

A. M. KLEIN'S FORGOTTEN PLAY

G. K. Fischer

A. M. KLEIN has always been a writer with a mission; and students of his work know that one of its salient features is found in his effort to wake in the Canadian reader a sympathetic understanding of the world of the *Shtetl* of Eastern Europe which lives on in the memory and basic attitudes of Yiddish immigrants. His writings attest to his desire to transmit, to recreate, to interpret the traditions which his parents brought from the provincial towns of Poland, traditions which he views with scholarly and compassionate eyes, with the intellect of an educated Canadian, and with the insight of a Jew who recognizes in fading customs and half-forgotten legends the eternal verities which once gave rise to them.

Among the works which show most clearly Klein's determination to instil new vitality into Yiddish folklore is a short verse play, *Hershel of Ostropol*. It is an interesting play but, at present, quite unknown, unlisted in most bibliographies, unmentioned in critical essays on Klein's work, completely forgotten, it seems, even by his most devoted readers. There are at least two reasons for this neglect. First, there is the date of publication. The play was printed in *The Canadian Jewish Chronicle* in March and in September 1939, at a time when Canadians, particularly Jewish Canadians, had more pressing problems on their minds. Secondly, the manner of publication almost guaranteed that any impact the play might have made should be lost. Act One appeared in March; Acts Two and Three appeared more than five months later.¹ To my knowledge, there has been no performance of the play. It is not of the kind that might fit easily into the repertoire of a modern stage, even in an *avant garde* coffee house. In character it is reminiscent of the drama of John Heywood and Nicholas Udall.

There is about it some of the naïveté of these early sixteenth-century writers, but there appears to be more depth in its ultimate intent.

The metre used by Klein is, in part, strongly Chaucerian and was chosen, probably, because the theme contains elements of a marriage debate. Like Chaucer, Klein also makes use in his verse of the proverb, the familiar saying.² Klein has a formidable knowledge of English literature, but most of it was acquired through independent study, and it may be of interest here to note that one of the two formal courses in English he took as an undergraduate at McGill was on Chaucer, given by Professor G. W. Latham.³ We find echoes of Chaucer in other of Klein's early writings, for instance, in the short story "The Parliament of Fowls";⁴ but it is here, in some of the dialogue of *Hershel of Ostropol*, that Chaucer's influence seems to have had its most fructifying effect.

The technique of the play is rooted in early English literature, but the setting and theme are those of the Yiddish *Shtetl* and, more particularly, of the Chassidic world. As the play opens, we find ourselves in a house of worship. It belongs to a famous Tsaddik, the Rabbi Boruch of Miedzboz. A considerable literature concerned with Chassidic philosophy and sociology is available in English, and much has been written about the rôle of the Chassidic leaders, the Tsaddiks, many of whom were descendants of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement, and of his disciples.⁵ The Tsaddik's task was to hear the complaints of the people, to offer them advice and comfort. Through meditation and prayer and love of God and man he was to reach the "level" of an intermediary between God and ordinary human beings. He did not perform miracles, but his followers believed that he could, and, in any case, that his blessings had special powers. There were Tsaddikim who were learned and honest and wise, and whose reputation reached far beyond the *Shtetl* in which they lived. There were many who were ignoramuses, pompous and parasitical.

The historical Rabbi Boruch was a Tsaddik of indifferent reputation. According to Nathan Ausubel,⁶ he reigned as the hereditary Tsaddik of Miedziboz between 1770 and 1810, a vain, self-indulgent nonentity, given to melancholia. Trying to ape the Polish nobility, he decided to acquire a jester and engaged for this purpose the down-at-the-heels Hershel from Balta in the Ukraine, a man who, having had no opportunity to learn a trade, had learned to live by his wits. Ausubel describes him as "endowed with an unusual capacity for self-irony, a rueful comicality in facing disaster, and a philosophy of disenchantment unmarred by a shred of defeatism. . . . He was an impish, likable *schimazl* whose misfortunes did not, by any means, arise from his own personal character weak-

nesses but rather from the topsy-turvy world he lived in." Hershel Ostropoljer used to tell droll stories about himself, and became the Tyl Eulenspiegel, the Nasreddin of Yiddish folklore. As such he is both the prankster who will outwit his host and get away with a free drink, and the wise fool who, according to tradition, can boast greater learning than his pretentious employer. Such is the historical and folkloric background of Klein's play.

