgence, a weakness, and in poor taste. For this is an era of hardboiled-dom. Today, the code of the athlete, of the tough boy - an American inheritance, I believe, from the English gentleman - that curious mixture of striving, asceticism, and rigor, the origins of which some trace back to Alexander the Great - is stronger than ever. Do you have feelings? There are correct and incorrect ways of indicating them. Do you have an inner life? It is nobody's business but your own. Do you have emotions? Strangle them. To a degree, everyone obeys this code. And it does admit of a limited kind of candor, a closemouthed straightforwardness. But on the truest candor, it has an inhibitory effect. Most serious matters are closed to the hard-boiled. They are unpractised in introspection, and therefore badly equipped to deal with opponents whom they cannot shoot like big game or outdo in daring. 10.

Bellow consciously set out to write an American novel, centred on a hero whose purity of line through the maximum of exposure could only be the spreading circumference of a pot belly. The new spokesman for an altered America would be more like Cohn than like Jake Barnes, and the reader would presumably accept the author's assumption that Romeros were as outdated as Lord Fauntleroys.

The first mutation would be rhetoric. In place of the monosyllabic, uninflected style that Hemingway perfected, Bellow intended to talk, "and if I had as many mouths as Siva has arms and kept them going all the time I still could not do myself justice." [11]. The need for a new style arose from the quest for a new truth; because, as Bellow's fictional spokesman, Joseph, explains, on the truest candor the tightlipped straightforwardness has an inhibitory effect. Hemingway's prose is stripped to the bone. There is no cant, there are no frills of sentimentality. No lies are told. But the absence of lies is not synonymous with truth. The intricacies of an intelligent, emotional human personality cannot be explored without recourse to the emotive and intellectual probing of sentiment and

conscience that Hemingway so consistently avoided. In Hemingway's fiction nature's cues are reliable, whereas man's decisions and actions are disconcertingly arbitrary. Thus Nick, during his solitary trip up the "Big, Two-Hearted River", stays in harmony with nature by never imposing his human frailties on her perfection. When Nick is faced with the decidedly human task of making coffee, however, he recalls the varied, vying opinions of his companions on former trips, and finally making the coffee according to one of their recipes, he finds it too terrible to drink.

Bellow would agree that human behaviour is erratic and irrational, but this, for him, is part of its charm. Human life is by definition more complex than animal life, and its complexity thus becomes an index of its humanity. As Joseph, the hero of Dangling Man, hangs suspended between choices of induction or independent isolation, the author introduces Joseph's"companion", a Talmudic dybbuk known as "The Spirit of Alternatives", or alternately, as "But on the Other Hand", or again, as "Tu As Raison Aussi". Like any authentic Talmudic debate, Joseph's dialogue with his superego, or projected anti-

type, is not mere pilpul, - not dialectic athletics for its own sale - but rather a sharpened quest for what is right. The rhetorical style, the very sentence structure, suggests the ambiguities and intricacies of Joseph's mind. He says, "My talent, if I have one at all, is for being a citizen, or what is today called, most apologetically, a good man".[12] The qualifying clausality of the syntax reflects the moral and psychological deflections on the way to the goal. The garrulous monologues of Joseph and other Bellow characters are filled with suggestions of compromise, uncertainty, weakness and failure, the inevitable consequence of urban, democratic living.

Complexity is not the only index of the human condition in Bellow's first novel. To the same degree that Hemingway had emphasized the virtue of stoical containment, Bellow embraced the opposing value of emotional committed involvement. "Trouble", says Joseph, "like physical pain, makes us actively aware that we are living, and when there is little in the life we lead to hold and draw and stir us, we seek and cherish it, preferring embarrassment or pain to indifference".[13]

This quotation sums up the new emphasis on intensity as one of the basic components of the schlemihl-character in American fiction, and indicates his main point of departure from European sources. The process described in the previous chapters tries to account for the use of the simpleton as a symbol of unbroken faith against almost universal skepticism and against fierce physical persecution. The American Jewish author is not concerned with faith-rootedness - if anyone is - nor with the survival of a God-centred community. His schlemihl is not even suggested to be the image of a people. He is above all an expression of heart, of intense, passionate feeling, especially in surroundings that stamp out individuality and equate emotion with unreason. The schlemihl is used as a cultural reaction to the prevailing Anglo-Saxon model of restraint in action, thought, and speech. What is Bellow's metaphor of Siva moving its many mouths and arms if not the semitic stereotype of vulgar volubility? The Yiddish schlemihl was an expression of faith in the face of material disproofs. The American schlemihl declares his humanity by loving and suffering in defiance of the forces of depersonalization and the

ethic of enlightened stoicism.

Many of these figures are named with heart: There is Levin, of Malamud's novel, A New Life, called Lev, the Hebrew word for heart; Herzog, meaning heart, speak; Miss Lonely-hearts, Nathaniel West's early forerunner of the schlemihls; Rosie Lieber, the speaker in Grace Paley's monologue "Goodbye and Good Luck", Bellow's Clarence Feiler of "The Gonzaga Manuscripts". Writing on Malamud, a critic says, "The Jew has typically a 'heart condition' and this is perhaps Malamud's central metaphor". [14] This lovely formulation applies generally to the schlemihl as a character in American fiction.

Although one cannot here provide an analysis of all the schlemihl types in modern American writing, a representative cross section must be introduced.

In English, as in Yiddish literature, the monologue is a preferred form, so that the speaker's position may have the force to engage the reader's allegiance despite its feeble objective base. In English, as in Yiddish, the monologue may be used for humour, and when the speaker is "from the Yiddish" the inflected language is itself a source of fun.

The inflections provide comical material and they serve as a clue to the social standing of the speaker. They may also release a potential in the language, since the immigrant, like the child, is unhampered by restrictions of grammar and may free hidden linguistic possibilities that remain confined in grammatical formality. Grace Paley's memorable story, "Goodbye and Good Luck" applies this technique in one of the few schlemihl stories whose leading character is a woman. Unburdening herself to Lillie, her niece, Aunt Rosie mocks the notion that she is pitiable:

> If there was more life in my little sister (Lillie's mother) she would know my heart is a regular college of feelings and there is such information between my corset and me that her whole married life is a kindergarten... I am good-natured - you know fat people are like that - kind, and I thought to myself, poor Mama....she married who she didn't like, a sick man, his spirit already swallowed up by God. He never washed. He had an unhappy smell. His teeth fell out, his hair disappeared, he got smaller, shriveled up little by little till goodbye and good luck he was gone and only came to Mama's mind when she went to the mailbox under the stairs to get the electric bill. In memory of him and out of respect to mankind, I decided to live for love. [15.]

Aunt Rosie recalls how she fell in love with Volodya Vlashkin, "called by the people of those days the Valentino

of Second Avenue"; how she left her mother for her lover, although she knew he had "a wife, children, the whole combination"; how she stayed true to him for years "Oi, Vlashkin, if you are my friend, what is time"? Only when Vlashkin is divorced by his wife who has grown tired of having him around, does Rosie win a proposal from him. As she recedes into the sunset, Aunt Rosie calls out her farewell:

> My goodness, I am already late. Give me a kiss. After all, I watched you grow from a plain seed. So give me a couple wishes on my wedding day. A long and happy life. Many years of love. Hug Mama, tell her from Aunt Rose, goodbye and good luck. [16].

Fat, romantic Rose is played off against the flat, middle-class values of her sister, obviously to her own advantage. The energy of the monologue is the extension of her emotional nature which is her one and only asset. She loves Volodya because of the emotions he is able to arouse in his audiences, and she is satisfied with herself because by feeling, she too has lived. The story is slightly ironic, there being some distance between the monologist's interpretation of her actions, and the reader's independent

judgment. Yet Lillie, the silent witness, is with her Aunt, not her mother in more than the physical sense. Like Bloom, Aunt Rose wins the allegiance and interest of the child who is not her own by offering more than the natural parent can. Objectively, Rosie's life is a failure, so that her mother and normally-settled sister bemoan her fate. Her pathetic insistence on a life of virtue ("How could you ask me to go with you on trains to stay in strange hotels, among Americans, not your wife?") once her lover is free, indicates that her values are not in any way different from those of her family. Only her priorities are different. Represented by herself, Rose is the most fortunate of all, fat, aging bride though she is. And actually her romantic attachment is rewarded: albeit on the rebound, she gets her man.

The monologue may be in the form of a diary - as in Dangling Man, or in epistolary form. Isaac Rosenfeld's wartime story "The Hand That Fed Me" [17.] is in many respects similar to Bellow's novel, a resemblance that is not surprising in the light of the friendship and shared interests of the two authors. Written as a series of five letters from Joseph Feigenbaum to a certain Ellen, between December

21 and December 31, the story studies intelligence in the service of fantasy. Joseph replies to a Christmas card he has received from Ellen, a girl he met in the WPA office three years earlier and with whom he spent that one and only day. Her unexpected card, followed by no further communication, triggers off a succession of fantasies and emotions, including an intricate analysis of the non-existent relationship. Joseph constructs a romance - much as one constructs a philosophic system - which has no touchstones in reality, and which elicits no real response. Because he is not unaware of the irony of his condition, Joseph, living as he says, "in what I consider to be a state of exile", must resort to paradoxes. His self-deception is also a form of self-analysis; his loneliness forces him to clutch at an aging memory, but in addressing the memory, he creates a form of dialogue. The mounting humiliation he feels after so thoroughly exposing his love to rejection leads him beyond humiliation to belief in his own potential happiness:

> I still believe in human happiness, and in my own to boot. If I cannot make my claim on you, I will make it on life, demand that existence satisfy the longings it arouses. It must, it must! For that is happiness: the conviction that something is necessary. ....

> We are accustomed to sing the joys of the happy, the fulfilled men. Let us also sing the joys of the desolate, the empty men. Theirs is the necessity without fulfilment, but it is possible that even to them - who know? - some joy may come. [18].

The very process of giving voice to his despair has made Joseph aware, on the eve of a New Year, of his willingness to risk disappointment, and, it must follow, of his belief in joy.

> I am cushioned at the bottom and only look forward to what I may expect. For after all, what is humiliation? It does not endure forever. And when it has led us underground to our last comfort, look, it has served its purpose and it is gone. Who knows when new heights may not appear? A man has only so much in common with his experience. The rest he derives from God knows where. [19].

The quasi-Biblical rhetoric is ironic too, for Joseph is a little man, and seems littler still when puffed up in majestic prose. But there is redemption in his irony, and more so in his passion. Here again, as in so many schlemihl stories, the clinical diagnosis of the protagonist would differ entirely from the elicited fictional response. Joe is sick; only a sick man can conduct a fiery ten-day correspondence with a woman who has sent him a Christmas card after a one-day meeting three years earlier.

Yet Joseph is presented as more than a neurotic, because the process wherein he lays bare his illness is the same process that uncovers his commitment to health. The analysand so clearly alive to the world around him and to his own thwarted interaction with it is himself an analyst, and when in the final letter he pronounces his cure, he is not unconvincing.

Our reading of these stories demands that we place the speaker against his background. Rosenfeld's Joseph and Bellow's Joseph both live in a war-depressed society, after communism has been discredited as a moral alternative, and when democratic human choices seem limited to military induction or the WPA. The emotional-intellectual odysseys of both heros are schlemihlish, since real heroes would have embarked on real, that is, actual quests. These men are literally and symbolically unemployed. Each of them, aware of his foolishness, is filled with self-mockery. Only against the unimaginative humdrum of the surrounding lives does their own intensity present a welcome value. As faith was an alternative to failure, so intensity - expressed as rhetorical intensity - becomes an

alternative to regimentation or plain dullness.

The schlemihl-figure in the title role of Stern is treated by the author, Bruce Jay Friedman, with greater satiric detachment than any of the characters treated above.[20] The book is not a monologue, and with the third-person form comes a deliberate increase of distance between the protagonist's point of view and that of the novel. Stern suffers from an ulcer, the localized symbol of all his hurt, and simultaneously, the cause of his anxiety and pain. The ulcer is actually a kind of "heart condition" in that it grows as Stern begins to feel his estrangement and to long for accepting love. The choice of this metaphor, the diagnosis of pain in a lower, less poetic organ, is symptomatic of Friedman's harsher, lower form of humor. Stern is a further study of the sick man as the relatively healthy man, the psychological equivalent of loser as winner. Friedman's novel, however, reveals not merely the irony, but the full horror of this inversion.

Stern is an urbanite recently transposed to suburbia, a Jew among gentiles. He is introduced as the

victim of a symbolic cuckolding - the burly, mythical "goy" of the neighbourhood has knocked down and "seen" his wife. Stern, who "had waited...for the day his wife would say this to him",[21] a victim even before the specific occasion defined the nature of his ordeal, sets out to avenge the act. Instead he tentatively punches himself in the belly, and the spreading sweetness of the ulcer pain makes its first appearance.

In his article on "Boy-man, schlemihl", Albert Goldman calls Stern "the most vividly drawn, the most completely unmasked schlemihl created by any modern American writer". He says further:

> Stern is pure black humor which, if presented seriously, would be an unbearable nightmare; instead, it is all played on a note of absurdity and intense hilarity, the fears made funny and thus tolerable. Stern's playing the schlemihl to the ultimate degree diminishes him to quivering helplessness and yet at the same time saves him - by allowing him to escape into sickness. Reduced to the complete and captive victim of a rest home, he finds strength - not enough to triumph, surely, but enough to survive. Although Stern pays a horrifyingly high price as a schlemihl, he also uses this role as a means to withdraw from painful realities. It is in truth his fantasy life from which he cannot protect him-

> self; in real life, however, being the schlemihl serves as a refuge and as a rationalization for him. [22].

Goldman analyses the growing attraction of the schlemihl pose for the average American who suffers from "similar feelings of inadequate virility and masculine power, similar repressions of turbulent negative emotions, and similar convictions of inferiority and alienation". [23]. He limits his discussion to the cathartic, comic uses of the schlemihl without considering what we have been discussing, namely the tentative proposal of the schlemihl as an ironic hero for the modern age. From the point of view of the article, then, Stern is truly the most "unmasked" version of this character-type in contemporary fiction. The tendency to equate truth with negative truth is valid in comedy, especially black comedy, that makes its point by stripping away the trappings of civilization and baring the naked ape. Thus in Stern Jewishness is no more than an irrational remnant of sterile forms ("In arguments with friends as to whose grandmother was more religious Stern would weight in with 'Mine opens the damned synagogue' and he would generally walk off with the honors"[24]; family is a

Mafia-type arrangement governing through overt or covert blackmail. Stern's magnanimities are interpreted as compensatory acts, and the dynamics of his little kindnesses are bared, as though in a glass clock where all the working parts are shown in motion:

> He was afraid of the boy's sudden eruption and wondered why the boy couldn't be nice to him all the time. Violence was such a waste. It didn't accomplish anything....Stern wanted to tell the boy, 'Be nice to me at all times and I'll tell you things that will make you smart. I'll lend you books and, when we both get out, take you to a museum, explaining any hard thing.'[25]

The liberal's emphasis on civilization is the outgrowth of his terror. This treatment of the schlemihl almost falls back into the original category of pure satire, where the figure of fun draws the author's fire because he deviated from the book's standard of normalcy and right action. Certainly it differs from works like Rosenfeld's or the early Confessions of Zeno by Italo Svevo, in which the sick man unravels his own layers of complexity, involving the reader in a many-leveled process. Zeno, the confessional persona in Svevo's book, offers alternative explanations for his actions, and creates endless ironies

by contrasting his motives with their results, and with the interpretation of those motives by others. Friedman's purposes in Stern are more circumscribed: the tall stooped Jew "with pale hips" is symptomatic of his society's ills, not an ironic alternative or challenge to them. In the last pages of the book Stern's overabundance of sympathy is almost recognized as a manifestation of great soul. A year and a half after the initial provocation, he returns to fight the assaulter, but though he no longer lacks the courage to fight, he hasn't the heart.

> He saw (the man's) socks...faded blue anklets with little green clocks on them. They were cut low, almost disappearing into his slippers, and reminded Stern of those worn by an exchange student from Latvia at college who had brought along an entire bundle of similar ones. Now Stern felt deeply sorry for the man's powerful feet, which were always to be encased in terrible refugee anklets, and for a second he wanted to embrace them. [26].

His enemy is suddenly revealed as just another refugee, as vulnerable as the Latvian exchange student, and as human as Stern himself. Stern's capacity to love makes him, momentarily, a moral hero, a conqueror in spirit. But he is cut down to size in the final paragraph, which sees his love as theatre, almost an extravagant gesture:

> Then he said, 'I feel like doing some hugging', and knelt beside the sleeping boy, inhaling his pajamas and putting his arm over him. His wife was at the door and Stern said, 'I want you in here, too.' She came over, and it occurred to him that he would like to try something a little theatrical, just kneel there quietly with his arms protectively draped around his wife and child. He tried it and wound up holding them a fraction longer than he'd intended.[27].

The book remains critical of the protagonist, and satiric in its descriptions of him. In works where emotional expressiveness is welcome, it is not subject to the accusations of theatricality. Nevertheless, the conclusion does suggest more than "a means of withdrawing from painful realities". Stern is well, his sensitivity is also a way of coping with painful realities.

These four fictional versions of the schlemihl-type - Aunt Rose, the two Josephs of Bellow and Rosenfeld, and Stern - are obviously further examples of estranged, "marginal" man. Yet like the prototypal schlemihl in Yiddish fiction, they reflect an ambivalent, and not simply hostile relation to their society. Each of them shows himself to be rooted in the very family or communal structure from which he is alienated, and that rootedness is not

merely historical, a piece of biographical data, but a vigorous and continuing part of his emotional life. In one way or another, Aunt Rose, Joseph Feigenbaum, Stern, and of course, Bellow's Joseph, elect induction to marriage, to love beyond any "safe" limits, to the army, to life. Each is maimed - ulcerous, fat, dangling, or neurotic - and yet is used as an example of relative health. There is about each of them a touch of cheerfulness, unwarranted by the facts of the case, but there nonetheless.

The Yiddish schlemihl did not abandon faith in the Almighty simply because he was confronted by proofs of God's perfidy. He learned to live suspended between belief and skepticism, perfectly and eternally balanced. Just so, in a different anthropological climate, the American Jewish schlemihl does not withdraw from human society simply because he and it are doomed to defeat. He leans to live within a continuing tension between belief in man and radical frustration. At the basis of Yiddish humor is a century old metaphysical dilemma. From this the American Jewish authors have extracted merely the psychological paradox: the knowledge of life's

futility, reinforced by daily experiences, does not invalidate an urgent insistence on joy, irrational as such emphasis may be. The insistence is foolish, since man, a Pavlovian subject, is expected to learn from experience, and to modify his ambitions accordingly. He is supposed, returning for a moment to Hemingway's standards, to puncture false hopes of happiness with wise resignation, "Yes...Isn't it pretty to think so?" The schlemihl is either incapable of making this move, or consciously unwilling to make it. So he continues to dream, or to fight for love, or to seek it, and according to the bias of his author is either ironically rewarded, or satirically deflated for his efforts. Bellow's Herzog thrusts out his opening line in almost Whitmanic defiance: "If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me..."!