In 1927, a tragi-comedy, *Hershele Ostropoljer* by Iacob Botoschansky, was published in Yiddish prose. In Botoschansky's play, the character of Hershel follows closely the traditional pattern. The *schlimazl* aspect is strongly emphasized. In his preface, Botoschansky describes Hershele as a man who never attains: when he reaches for bread, it never reaches his mouth. His Hershele meets his end when he says something so outrageous to his employer, Reb Baruch'l (what it is we never find out), that Baruch'l's followers push him down a flight of stairs. Hershele reflects bitterly: he has never reached the summit, and yet he dies from falling down. But the *schlimazl* motif does not eliminate that of the imperturbable jester, and here Botoschansky's Hershele has retained all the earthy, naïve humour of the folktale. In the end, though mortally injured, he continues in his usual vein, and in his last moments looks forward to being a jester in Heaven, where he hopes to eat wild ox and Leviathan and to drink wine.

KLEIN'S PLAY broadly follows the tradition. The emphasis on the *schlimazl* motif is retained, and so are some of the traditional, naïve jokes. But Klein's Hershel emerges much refined. His wit, upon occasion, is more subtle than in earlier versions. He is endowed with a more sparkling personality. But most of all, Klein's Hershel appears ennobled because Klein is able to convey more clearly the philosophical essence that underlies Hershel's familiar traits.

As the curtain rises, we find the followers of Reb Baruch'l engrossed in conversation. It is night. The candles flicker. The atmosphere is one of mystery. We have entered a place of learning and piety, of worship and study. This is the house of Reb Baruch'l. His Gabbai (warden) admonishes the Chassidim not to disturb their rabbi who has retired to his chamber to meditate. Needless to say, Klein's Reb Baruch'l differs greatly from his historical antecedent. He too is a wealthy man and plagued by melancholia. But while the historical Boruch, according to Ausubel, was ignorant and pretentious, Reb Baruch'l in *Hershel of Ostropol* is a man who studies day and night, reads Kabala, reaches out toward

the spirits of angels and the Baal Shem Tov, and obviously enjoys great love and respect among his employees and his guests. This is how he is described:

Shamash: The whole world knows
 He lacks not worldly goods. His coach is drawn
 By chargers champing golden bits. Upon
 His throne he sits, and at his thumb's behest
 Servants trot forth in most obsequious haste
 To bring him delicates, or hot or cold.
 His spoon is silver and his plate is gold.
 His shtreimel is of samite, trimmed with fur;
 And for his caftan, pious silkworms were
 Industrious in the sun; and sheep were fleeced⁹
 To make a girdle for God's worthiest priest.
 (Lyrical) White are his stockings, and his slippers red,
 Broidered and buckled: flowers near his bed!
 The rebbe's holy slippers, holy beyond surmise —

Chassid 2: They could themselves mount up to Paradise!

Chassid 1: Yet on his brow, beneath phylacteries
 Sits sorrow in a wrinkle, gloom in a crease!

The unfortunate Reb Baruch'l has fallen into deep despondency. We hear that Hershel from Ostropol,¹⁰ a famous man reputed to be a doctor, has been summoned to help him. Hershel, it is rumoured, uses "most curious therapeutics." He makes people laugh. He can

With jokes, pranks, larks, puns, riddles cure
 The constipated rich and starving poor.

The Chassidim, worried as they are about the health of their Tsaddik, are yet full of hope. Hershel is a "gift from Heaven" or, as one Chassid puts it, a "pill apothecaried by the Lord." Suddenly, while they are still debating the "bright spell" Hershel is likely to cast upon the rabbi, Hershel himself appears. He comes in, climbing through the window.

Cantor: Whence did you come?