Footnotes for Chapter Five

1.
Wallace Markfield, "The Yiddishization of American Humor", Esquire, Oct., 1965, pp. 114-115. Cf. H.L. Mencken, The American Language (New York, 1937), p. 633ff; Leo Rosten, The Joys of Yiddish (New York, 1968).

2.
Leo C. Rosten, The Education of H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N (New York, 1937), p. 74.

3.
David Falcon, Irving of Arabia, an Unorthodox Interpretation of the Israeli-Arab War (New York, 1967).

4.
Joseph Mersand, Traditions in American Literature: a Study of Jewish Characters and Authors (New York, 1939).

5.
Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises (New York, 1926), p. 168.

7.
Hemingway, op. cit., p. 182.

8.
Henry Adams, "From a Letter to Charles Milnes Gaskell", The Jew in a Gentile World, ed. Arnold Rogow (New York, 1961).

9.
Leslie Fiedler, "Saul Bellows," Saul Bellows and the Critics, ed. Irving Malin (New York, 1967), pp. 2-3.

10.
Saul Bellow, Dangling Man (New York, 1960), p. 9.

11.
Ibid., p. 9.

12.
Ibid., p. 91

13.
Ibid., p. 82.

14.
Gabriel Pearson, "Bernard Malamud and the Jewish Arrival", Explorations, ed. M. Mindlin and C. Bermant (London, 1967), p. 28.

15.
Grace Paley, "Goodbye and Good Luck", The Little Disturbances of Man (New York, 1959), p. 9.

16.
Ibid., p. 20.

17.
Isaac Rosenfeld, "The Hand That Fed Me", Modern Jewish Stories, ed. Gerda Charles (New Jersey, 1963), pp. 225-243.

18.
Ibid., p. 242.

19.
Ibid., p. 242.

20.
Bruce Jay Friedman, Stern (New York, 1962).

21.
Ibid., p. 9.

22.
Albert Goldman, "Boy-man, schlemihl: the Jewish Element in American Humor", Explorations, p. 14.

23.
Ibid., p. 15.

24.
Stern, p. 48.

25.
Ibid., p. 111.

26.
Ibid., p. 158.

27.
Ibid., p. 159.

Chapter Six : Herzog

Schlemihls abound in Bellow's fiction, even in stories he chooses to translate and anthologize.[1] Bellow is concerned, throughout his literary development, with the diminished stature of the individual in everyone's perception but that man's own:

> It's obvious to everyone that the stature of characters in modern novels is smaller than it once was, and this diminution powerfully concerns those who value existence. I do not believe that the human capacity to feel or do can really have dwindled or that the quality of humanity has degenerated. I rather think that people appear smaller because society has become so immense.[2]

In other words, the diminution of the hero is only a matter of perspective, and the actual balance of a soul in ratio of social impact: but human aspiration has not appreciably altered.

Bellow's considerable achievement as a writer has been to portray, against the unquestionable dwarfing forces of modern society, the honest, often successful struggle of the individual striving to define himself as a man within a narrowing range of active possibilities. Naturally, any successful literary hero defies mere

classification as one or another character type; yet I hope it may help clarify the achievement of Bellow to discuss one of his protagonists, Herzog, as a character in the tradition of the schlemihl.

Unlike any of the works we have examined, Herzog includes a series of flashbacks, filling in the hero's childhood, and providing a sensuous, evocative description of his formative years. Benjamin III and Menaham Mendl are political and economic interpretations of the schlemihl, and their literary functions can best be described within a general objective analysis of their environment. But Moses Elkanah Herzog explores his very personal schlemihl psychology, spontaneously dipping into his childhood to help explain his responses as an adult. It behooves us to see what he finds.

His father, he candidly recalls, was an urbane Menahem-Mendl:

> In 1913 he bought a piece of land near Valleyfield, Quebec, and failed as a farmer. Then he came into town and failed as a baker; failed in the dry-goods business; failed as a jobber; failed as a sack manufacturer in the War, when no one else failed. He failed as a junk dealer. Then he became a marriage broker and failed - too short-tempered and blunt. And now he was fail-

> ing as a boot-legger, on the run from the Provincial Liquor Commission. Making a bit of a living. [3].

At the same time, this is the father, "a sacred being, a king". As for Herzog's mother, her role was to pamper and over-protect the children. The daughter must have piano lessons. And her precious Moses must grow up to be a great <u>hamden</u> - a rabbi. She pulled him on a sled, sacrificing her strength to her children. Moses, the Jewish immigrant child, was the traditional repository of parental dreams, overwhelmed by affection, "dear little Yingele", pampered even by the tyrannical Aunt Zipporah. Center of the universe, he experienced, as he tells us, "a wider range of human feelings than he had ever again been able to find". [4]. The boy is the focus of love, but the model of the failing father is an ominous warning of things that might lie ahead. Here, on the familial level, is the pattern we have previously discussed in its theological dimension: the Jew as the repository of God's Torah, His hope, living in the temporal world as one of a persecuted, ridiculous minority. The Jewish son, like Herzog, was introduced to this paradox by his own analogous personal experience. Elected to embody

all his parents' unfulfilled aspirations, he knows before he begins that he will never achieve them; his father's presence tells him so. Yet like the national idea of election, the warmth and love given to the child communicate a sense of importance, an idea of his own particular worth and a framework of meaning that are never entirely eradicated in spite of all subsequent challenges. Herzog writes his unfinished, unposted letters. He is nevertheless able to say: "I am Herzog. I have to be that man. There is no one else to do it." [5].

Albert Goldman, in an article to which we have previously referred, singles out the family relationship as crucial in establishing the basic psycho-dynamics of Jewish humor. The Jewish comic, or schlemihl, remains a boy-man, even when fully grown. Goldman traces this to four factors, the most important being "the Jewish mother's destructive domination, her demands for love and success from her son which are linked to her refusal to grant him the independence required for manhood". [6]. Recent American Jewish literature has left us sufficient testimony on this subject, in popular humor, How to be a Jewish mother, by Dan Greenberg, in

middlebrow fiction, A Mother's Kisses, by Bruce Jay Friedman, and in at least one stunning novelistic tour de force, Portnoy's Complaint, by Philip Roth.[7.] But the example of Herzog would lead us to temper this generalization somewhat, since it suggests that demands for love and success may be constructive as well as the opposite. Goldman emphasizes the uses of love as a means of domination, and the exaggerated expectations of success as a catalyst to failure, and brings supportive evidence from Lenny Bruce to Bruce Jay Friedman. Bellow is one of the very few American Jewish writers to consider and present another interpretation of the same observable phenomena: that love and those expectations explain why Herzog "characteristically, obstinately, defiantly, blindly but without sufficient courage or intelligence tried to be a marvelous Herzog, a Herzog who, perhaps clumsily, tried to live out marvelous qualities vaguely comprehended." [8.] The family situation, smothering the boy in more love than he would easily find again; endowing him with greater importance than his peers would concede him; placing him at the centre of a comprehended circle, whereas he would subsequently find himself floating around some ill-

defined circumference; all this blesses the child with a secure sense of self even as it bedevils his later abilities to "get along". Herzog is a "heart's hog",[9] attempting the marvelous, even as he makes an ironic, schlemihl's progress towards it; and for this his childhood is, as he knows, largely responsible.

* * *

Herzog's final self-acceptance has been attacked, and vehemently, as a "fatty sigh of middle-class intellectual contentment".[10] The resolution of the book has been assailed, even by friendly critics, as offering either too little or too much. Harold Fisch, writing on "The Hero as Jew" provides an illuminating contrast between Herzog and Bloom, between the cyclical movement of Ulysses and the linear, historical progression of Bellow's book. He concurs with the widespread acceptance of Herzog as "an attempt to reach beyond mere victim-literature to some more positive ground of hope" but finds that actually "Herzog does not go anywhere". "The book does not ultimately offer salvation, and in that sense it fails as a twentieth-century epistle from the Hebrews".[11] Theodore Solotaroff, by contrast, complains that the conclusion is too affirmative:

> The elegiac prose of the closing section is so naturally luminous and moving that one tends to overlook the fact that it is quietly burying most of the issues that earlier had been raised in connection with its relations to society. [12].

And in fact the general critical tendency has been to find fault with its ability to resolve at all: "Herzog is finally as arrogantly complacent in his new-found affirmative position...as Bellow dares to allow him to be".[13].

From the standpoint of schlemihl-literature, this criticism is entirely beside the point. First, insofar as the schlemihl is a comic hero, he is promised a "happy ending", if not in the normal sense, then at least in his own self-appraisal. Along the way we may expect the sacrifice of male initiative, pride, dignity and socio-economic achievement - and all of these expectations are fulfilled - but the conditions of the sacrificial game are such that at least one runner, a wisely-chastened, optimistic, self-acceptance, must reach base. When Herzog says (to the horror of critics), "I am pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy",[14]. he is within the same convention as virtually

all the figures we have previously discussed. In every conceivable empirical test the schlemihl may fail, but he never fails in his final self-acceptance; otherwise the whole premise of the loser-as-victor would be destroyed.

Then, too, criticism of Herzog's complacency does not seem to take into account the degree to which Herzog is an ironic hero, still in the schlemihl tradition. The ironic smugness is present, if we read carefully, in the very first sentence. The man who says "If I'm out of my mind, it's all right with me" already appears to be "pretty well satisfied to be just as it is willed." On the other hand, Herzog can go further in self-criticism than even the severest of his critics, and he is usually more unsparing, as well as wittier, in pointing up his own flaws. As he sits, for example, in the city courthouse:

> Herzog discovered that he had been sitting, legs elegantly crossed, the jagged oval rim of his hat pressed on his thigh, his striped jacket still buttoned and strained by his eager posture, that he had been watching all that happened with his look of intelligent composure, of charm and sympathy - like the old song, he thought, the one that goes, "There's flies on me, there's flies on you, but there ain't no flies on Jesus." A man who looked so

> fine and humane would be outside police jurisdiction, immune to lower forms of suffering and punishment.[15].

Herzog is under no prolongued illusion about his Christlike goodness. He recognizes that his sympathy is socially meaningless and morally fattening, and he mocks it. So too his multifaceted importance to the human race:

> The mirror of the gum machine revealed to Herzog now pale he was, unhealthy - wisps from his coat and wool scarf, his hat and brows, twisting and flaming outward in the overfull light and exposing the sphere of his face, the face of a man who was keeping up a front. Herzog smiled at this earlier avatar of his life, at Herzog the victim, Herzog the would-be lover, Herzog the man on whom the world depended for certain intellectual work, to change history, to influence the development of civilization. Several boxes of stale paper under his bed in Philadelphia were going to produce this very significant result. [16].

Or again, here is Moses as he sees himself in the frequent role of lover:

> And Herzog thought...is this really possible? Have all the traditions, passions, renunciations, virtues, gems, and masterpieces of Hebrew discipline and all the rest of it - rhetoric, a lot of it, but containing true facts - brought me to these untidy green sheets, and this rippled mattress? [17].

Surely Solotaroff is right when he says that irony here

"takes on the status of an ontological principle". Even the final affirmation follows a dialectic questioning that includes serious doubt: "But this intensity, doesn't it mean anything? Is it an idiot joy that makes this animal, the most peculiar animal of all, exclaim something? And he thinks this reaction a sign, a proof, of eternity?...." [18.] If Herzog does ultimately accept himself, he does so in the spirit of compromise.

The ending is typical of schlemihl conclusions in yet another way: the soul of the protagonist is its exclusive concern. We have previously hinted at a distinction between the saint (picaresque, among others) and the schlemihl as literary heroes, but here we have opportunity for further comparisons. The saint's moral values are seen in his concern for others and in his ability to affect attitudinal or substantive change. While he too, like our hero, risks being thought a fool, his grandeur is invariably recognized, perhaps posthumously, but without equivocation. Salvation for the schlemihl, to the contrary, is always partial and personal. He does not affirm the objective presence of goodness, but merely the right and the need to

believe in it as one component of the human personality. Herzog is always being exposed to social evils, yet always, self-admittedly, as a spectator whose concerns are his own feelings, his own psychic health, and his own conscience. It may be, as Norman Mailer has complained, that with Herzog, the reality of the novel has coagulated into mere moral earnestness.[19] This is the limitation of all schlemihl works, a seemingly inevitable characteristic of the genre. What once appeared in the novel as the individual's interaction with his society has now narrowed to a study of the individual's reaction to society. The modern novel of sensibilities does not appear to be a suitable medium for what Mailer calls "cutting a swath across the face of society", for society is present only insofar as it cuts a swath across the face of the protagonist.

Those who accuse the novel of burying most of the issues it has raised may be mistaking the context in which these issues were raised in the first place. The book is predicated on a certain ineluctable unsatisfactoriness in the environment. Had the novel presented serious possibilities for ameliorative social action, then Herzog's

reflective intelligence and his irony would have been a crime. But Herzog is neither judge, counsel, nor defendant. In the critical courtroom sequence he appears as simply one of the millions who must share his place in the city with a woman capable of beating her child to death. If Herzog's pain were the result solely of Madeleine's infidelity and Gersbach's deceit, the "problem of evil" might have seemed chimerical or paranoiac. Had Herzog's knowledge of evil come from his readings, it would have seemed abstract, intellectual. As observer in the courtroom, Herzog becomes a witness to horrors far greater than any he had personally experienced, and more deeply personalized than any of history or the weekly periodicals. He is exposed to life-size barbarians, his neighbours, in a brutal challenge to his apple-cheeked humanism.

> I fail to understand! thought Herzog,....but this is the difficulty with people who spend their lives in humane studies and therefore imagine once cruelty has been described in books it is ended. Of course he really knew better - understood that human beings would not live so as to be understood by the Herzogs. Why should they? 20 .

Having witnessed the trial, Herzog blindly stumbles away, into the path of a cripple whose "eyes, prominent, severe, still kept him standing, identifying him thoroughly, fully, deeply, as a fool. Again - silently - Thou fool!" The events of the sequence remind us of Nathaniel West,[21] except that Bellow takes pains to keep Herzog decidedly unsurrealistic. When he is finally alone, Herzog goes over what he has seen in his mind and tries to salvage some human meaning for the murdered boy. It is hardly accidental that the murder dramatized for Herzog is just the sort of murder from which no shred of meaning can be extracted, one which like Auschwitz stands outside the scope of rational thought. Herzog "experienced nothing but his own human feelings, in which he found nothing of use".[22] The only resolution he draws, and that, irrationally, is to protect his own child.

The courtroom drama is a "play within a play", exploring the subject's relation to what is basest in the modern world. These are horrors that cannot be categorized as economic ills, or results of unsatisfactory social pressures. Nothing can be gained for the murdered boy, no

symbolic assurance that the world will be better for his death, no religious murmurings, no personal revelations. Nothing is learned from the murder of this child or from the murders of millions of such children. Now Herzog is a kind, thoughtful humanist, and what is he to do with the anguish dumped on his doorstep? His response is not effective, merely affective. When his life touches the uncomfortable, he struggles to understand it. He does not, however, give up his life to it. The irony merely intensifies, as Herzog continues to worry about his soul (his soul!) on a trip through Hades. Herzog knows this is petty (petit) and knows also it is necessary because that is his function as a human being. "The strenghh of a man's virtue or spiritual capacity measured by his ordinary life".[23.]

Elsewhere Bellow has written: "We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it - the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it".[24.] And still in the same vein, in an article written concurrently with the last parts of Herzog, Bellow defines his own position as a writer:

> One last thing. Not too many people will disagree if the proposition is put as follows - either we want life to continue or we do not. If we don't want to continue, why write books? The wish for death is powerful and silent. It respects actions; it has no need of words.
>
> But if we answer yes, we do want it to continue, we are liable to be asked how. In what form shall life be justified? That is the essence of the moral question. We call a writer moral to the degree that his imagination indicates to us how we may answer naturally, without strained arguments, with a spontaneous, mysterious proof that has no need to argue with despair. [25].

Herzog is precisely such an attempt at proof.

* * * *

What sets Herzog apart from the characters previously discussed is his intelligence, and more particularly, his consciousness, including his awareness of himself as schlemihl. In Menahem-Mendl, Sholom Aleichem juxtaposes the life-styles of two characters for ironic effect, but here the protagonist juggles his own distinct levels of existence. Not only does Herzog elucidate his opinions and clarify his feelings, he is able, as an intellectual and a professor of history, to relate those opinions and feelings to the broader flow of Western thought. Thus we find Herzog

raising many of the questions we have raised about the role of the schlemihl:

> Oh, he had really been asking for it. Because he insisted on being the ingénu whose earnestness made his own heart flutter - zisse n'shamele, a sweet little soul, Tennie had called Moses. At forty, to earn such a banal reputation! His forehead grew wet. Such stupidity deserved harsher punishment - a sickness, a jail sentence....Still, extreme self-abuse was not really interesting to him, either...Not to be a fool might not be worth the difficult alternatives. Anyway, who was that non-fool? Was it the power-lover, who bent the public to his will... the organizational realist? Now wouldn't it be nice to be one? But Herzog worked under different orders - doing, he trusted, the work of the future. The revolutions of the twentieth century, the liberation of the masses by production, created private life but gave nothing to fill it with. This was where such as he came in. The progress of civilization - indeed, the survival of civilization - depended on the successes of Moses E. Herzog. [26].

Is the fool, then, escaping the responsibilities of adulthood by playing the loveable failure; or is the world of personal relationships in which Herzog loses his way the only world worth braving? If power-lover and innocent are indeed the alternatives, which is the lesser evil, which the worthier role?