Hershel: The window!

Cantor: *Wherefore?*

Hershel: Cantor

The same way I depart, I always enter.

This remark concerning his manner of entry is noteworthy. It gives us a clue to Hershel's nature. One may recall a scene in Goethe's *Faust*. Mephistopheles, who, in the shape of a poodle, has entered Faust's study, cannot leave it because

of a magic sign that is drawn in front of the door. Faust asks him why he doesn't use the window. Mephistopheles answers:

... 't is a law of devils and phantoms
Where they slipped in, there they have to leave.¹¹

Hershel, in his reply to the cantor, reverses the old superstition concerning demons and phantoms. This may merely be an example of his wit; it proves him a rather sophisticated joker. But it may also suggest much more. This, perhaps, is Klein's way to indicate that Hershel is not to be considered an ordinary human being, that he is, indeed, an essence, a spirit. There is a good deal of impishness in the lines immediately following his entry. He takes acid pleasure in baiting the Cantor for not having recognized him at once and flaunts a stick which, he declares, is a magic wand that discloses every foible of those whom his soul spurns. Again, this may be just a jester's way to amuse his audience. But it could also be the words of a spirit revealing his character. Klein did not insist on this interpretation of Hershel. There are no more references to the supernatural. But the suggestion, ambiguous as it is, remains in our consciousness, and when we look at the play as a whole, it seems to strengthen the impression that Hershel's main significance is to be found on the symbolist level, that Klein's Hershel is a personification rather than a person. He is, by the way, by no means a Mephistopheles. He has all but lost his traditional propensity to playing tricks on people. He may brag of his tricks,¹² but we don't witness them. Whatever influence he attempts to wield over others, for all his impish talk, is entirely benevolent, and over his own destiny he holds no sway at all. While Mephisto (in Marlowe as well as in Goethe) is able to conjure various goodies, Hershel, in the traditional folktale, has to use his wits to scrounge food and wine, and in Klein's play he is content to rummage for bread, herring, and liquor.

Hershel's politics are those of the oppressed Jew, his philosophy that of the Chassid *par excellence*. He enumerates wrongs that have been done to Israel and catalogues various oppressors. He can be bitter:

Sport have we been for them, lugubrious sport,
Jesters who had a continent for court. . . .
Performing sorry antics for the scum
That giggled at the gags of martyrdom . . .

But Hershel reproaches the Chassidim for their despondency: "Too long has Israel been three-quarters tears." Moaning is no remedy:

An end! No more! Never let melancholy
 Again perch on our brows, and caw our folly!
 Never let tears again give solace to
 The heathen gloating over the glum Jew. . . .
 The cantor, there, well may he look askance,
 Clutching his tallis,¹³ hitching up his pants,
 Preparing to show off his well-combed voice,
 Fearing that my song be the Jewry's choice,
 For singing is my livelihood; my song
 Gathers the jubilant and jocund throng.

What Hershel is preaching is Chassidic doctrine. To experience joy, to be grateful for life, for consciousness, is the duty of human beings. "Through joy the spirit becomes settled, but through sadness it goes into exile," is a saying of the great Chassidic teacher, Rabbi Nachman.¹⁴ According to the Baal Shem Tov, "Joy alone is true service of God."¹⁵

The Chassidim's enthusiasm is soon kindled by Hershel's speech. Their gloom gradually evaporates. They begin to sing. They are looking forward now to the days of the Messiah when the Tsarist conscription will cease, when all foes and apostates will perish, including the hated Reb Shneyer Zalman, a rival of their beloved Reb Baruch'l. Zalman, we already heard in previous conversation, is an ignoramus, a son of Belial who would "Barter the law / for goatskin on which it is written" and who has the audacity to come into Reb Baruch'l's domain to preach his false doctrine. The Gabbai's hatred of Reb Shneyer Zalman is profound and unyielding. But Hershel checks him:

No!
 Even to him, to that wretch, we will throw
 Not meat from the wild ox, nor heavenly bran
 But maybe a fishbone of leviathan.
 Then when Messiah will come
 On holy land we'll pray,
 And all our foes, their tails between
 Their legs, will slink away.