Not the author, but the character, poses these

questions. Maynard Mack has written that comedy depends on our remaining outside, spectators, in a position from which we may notice the discrepancies between the facades of personalities as they present themselves, and these personalities as they actually are. "The point of view that ours must be continuous with in comedy is not the character's but the author's." [27]. Though true for the works of Cervantes and Fielding, also Mendele, Sholom Aleichem, and Bashevis Singer, this description does not fit Herzog. Bellow has deliberately - how deliberately only a careful study of syntax will reveal - written the entire book from the character's own point of view, allowing him to observe and note all the discrepancies, and thereby making him the conductor of humor. Because comedy does depend on discrepancies between surfaces and substances, Herzog is allowed at least two modes of observation: the letters, a direct means of externalizing his concerns; and indirect narration, also reflecting the protagonist's point of view, but permitting a wider inclusion of conversation and event. The rapid transition from one to the other sometimes accounts for the comic tone, as when Moses, fleeing from the sex-

priestess, Ramona, writes political kudos to Stevenson and Nehru while his unsteady thoughts hurtle him back and forth to and from his personal involvements. More often, within the indirect narration itself, Herzog reveals the self he admires side by side with the self he scorns:

> The house in Ludeyville was bought when Madeleine became pregnant. It seemed the ideal place to work out the problems Herzog had become involved with in The Phenomendogy of Mind - the importance of the "law of the heart" in Western traditions, the origins of moral sentimentalism and related matters, on which he had distinctly different ideas. He was going - he smiled secretly now, admitting it - to wrap the subject up, to pull the carpet from under all other scholars, show them what was what, stun them, expose their triviality once and for all. It was not simple vanity, but a sense of responsibility that was the underlying motive. That he would say for himself. He was a bien pensant type. He took seriously Heinrich Heine's belief that the words of Rousseau had turned into the bloody machine of Robespierre, that Kant and Fichte were deadlier than armies. He had a small foundation grant, and his twenty-thousand-dollar legacy from Father Herzog went into the country place. [28].

The irony of "It seemed" and "He was going" in the second and third sentences derives from the superimposition of Herzog's present knowledge of himself over past hopes. He mocks both his unfulfilled expectations, and the very substance of his ideas. The recognition that he is a "bien

pensant type" is like his perception, cited earlier, that he is like the old song "There's flies on me, there's flies on you, but there ain't no flies on Jesus". He is ironic about his would-be goodness, partly because he suspects it, and partly because it is so obviously ineffectual. Looking back on the ambitious scholar he was, he smiles at his boy-scout meritoriousness. And the final juxtaposition of his sources of income is the unkindest cut of all, the small foundation grant with the big legacy, the earnings of the great intellectual overshadowed by the rewards of the dutiful boy. Here the character, aware and amused by the dismal gap between "is" and "would have been" makes himself his own comic butt.

Herzog's internalization of irony sets him apart from Bloom, from whose saga his name alone is lifted: "Moses Herzog, of 13 Saint Kevin's parade, Woodquay Ward, Merchant"...[29]. In Ulysses, Joyce has placed in apposition "the persuasive surfaces of personalities as they see themselves, and these characters as they are", even when he seems to be offering a stream of consciousness. The very form of the mock epic imposes the shadow of his heroic predecessor over

a dwarfed Bloom. Joyce called his work Ulysses, but Herzog casts his own little light. Sometimes Bloom will joke - "come forth, Lazarus! And he came fifth and lost the job" - but more often the author's rhetoric, applied to the character in question, constitutes the joke. In Herzog, the protagonist is endowed with the complexity of mind and ironic vision that in Ulysses remain the prerogative of the author. The result is not an ironic exposure of life, but rather an ironic life, exposed.

Herzog is finally the character who lives according to a two-fold perception of himself in relation to the world, both giant and dwarf, alien and centre of the universe, failure and success, cockold and great lover, intellectual and schlemihl. The single reality of the naturalists is for him insufficient. To Sandor Himmelstein, the deformed lawyer, he protests:

> "And you think a fact is what's nasty".
> "Facts are nasty."
> "You think they're true because they're nasty". 30.

To James Hoffa, who shares this "angry single-mindedness" he considers saying: "What makes you think realism must be

brutal?" Herzog fights the Spenglers, the Wasteland rhetoricians, "The vision of mankind as a lot of cannibals, running in packs, gibbering, bewailing its own murders, pressing out the living world as dead excrement".[31.] He points out how corrupting is the effect of this mode of perception on both the individual and on society. Even as he is insisting on the need for the pumping heart, for "moral realities", he jibes at himself:

> Do not deceive yourself, dear Moses Elkanah,
> with childish jingles and Mother Goose.
> Hearts quaking with cheap and feeble charity or
> oozing potato love have not written history.

Time and again he makes fun of his search for love and belief in love as a female pursuit, which in the terms of this novel is no flattering attribute. Yet finally, when all is said and written, Herzog addresses himself seriously, if not earnestly, to his - and as he sees it, the world's situation: "We must get it out of our heads that this is a doomed time, that we are waiting for the end, and the rest of it, mere junk from fashionable magazines".[32.] The intellectual rejection of pessimism is ultimately coupled with a psychological readiness to

accept, even bless, the future. The ironic life accepts itself. "Anyway, can I pretend that I have made a choice?"

Because Herzog's irony is internalized, there is less than the usual ironic distance between author and character. This opens the book to charges of sentimentality, since modern literature and modern literary criticism are very much concerned with distances and masks, and we are frankly unaccustomed to committing our disbelief into the hands of a reliable narrator. In this work, the author's position or point of view is not noticeably different from the protagonist's. Herzog steers his pumping heart between the Scylla of Madeleine ("Feel? Don't give me that line of platitudes about feelings") and the Charybdis of Valentine, the false commercialized whirlpool of a heart. He controls the novel even when he is not yet in control of himself. Bellow has written a humanist novel, presenting one individual's life - a life by all standards a near-failure - which in its intelligence and energy commands our attention and affection. Herzog, a study of irony as a modern form of moral vision, is the more engagé because of Saul Bellow's minimal irony about his subject.

Footnotes for Chapter Six

1.
Saul Bellow, ed. Great Jewish Short Stories (New York, 1963). The volume includes at least ten schlemihl stories, among them Grace Paley's "Goodbye and Good Luck", Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" (in Bellow's translation), Philip Roth's "Epstein", Sholom Aleichem's "On Account of a Hat", and Bernard Malamud's "The Magic Barrel". Bellow is also the translator of Sholom Aleichem's "Eternal Life" in A Treasury of Yiddish Stories, ed. Howe and Greenberg (New York, 1953).

2.
Stanley J. Kunitz, ed. Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement (New York, 1955), p. 73.

3.
Saul Bellow, Herzog (New York, 1964), p. 137. All references are to this edition.

4.
Herzog, p. 140.

5.
Herzog, p. 67.

6.
Goldman, "Boy-man, Schlemihl", p. 8.

7.
Dan Greenberg, How To Be a Jewish Mother (New York, 1966); Bruce Jay Friedman, A Mother's Kisses (New York, 1964); Philip Roth, Portnoy's Complaint (New York, 1969).

8.
Herzog, p. 93.

9.
G.P. Elliot, "Hurtsog, Hairtsog, heart's hog?", Nation, Oct. 19, 1964, pp. 252-4.

10.
John W. Aldridge, "The Complacency of Herzog," Saul Bellow and the Critics, ed. Irving Malin (New York, 1967), p. 210.

11.
Harold Fisch, "The Hero as Jew: Reflections on Herzog", Judaism, XVII, 1 (Winter, 1968), p. 52.

12.
Theodore Solotaroff, "Napoleon Street and After", Commentary, XXXVIII (December, 1964), p. 66.

13.
Aldridge, op. cit., p. 210.

14.
Herzog, p. 340.

15.
Herzog, p. 230.

16.
Herzog, p. 104.

17.
Herzog, p. 170.

18.
Herzog, p. 340.

19.
Norman Mailer, "Modes and Mutations - Quick Comments on the Modern American Novel", Commentary, March, 1966, p. 39.

20.
Herzog, p. 238.

21.
See Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in The American Novel (New York, 1960), p. 464, for discussion of Miss Lonely-hearts as schlemihl-Everyman.

22.
Herzog, p. 240.

23.
Herzog, p. 106.

24.
Saul Bellow, Great Jewish Short Stories, intro., p. 16.

25.
Saul Bellow, "Writer as Moralist", Atlantic CCXI (March,1963), p. 62.

26.
Herzog, p. 125.

27.
Maynard Mack, "Joseph Andrews and Pamela", Fielding: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. R. Paulson(New Jersey,1962),p.57

28.
Herzog, pp. 119-120.

29.
James Joyce, Ulysses (New York, 1934), p. 287. See David Galloway, "Moses-Bloom-Herzog: Bellow's Everyman", The Southern Review, Winter, 1966, pp. 62 f. for the most thorough discussion of Herzog against the background of Ulysses.

30.
Herzog, p. 86.

31.
Herzog, p. 77. See also following reference.

32.
Herzog, p. 317.

Chapter Seven:

The Evolution of Arthur Fidelman

Among serious American writers - as opposed to those, like Leon Uris, whom Bellow has aptly called "arrangers" - there are those who deal with Jewishness as a sociological fact, and others who use "Jew" as symbol for a certain attitude towards and relation to existence. The first group, satirists most of them, describe the suburbs and the synagogues under the general impulse to "color them rhinestone". The rarer works of the symbolic kind, perhaps including no more than Bellow's The Victim and a growing proportion of Bernard Malamud's work, tend to study the isolated Jew, a man outside the community much as Jews have seemed to be outside the community of man. Malamud's Jewish characters are displaced loners - an American in Italy, an Easterner in the West, a German refugee in America - and though they often speak with a Yiddish intonation, or emerge out of an identifiably Jewish past, they bear little actual resemblance to the majority, or even to a majority of their American co-religionists. Malamud's failing shopkeepers and hungry boarders appear in modern fiction as a kind of anachronism; in the works

of his contemporaries, Philip Roth, Mordecai Richler, Wallace Markfield, such characters are already the subjects of nostalgia. But Malamud is obviously outside the realistic, time-bound tradition of literature, and does not give priority to the actual inter-connection of his figures with contemporary social reality. As Jonathan Baumbach observes,[1] Malamud belongs to what Richard Chase called the Tradition of the Romance in American Literature, the word romance signifying:

> besides the more obvious qualities of the picturesque and the heroic, an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness...to ignore the spectacle of man in society....[2]

Connecting Malamud with another literary tradition, Alfred Kazin says he draws from "the otherworldly feeling in the great Jewish writers of the past (which) was supported by a conviction that earth and heaven are connected".[3] Kazin goes so far as to complain that Malamud is a little too inclined to turn life into symbols, and wishes he would stay more firmly grounded in "solid reality".