He is without malice; he doesn't want to see anyone perish; and the Chassidim remark to each other how Hershel has already changed the atmosphere.

In the following passage, more is revealed of Hershel's character. His clothes are elegant in front where he must see them, but the back of his coat is patched. He brags of his many exploits and successes. As the greatest of jesters, he was

made mayor of Chelm (a city proverbially inhabited by fools — the Jewish Abdera). He has seen the world. Once he came to a country so cold

Even the sun was frozen and the stars
Were frost upon God's window panes, . . .

But trust Hershel: one "good breathless swig" out of his bottle, and he was warmed.

A new character arrives: Reb Chaikal Chakran who, according to the Shamash,

. grows fat
On metaphysics, gets a double chin
From skim-philosophy, and pads his skin
With *ologies* interred and *isms* dead.
Science — is herring that he eats with bread,
And for dessert, truisms

The conversation, very brisk and amusing at this point, turns to marriage. Hershel has no wife; but oh! his eyes once apprized the most perfect of maidens:

Hershel: . . . Her brilliance spoiled my eyes for others; she
Proved sweet Queen Esther a monstrosity;
Judith a hag; Bathsheba ugly bones;
The Shumanite cold meat, and Solomon's
Nine hundred concubines, nine hundred witches.

Chassid: You saw her in a dream.

Hershel: This full palm itches
To wake you out of yours! A dream!

Chassid: It was
Indeed a maid with arms, legs, bosom, face
And other items feminine?

Hershel: Indeed,
For her a rabbi would abjure his creed,
She was so beautiful! Her lips are two
Rose petals upon cream. Her eyes were blue,
Blue as the sky upon a clear cool day
And down her neck and on her shoulders lay
Two flaxen braids making the fair more fair.
O bind me, bind me halter of such hair! . . .
Had God
Created man from flowers, and not from sod
She would be as she is; lilies each cheek,
Her mouth a rose that sings when it should speak,
Her eyes forget-me-nots.

Thus he proceeds. The girl is a paragon among women; but, alas, she does not care for him. When he spoke to her, she turned her head away.

Coy as a bird, as pure as a white flower,
As fresh as dewdrops at the sunrise hour
Modest as violets.

Hershel's audience gets more and more animated until Reb Baruch'l issues from his study, furious at the disturbance; but Hershel soon succeeds in dispelling the thunder clouds and the Chassidim bless him for making their rabbi smile.

Meanwhile, someone has arrived to speak with Rabbi Baruch'l on business. It is Reb Sendor, a wealthy man, with his daughter, Naomi. Apparently, one of the hated Shneyer Zalman's men wishes to marry the girl, and it is rumoured that Zalman himself is behind the scheme. He hopes that a marriage between children from these rival factions will restore peace among the Chassidim. Reb Baruch'l's permission is sought so that the wedding may take place. As might be expected, the beautiful Naomi is none other than the girl with whom Hershel is in love.

Nothing can be done to avert the impending catastrophe. Reb Baruch'l gives his consent for the sake of peace and looks forward to the ceremony. He himself will intone the liturgy and Rabbi Shneyer Zalman will bless the bridegroom and the bride. Hershel is in despair:

Give
This gem some uncouth fool? Some unweaned calf
This flower to lip? Indeed, it is to laugh!
The Rebbe calls it triumph. Ignominy
Were a much better word.

But Hershel knows that there is no help, and, true to his essential self, he decides to be a jester at Naomi's wedding. As Act One closes, Hershel reminds one of Pagliacci, the laughing clown who performs his antics while his heart is breaking; but this resemblance is temporary and superficial. There are, as one realizes in the end, fundamental differences between Pagliacci and Hershel of Ostropol.

The second act begins amidst great bustle: the Chassidim are preparing for the wedding. The musicians are trying out their instruments; guests, in their finery, are already arriving, and beggars mingle with the crowd. Hershel prepares to get drunk and, waxing lyrical about the food, makes himself a nuisance to the cooks. But the Gabbai, gloomy as ever, has a secret word with Reb

Baruch'l. Something in the air speaks no good. All sorts of omens have predicted disaster: a prayer-book fell from his hand; the cat washed his chest although no guests were expected at his home.¹⁶ The rabbi rebukes him for his heathenry. But a few minutes later, while the guests are listening to Hershel's drolleries, a messenger arrives and announces that fire has swept away Reb Sendor's mill. Naomi's dowry is destroyed. Not long after, amidst general lamentations, the Cantor discovers that the bridegroom is missing; seeing the dowry gone, he decided to bolt. Zalman's men, the groom's relatives, cough and rise and sneak away; the bride faints; Reb Baruch'l, his melancholy darkening, threatens to die of the disgrace. Chaikal finds him in such distress and so confused: "One would think him the bride so cheaply used." There is great outcry. What is to be done? How can this humiliation ever be washed away? Well, the remedy is, of course, at hand. The Chassidim adjourn to discuss how another bridegroom is to be found for Naomi. Hershel, jubilant, orders the musicians to play the wedding march, and while the others are still worrying and debating, he walks toward the bride, admonishing her to dry her tears lest they should spoil the starch in her veil.

The third act has two scenes. The first is pure farce. When the curtain rises, Hershel staggers onto the stage and sings vigorously. He is horribly drunk, and with good reason too. His beautiful Naomi, this paragon among women whom he so chivalrously wedded, has turned out to be a dragon, an unmitigated shrew. Klein here follows the folktale in which Hershel's wife, scarcely less illustrious than her husband, is known as a woman with a shrewish disposition. Botoschansky too followed this tradition, but in his play, Hershele and his spouse, Gnendel, are already married at the beginning.

Hershel's boon-companion, Chaikal, has accompanied him home. While they are talking in front of the house, Naomi appears on the balcony.

Chaikal: Quit verse. You're home!

Hershel: And now no crescent, no slim moon! Behold
Over the balcony a full moon. Cold
And wan it stares at me. It gloats. It walks
Across the sky. It stops.

Naomi: Hershel!

Chaikal: It talks!

Hershel: My spouse, my dove. The moon has soured.

Naomi: Sot!

Hershel: Alas, precisely that which I am not!
I shall not answer.

Naomi: Husband, drunken scum
 Are you below? Speak, or God strike you dumb!
 Hershel: I'm here!
 Naomi: You're there! You need not tell
 Me that as long as beer stinks and I smell.

She chases Chaikal away offering to throw a flower pot at him and then continues to berate poor Hershel who, in vain, tries to humour her. He pleads, he cajoles:

 And as for our six brats, why fret and foam?
 Do they not prove that I am sometimes home?

He promises to be a good husband, to teach the children, to give her all the money he earns. But it is no use. His overtures are answered with derision. All he wants is peace, to drown his sorrow with a flask. He is weary. He would like to rest a while. Naomi accuses him of always raising contention and orders him upstairs. When he does not obey, she pours a pail of cold water over him.

In Scene 2 we find Hershel in bed surrounded with a veritable apothecary's store of boxes, bottles and flasks. The cold shower has done him no good; he has caught a cold. Naomi, now miraculously transformed and much to the astonishment of her son, speaks softly to him and tells the rest of the children to be quiet. The Cantor and the Gabbai, who have always been rather inimical to Hershel, now come to his bedside. Hershel, who expects to die, indulges in macabre jokes. Here, Klein keeps quite close to tradition. We find some of the familiar witticisms. Hershel, for instance, asks the Gabbai to see to it that, when they wash his corpse, no one touches his arm pits. He is ticklish there. This anecdote is included in Ausubel's *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*. When Naomi comes to Hershel's bedside, he asks her to dress in Sabbath clothes so that the Angel of Death, finding her handsomer than himself, may take her. This joke, somewhat more elaborated, occurs also in Botoschansky's play. When all are gathered around his bed, Hershel bequeathes his belongings, still joking. At last, his mood changes, and, as in a delirium, he imagines himself once more a bridegroom. In his greatest extremity, he remembers the happiest day of his life, the wine, the music, the dance, and all the guests wishing him well. And as his thoughts turn to heaven, he is confident that there too he will continue, a jester.