The Jew is Malamud's symbolic man, and the schlemihl is his representative Jew. In Malamud's mythology, the schlemihl condition is explored not simply for its own intrinsic qualities, but as the clearest alternative to the still-dominant religion of success. "The Morris Bobers and S. Levins in Malamud's fictional world succeed as men only by virtue of their failures in society".[4] There is, of course, nothing new about the opposition to success in American fiction; characters from the pens of Henry James through James T. Farrell have reached the point of no return by climbing to the doom at the top. However, the modern authors, and Malamud especially, have approached the subject somewhat differently, by stating the case positively, for the failures, rather than negatively, against the successes. In Malamud's stories, the protagonist usually has the raw potential for becoming a schlemihl, the potential for suffering, for submitting to loss, pain, humiliation, for recognizing himself as, alas, only himself. This potential is sometimes realized, sometimes not. The hero of the novel, A New Life,[5] S. Levin, wins what the title promises because he takes burdens on himself, and

follows the bungling path of the loser. H. Levin, in a story called "Lady of the Lake",[6] changes his name and, as he hopes, his character, to Freeman, but ends as a slave to his own deception, embracing "only moonlit stone", the symbol of deception. The character courageous enough to accept his ignominy without being crushed by it is the true hero of Malamud's opus, while the man playing the Western hero, without admitting to his real identity - Jewish, fearful, suffering, loving, a-heroic - is the absolute loser.

Like Saul Bellow, Malamud's interest in the schlemihl hero springs from his conviction that man has not been diminished, he merely looks smaller in his swollen setting:

> I am quite tired of the colosally deceitful devaluation of man in this day; for whatever explanation: that life is cheap amid a prevalence of wars; or because we are drugged by totalitarian successes into a sneaking belief in their dehumanizing processes; or tricked beyond self-respect by the values of the creators of our own thing-ridden society;... or because having invented the means of his extinction,man values himself less for it and lives in daily dread that he will in a fit of passion, or pique, or absent-mindedness, achieve his end. Whatever the reason, his fall from grace in his eyes is betrayed in the words he has invented to describe himself as he is now:

> fragmented, abbreviated, other-directed, organizational, anonymous man, a victim, in the words that are used to describe him, of a kind of synechdochic irony, the part for the whole. The devaluation exists because he accepts it without protest.[7]

Of his task as a writer, Malamud said, "The defense of the human is the great thing. The great thing is to explicate life in order to defend it". In attempting to "defend", Malamud has taken the Yiddish cue by pleading for the lives of "idiots first", or if not of idiots, then of other hapless tenants of the universe whose poor humanity is their only redemptive feature. By handling his characters as he does, he is able to herald the successes of the loser, rather than as has more widely been the case, the failures of the success.

One Arthur Fidelman, a character who first appears in "The Last Mohican"[8] in the collection The Magic Barrel, 1958, and who continues to appear in Malamud's collections ever since, is the most provocative of his schlemihl characters to discuss within the framework of this paper. Fidelman is a schlemihl-in-progress, and though the last of him may not have been seen, the existing sketches are almost

equal to a fully conceived portrait.

Fidelman, as introduced to the reader in the opening sentence of his first story, is "a self-confessed failure as a painter".[9] A refugee from the Bronx, he has come to Italy on a carefully planned and budgeted trip in order to prepare a critical study of the artist, Giotto. At the outset, Fidelman wears ox-blood shoes, carries a bulky, old-fashioned suitcase which "embarrassed him slightly" and tries to keep himself aloof, uninvolved, dedicated to his scholarly pursuit. But Fidelman has the good fortune to meet his "Vergil", a moral guide in the form of Shimon Susskind, who is "a Jewish refugee from Israel, no less". [10] Malamud's image of the Jew obviously has little in common with the Israeli, who has become the anti-type of the Eastern European ghetto refugee. The author's selectivity is nowhere more apparent than in this deliberate distinction between the Jewish type that interests him ("I'm always running") and the Israeli heroism which does not ("the desert air makes me constipated".) Noteworthy, too, if we bear in mind the origins of the schlemihl-type, is the distance between Mendele's or Sholom Aleichem's

natural reliance on this type (because he was so characteristic of the culture's ironic suspension between hope and its opposite), and Malamud's careful selection of the schlemihl as a "comic correlative"[11.] to modern man's false image of himself. Susskinds were once the stuff of Eastern European Jewish life, but in contemporary Rome he is exotic, a last mohican; what was realism in the earlier works is almost sheer symbolism here.

In any event, this rare Susskind leads Fidelman to a true understanding of his own schlemihlhood, which is also the process whereby a man becomes a mentsch, as Hassan has so quotably put it. The unredeemed Fidelman's crime is his refusal to part with his suit. As he properly explains to the schnorrer, Susskind, "All I have is a change from the one you now see me wearing".[12.] Though Fidelman's crime is merely parsimony, and though he does give up five banknotes in his eagerness to rid himself of Susskind, the acts of withholding, and of giving only under duress, confirm that Fidelman is unsatisfactory in human responses. He is too measured, both in taking and in giving; he is even afraid of his passion for history: "The kind of excitement was all

right up to a point, perfect maybe for a creative artist, but less so for a critic. A critic, he thought, should live on beans".[13] Susskind takes it upon himself to be the visiting American's "guide".

Cruel to be kind, Susskind steals the budding scholar's opening chapter on Giotto, and as we later learn, consigns it to the flames. The disorientation Fidelman experiences after the loss of his chapter is the first hopeful sign of his development. His quest for the manuscript, orderly at first, then increasingly frantic, is accompanied by the disintegration of his former self. He cannot go on with the meticulous notetaking; he rearranges his studied schedule of travel, this time improvising; he frequents movie houses instead of museums, sees the prostitutes in the street, not merely those on canvas; and, eventually, tracking Susskind down, he is exposed to misery in a form and degree unknown to him before. Slowly, he learns.

The redemption, however, is not yet complete. After a visit to Susskind's room, a visit from which "he never fully recovered", Fidelman brings Susskind the suit

he has so consistently denied him. But Fidelman has yet to grasp the interconnection between life and art, the degree to which his actions as a human being are related to his work as an imaginative critic, because both reflect the quality of his soul. In return for the suit, Susskind returns the empty briefcase, revealing that its content, the chapter, has been destroyed. Enraged, Fidelman starts after the refugee:

> "Have mercy," cried Susskind, "I did you a favour."
> "I'll do you one and cut your throat".
> "The words were there but the spirit was missing." 14.

The pursuit stops abruptly when Fidelman "moved by all he had lately learned, had a triumphant insight.

"Susskind, come back", he shouted, half sobbing.... All is forgiven."

Vergilio Susskind has led Fidelman into the final humiliating perception, the failure of all he had previously aspired to as success. "The American ... grows morally as he is thwarted",[16.] indeed, grows morally because he is thwarted. At the end a poorer, more uncertain, more wretched Fidelman is capable, at last, of understanding Giotto.

It is the shared experience of failure and suffering that, in Malamud's world, permits the ordinary man to grow beyond his stencil-personality. By taking from Fidelman his suit and his mediocre chapter on Giotto, Susskind forces him into an awareness of what he, Fidelman, is really missing, any genuine communication with those around him. When Fidelman finally comes to understand the strange charity of his benefactor, he has attained a true compassion, and has moved into a completely new level of morality. The surface level where he starts out is the ordinary debit-credit ledger of an American abroad, willing to pay for services, but jealous of his time and privacy, ready to offer handouts, but nothing of himself. The process of metamorphosis plunges Fidelman into a Rome quite unlike the tourist Mecca, into Jewish Rome, the notorious ghetto, the cemetery with its memorials of Auschwitz. The morality into which he grows has to do with what people really give and take from one another, with the responsibility a man can come to feel for his fellow man far more profound - both exhilerating and dangerous - than normal

social intercourse. Fidelman, victimized, has arisen to "a new life".

The new Fidelman turns up in two stories of Malamud's second collection, Idiots First. His name and the facts of his biography are the same, a sister Bessie in the Bronx, some fifteen years his senior, still sends him money, and he still stretches it as far as it will go in Rome. But Fidelman has now returned to his earlier, once-discarded occupation as painter, and he is now "ever a sucker for strange beauty and all sorts of experiences."[16] No longer guarded and self-protective he freely lives out his schlemihlhood seeming to become more comically human as he submits to the heel of experience.

In his second story, "Still Life", Fidelman rents part of the studio of an Italian pittrice, Annmaria Oliovino, paying far more than he should for the privilege of loving her. Like Elka of "Gimpel the Fool", Annmaria takes every advantage of her admirer's affection, and like Gimpel, Fidelman knows no self-abasement too low, no cost too high for the chance of winning her. We are shown a shivering Fidelman, paying for heat he does not get; a naked Fidelman,

posing for his landlady and her would-be-lover, another artistic nonentity; Fidelman himself as lover, overeager and premature. The story's bizarre conclusion vindicates the protagonist who wins the lady and more: who brings her salvation. When Fidelman, after suffering unbearable humiliations, returns to the flat in a rented gown to paint his frenzied self-portrait (after Rembrandt), Annemarie mistakes him for a priest, and falls on her knees to confess. She pours out to the astonished Fidelman the story of a bastard child she had borne and thrown into the Tiber "fearful it was an idiot", adding the consequence of her uncle-lover's impotence. Her uncle had begged her to confess, else he would never again regain his manhood, but until that moment she had been blocked, and unable to speak of her sin. Fidelman in the role of father-confessor, is asked to demand a heavy penance, and in the tradition of coarse humor from priesthood to psychiatry, demands possession of her. This time, "pumping slowly, he nailed her to the cross",[17] a conquest for him, but also an act of purification.

The story's witty, ironic title, "Still Life", offers its own comment on the action: a schlemihl and a self-

confessed murderess, but still, life. Fidelman, not much less of a refugee than his mentor, Susskind, and with the same style of bestowing by taking, is now the figure of moral instruction. In part, the whole thing is a masquerade. He, the suffering Jewish lover, is mistaken for a priest by an egotistical and stupid sinner whom he has mistakenly painted as the madonna. The conclusion is less a direct confrontation than a fortunate coincidence of role needs, each party using an artistic mask as a means of entering into love. And yet the mingling of the sexual with the religious is only comic in part, in part it is sober and serious. The inversions of Christian symbolism are naturally intended as comic bathos, but, however funny, they also provoke our recognition that what used to be called love and salvation must now be referred to obliquely, through masks, those of the characters or those of the author.

Fidelman returns in "Naked Nude",[18.] enslaved this time not to his passions, but more literally, to the padrone of a brothel and his major domo, who keep their captive on as toilet cleaner and potential assistant in crime. The plan, briefly, is for Fidelman to produce a copy of Tiziano's

"Venus of Urbino", to switch the false copy for the original, and hold the masterpiece until payment of ransom by the insurance company. For his participation Fidelman is promised $350 and the return of his passport, or freedom. For his refusal, death. The hero works out his own system of integrity within the given frame of deceit, and tries to comply with the task. He is blocked for a long time, until one day all the painted and real women of his life happily converge in his imagination and he is able to paint a naked nude, his own revealed version, "falling in love with the one he painted." [19]. When the moment for the theft arrives, he prefers to make off with his own. "Everyone steals. We're all human", has been the motto of the master thieves. But though Fidelman concurs with this general principle, of art and of life, his own transmutation of originality is more precious to him than the original.

The stories of Fidelman become increasingly zany, keeping pace with the protagonist's experiments in painting and with the author's increasingly complex statements about living and creating, plot and style. Strangely enough, analyses of Fidelman have hitherto paid scant attention to

his profession, and to the obvious recurrent concern of all these stories with the artistic process. The key question is posed in the very first story, by that trustworthy guide, Susskind, who appears in a dream to ask, not, according to Tolstoy, "What is art?" but in the spirit of these stories, "Why is art?" The story's answer seems to be simple - art is because life is, and particularly because suffering is. So the scholar who fails to understand the suffering of a fellow being is incapable of understanding Giotto. Stated baldly, the point is so familiar it hardly warrants repetition, but of course the story does not baldly state the point at all. It creates Fidelman, whose movement from painting to criticism represented his initial withdrawal from the participatory arena to the spectator stands, and whose human adventure, really an adventure in being human, brings him back into the arena again. What complicates this apparently happy sequence is that in the beginning Fidelman was a self-confessed failure as a painter, and his artistic ability never seems to improve, no matter how genuine and intimate an understanding of life he gains. Like the Simple Man of the Bratzlaver's tale, his salvation will

not come through what he does, neither arts nor crafts, but through what he is able to be. Though Fidelman remains a painter, his art is only valuable as a guide and index to his actions and level of genuineness, but his many adventures of body and soul do not make him a better painter.

Malamud's insistence on Fidelman's limitations as an artist exceed the formula requirements that the schlemihl fail. These stories seem, in fact, to be examples of "Pull Down Vanity",[20] the vanity in question being the conceit of art. Malamud challenges nothing less than the last vestige of the hero myth in Western culture - the myth of the artist as the final embodiment of that noble quest for purity and truth, fearless of his independence, perfect in his moral radiance. Here the artist is a schlemihl; if he attains to any successes, they are markedly imperfect, the sort of ironic achievements that are teased out of the jaws of defeat. The artistic statement is faulty, sometimes a blind mistake, sometimes a theft. The artist is a fallible being to whom everything is dictated as it were, who is in every way bound, and who fashions his "own" creation not ex nihilo but as a compromise between all the givens -

the subjects, the materials, the prescribed circumstances of a moment in time. Art is the tool of life, not vice versa, and the artist paints to live, not the opposite. Malamud's saga of the artist is not a spoof of any one school of painting, nor of any particular approach to art, but a generalized portrait of the artist, drawn on the same scale as all other men, small and silly, but with recognizably human features, and involved in the recognizably human condition.

The most recent story in this series, "Pictures of Fidelman",[21] is less ordered, more frenetic than its predecessors, giving us the uncomfortable feeling that the schlemihl's time has run out, like a wound-up doll that is stumbling to a halt after a lengthy dance. The style of the story may also shed some light on Malamud's artistic intentions: he may be providing a brief history of post-Renaissance art in these tales of Fidelman, just as Joyce's "The Oxen of the Sun" episode in Ulysses traces the embryonic development of the English language in its depiction of the birth of a child. The first story's theme, know life before you pretend to know art, involves the under-

standing of Giotto, whose great innovation was to paint according to nature, existentially rather than as had been the custom, essentially. The second story, "Still Life", reflects a later period of artistic preoccupation: it concerns people painting people, the psychological interaction that informs portraiture and which produces keenly personalized work of both holy subjects and profane. With "Naked Nude", we seem to be in the late nineteenth century, when art was copying art, working with full consciousness, sometimes with ironic consciousness, of its relation to previous art history. "Pictures of Fidelman" is the modern stage of art, form free from content, represented literally by Fidelman's sculptures of empty holes. And at every level of this progression, the artist is the same schlemihl, working with different tools and within a different dramatic context.

As for the pictures of Fidelman, they are not true-to-life snapshots, but hurried impressions of the subject in various real and imagined poses. Fidelman does not seem appreciably different from his appearances in the earlier two stories, but the cost of this style of living

has risen so sharply that the gentle ironies have worn thin, to be replaced by harsher ones: "Fidelman pissing in muddy waters discovers water over his head".[22]. Language, imagery, and the hero, have lost the innocent richness of earlier episodes. The quick impression of Church art, as summarized by Fidelman, is a house of horrors:

> Lives of the Saints. S. Sebastian, arrow collector, swimming in bloody sewer. Pictured transfixed with arrows. S. Denis, decapitated. Pictured holding his head. S. Agatha, breasts shorn clean, running enflamed. Painted carrying both bloody breasts in white salver. S. Stephen, crowned with rocks. Shown stoned. S. Lucy tearing out eyes for suitor smitten by same. Portrayed bearing two-eyed omelet on dish...[23].

The artist's imagination runs amock, and scatological visions abound:

> Drawing. Flights of birds over dark woods, sparrows, finches, thrushes, white doves, martins, swallows, eagles. Birds with human faces crapping human on whom they crap.[24].

As though withdrawing completely from representational art will free him from his association with human life, Fidelman begins to dig perfect holes, travelling from place to place with his mobile exhibition. The holes are perhaps

graves, the death of expression and also of hope. One day an art afficionado, after paying out his last few lire to see the muddy exhibition, pleads for his money back, the admission fee having constituted the price of his childrens' bread. "Holes are of no use to me, my life being full of them", he entreats the sculptor, "so I beg you to return the lire that I may hasten to the baker's shop to buy the bread I was sent for."[25.] Fidelman, however, is coldly unsympathetic:"Tough titty if you can't comprehend Art...Fuck off now".

Fidelman's soul is in obvious danger, and, as in the opening story, Susskind makes his appearance as saviour. There, events are plotted realistically, and if certain images seem to rise to the level of symbols, they are still embedded in the actual events of the story. But by this point the lines between realism and symbolism have disappeared, as in the mind of one who can no longer accurately distinguish between fact and fancy. Susskind is Sussking, the reincarnated Christ, preaching the new gospel. "Tell the truth. Don't cheat. If its easy it don't mean its good. Be kind, specially to those that

they got less than you."[26.] Fidelman, in this frame, is naturally the guilt-ridden Judas who sells his redeemer for 39 pieces of silver and "runneth out to buy paints, brushes, canvas." [27.] The morality of the artist is a betrayal of the refugee's homey and human truths. This becomes still more explicit in the last "picture of Fidelman" in which he is "the painter in the cave", an artistic Plato, trying to capture the pure ideas in pure geometric designs. Susskind reappears in the cave of shadows as the source of light - a one hundred watt light bulb. The bulb is the Hebraic light giving out its moral message to the Hellenized painter, telling him to go upstairs to "say hello to your poor sister who hasn't seen you in years." Bessie, his surrogate mamma, is dying, and it would make her so happy to see her brother Arthur again. At first Fidelman insists on staying put and painting out his perfect truths on the walls of the cave, but eventually he gives up his "graven images" long enough to fulfil his obligation, to go upstairs and say his last goodbye. "Bessie died and rose to heaven, holding in her heart her brother's hello".[28.] The classic bedside leave-taking is

here presented in a comical, almost parodistic form, and yet once again the underlying seriousness of the occasion, and of Fidelman's decision, filters through. The story's closing line echoes a previous theme, "natura morta. Still life"; this time the Italian is counterpointed with the English - dead nature, still life. Though the interrelation of art and life is madly and comically complicated, like the bearing of death on life, and life on death, the actions and moral responses of the human individual are its major components. Abstract art is farthest from claiming Malamud's artistic allegiance, Rembrandt is closest. For all its stylistic modernity, the story insists that art becomes absurd when divorced from the little things that man does, and that the artist, even he, is not freed from the claims that people make on one another.

The artist dare not deal in Platonic purities, because he is a human animal, and there is someone dying in the room upstairs to whom he is accountable, and whose imperfections he shares. To live with the comic realization of human limitation, while striving to create the aesthetic verities in some eternal form, - that is the artistic equiv-

alent to the schlemihl's suspension between despair and hope. Between the house of horrors that opens the story - art like Francis Bacon's that lingers over the brutal and the grotesque - and the escape from reality, represented by the empty holes and geometric forms to which Fidelman turns for solace, lies the real task of art, the confrontation with Bessie. From her Fidelman first escaped to Rome, and it is to her, to the "too complicated" (repeated three times) past that she represents that he returns. But the prolonged unwillingness of Fidelman to leave his purities, and the tortured difficulties of the style, point strongly to the increasing difficulty of maintaining schlemihl-irony in the modern philosophic and literary context. In fact, this series of stories seems to sound the requiem for the schlemihl as a serious character in American fiction. A schlemihl hero demands unflinching adherence to the belief that the loser is winner, and that what a man gains by exposing himself to failure, loss, humiliation, is nothing less than his humanity, the most vital part of his being. In the sharpening polarizations of political and social allegiances of the late 1960's,

such ironic subtleties are suspect, and badly out of harmony with the temper of the times. The impossibility of sustaining a Fidelman during these past ten years is highly indicative, not merely of Malamud's struggle with this character, but of a wider rejection of "compromise" of any kind.

Any one of Malamud's heroes might have served as an illustration of his deep interest in this theme. Yakov Bok, for example, Yakov the he-goat, whose unjust imprisonment is the subject of 'The Fixer,'[29] is an even more sharply delineated study of the man whose progress towards inner freedom and compassionate humanism begins with his incarceration. Similarly, Frankie Alpine of The Assistant [30] is virtually initiated into the family of "human" men (in Malamud's mythology, Jews) by the three days of pain following his circumcision.

This study has limited its attention to the development of Arthur Fidelman, because Fidelman is a rare example of the schlemihl-theme applied to the artist, and because Malamud's recurrent focus on one character over a

period of years allows us to trace his evolution through a number of phases. The last phase seems to indicate that Malamud's ironic equations of social weakness with moral strength, imprisonment with psychic freedom, failure with soul's success, have begun to disintegrate. Perhaps the supply lines of the traditional faith-culture of Eastern European Jewry have been stretched too far in space and time, and there being too little relief from the immediate environment, the fight against despair has been lost.

Footnotes to Chapter Seven

1.
Johathan Baumbach, "The Economy of Love: The Novels of Bernard Malamud", Kenyon Review, XXV, 3, pp. 438-39.

2.
Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York, 1957), p. ix.

3.
Alfred Kazin, Contemporaries (Boston, 1962), p. 206.

4.
Sidney Richman, Bernard Malamud (New York, 1966), p. 23.

5.
Bernard Malamud, A New Life (New York, 1961).

6.
Bernard Malamud, "The Lady of the Lake", The Magic Barrel (New York, 1958), pp. 105-133.

7.
Granville Hicks, "His Hopes on the Human Heart", Saturday Review, October 12, 1963, p. 32.

8.
Bernard Malamud, "The Last Mohican" The Magic Barrel (New York, 1958), pp. 155-182.

9.
Ibid., p. 155

10.
Ibid., p. 158.

11.
Mark Goldman, "Bernard Malamud's Comic Vision and the Theme of Identity", Critique, VII, 2 (Winter, 1964-65), p. 103.

12.
"The Last Mohican", p. 159.

13.
Ibid., p. 162.

14.
Ibid., p. 182.

15.
Robert Alter, "Out of the Trap", Midstream (December,1963), p. 90.

16.
Bernard Malamud, "Still Life", Idiots First (New York, 1963), p. 32.

17.
Ibid., 54.

18.
Bernard Malamud, "Naked Nude", Idiots First (New York, 1963), pp. 106-127.

19.
Ibid., p. 123.

20.
Leslie Fiedler, Pull Down Vanity (Philadelphia, 1962). The title story pulls down the vanity of a professor of creative writing, and is thematically similar to Malamud's last Fidelman story.

21.
Bernard Malamud, "Pictures of Fidelman", The Atlantic (December, 1968), pp. 63-70.

22.
Ibid., p. 63.

23.
Ibid., p. 63.

24.
Ibid., p. 64.

25.
Ibid., p. 65.

26.
Ibid., p. 66.

27.
Ibid., p. 68.

28.
Ibid., p. 70.

29.
Bernard Malamud, The Fixer (New York, 1966).

30.
Bernard Malamud, The Assistant (New York, 1957).

Chapter Eight:

Requiem for the Schlemihl

Clearly, the schlemihl as we have defined him, is not a hero for all seasons. The fool may be one of the most universal characters of folklore and fiction, but in formal literature he remains unusual as a protagonist; he is familiar only as a comic relief, a servant of the hero and of the action. Whenever the fool is made the hero, the usual standards of society are being ironically inverted, since he is by definition the deficient one in terms of normal social judgment. The schlemihl becomes the hero only when all else fails, and remains a hero only as long as active alternatives are lacking. As this paper has attempted to show, he is an ironic hero, unsuited to either a purely tragic or purely comic, that is, optimistic, interpretation of life.

During the post war period, and particularly in the 1950's, when Americans had begun to feel that the new frontiers were now only rhetorical, and that the American dream could never be realized unless bulldozers or the apocalypse were to raze all that the dream had heretofore

created, the schlemihl pose was a highly attractive one. The objective situation was bleak, yet the habit of dreaming and hoping persisted. But there are signs to suggest that the "American mood" is shifting; the polarization of left and right in politics, the movement of black power, the militancy of campus youth, suggest that a majority of Americans may be identifying with active positions, seeking power, and hence rejecting the schlémihl's worldly-wise resignation.

More significantly, for our purposes of literary analysis, this is happening in literature as well. A recent autobiographical novel by Norman Podhoretz, who stands in the same American Jewish line as the writers we have been discussing, is called Making It. Mr. Podhoretz opens with the following challenge:

> Let me introduce myself: I am a man who at the precocious age of thirty five experienced an astonishing revelation: it is better to be a success than a failure. [1].

In defending this thesis, the book calls into doubt the psychological underpinnings of all counter theories: the schlemihl emerges as a poor deluded fellow who has fallen

prey to the vicious lie of the American establishment which suggests that ambition is somehow nasty and that success necessarily corrupts the soul. Podhoretz describes how he learns to live with his ambition, to enjoy the fruits of his success. By acquiescing to the myth that failure is success, instead of trying for the real victory, the schlemihl is a dupe of the capitalist system.

A second kind of challenge comes from a work like Mordecai Richler's Cocksure,[2] which makes the claim that since Jewishness and Jewish culture have become so prevalent only a gentile is today able to experience himself as outsider. Success, the book maintains, has ruined the traditional Jewish postures of marginality and irony from which archetypes like the schlemihl derive. The work, and others like it, imply that Jews have in fact come to the same conclusion as Podhoretz, but have not yet realized that the old poses are outworn.

Both these works are indications that though schlemihl-literature may have a continuing revelance as literature, it is no longer as immediately representative of American Jewish thinking, as it was between 1950 and 1965.

Activism, the current mood, dismisses the schlemihl. Single-minded dedication to a particular position cannot tolerate a character whose dualistic perception of reality will never allow him to accept the dogma of either faith or nihilism, either of a Messianic movement like Marxism, or a fatalistic approach like that of the Black extremists (It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees). There was an Eastern European Rabbi who wore a coat with contradictory quotations sewn into each of his pockets. On one side the quotation read: "The world was created for your sake"; on the other; "You are but dust and ashes". Out of the ability to sustain this paradoxical position, from the ability to wear such a coat, the irony of Eastern European Jewry grew. But the lifeblood of irony coagulates when a society becomes either wholly optimistic or wholly pessimistic about human potential and God's.

The moment of irony in American life seems to have passed, but during the decade or so of its dominance, it produced several works of distinction. These evolved

out of an older Eastern European tradition, but were so transformed and rerooted, that they will probably remain a permanent part of the American cultural heritage.

Footnotes to Chapter Eight

1.
Norman Podhoretz, Making It (New York, 1967), p. ix.

2.
Mordecai Richler, Cocksure (Toronto-Montreal, 1968).

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