THUS ENDS Klein's *Hershel of Ostropol*. I Pagliacci goes on laughing while his heart breaks; but Hershel's heart is not breaking. He is not

showing the world a mask which hides secret suffering. Hershel is the man who, within himself, genuinely overcomes disaster. Even within his most secret self, he is able to smile at adversity. He directs his eyes toward the bright side; he enjoys what is enjoyable; he wrests from life whatever good it has to offer. He is the eternal optimist whose confidence is unshakeable. His last thoughts, as they appear in Klein's play, reflect an attitude which is deeply anchored in Jewish thinking, particularly in Chassidic philosophy.

But the spirit which is capable of focusing its attention on happy circumstances, no matter how remote, and capable of indomitable trust in a future Good, no matter how bitter the present, is not confined to Judaism. It is a universal human trait, part of the sustaining power of the Life-force itself. It can manifest itself anywhere. It appeared, in especially pronounced form, in pioneering North America and later remained part of the magnetism of its rough and ugly towns. *Hershel of Ostropol* crystallizes ingredients that are very much part of the culture of this continent. Without this zest and trust, the prairies of Canada would not have been turned into the "rug of thick and golden thread" of which Klein speaks in his poem "Grain Elevator." There is a passage in Sinclair Ross's novel, *As for Me and My House*, where the heroine describes the "poor tumbledown, shabby little towns" that sprang up across the width of the land, parched settlements where year after year the crops withered in the drought. She remembers a town "where once it rained all June, and that fall the grain lay in piles outside full granaries. It's an old town now," she says, "shabby and decrepit like the others, but it too persists. It knows only two years: the year it rained all June, and next year."¹⁷ This town's way is the way of life, of survival. It will overcome. It is in places like this that the essential Hershel of Ostropol is at home.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ A. M. Klein, *Hershel of Ostropol*, *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, XXVI (March 31, 1939), 19-27; XXVII (September 13, 1939), 19-26.
- ² E.g., "... never show a fool unfinished work." *Hershel of Ostropol*, (March), p. 21. This is a saying widely used in Central Europe. Cf. German: Einem Narren darf man kein ungebrautes Haus zeigen. (One must not show a fool a house before it is built.)
- ³ Eliah Ezekiel Palnick, *A. M. Klein; a Biographical Study* (Thesis), Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati, Ohio), 1959, I.
- ⁴ A. M. Klein, "The Parliament of Fowls," *McGilliad*, II (November 1930), 9-11.
- ⁵ An excellent brief survey may be found in Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People; the Jewish Little-Town of Eastern Europe*, pref. Margaret Mead (New York, 1952).

- ⁶ Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, (New York), 1948), pp. 286-7.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Jacob Botoschansky, *Hershele Ostropoljer* (Buenos Aires, 1927). I am indebted to Mrs. Miriam Nichols, who, with summaries and translations, made the content of this play accessible to me.
- ⁹ Shamash is a synogogue sexton. A *shtreimel* is a hat and, in accordance with Chassidic custom, usually trimmed with fur.
- ¹⁰ Ostropol apparently, means only "an eastern city." I have not discovered a real city of this name.
- ¹¹ Faust: Doch warum gehst du nicht durch's Fenster?
Mephisto: 's ist ein Gesetz der Teufel und Gespenster:
 Wo sie hereingeschlüpft, da müssen sie hinaus.
Faust, I, Studierzimmer (study), lines 1407-1411.
- ¹² *Hershel of Ostropol*, (March 31, 1939), p. 20.
- ¹³ Prayer shawl.
- ¹⁴ Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (1956), (Bloomington, Indiana, 1962), p. 38.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- ¹⁶ Klein here refers to a popular saying of the Yiddish *Shtetl*: when the cat washes himself, guests will shortly arrive at the house. A reference to this may be found also in Klein's short story, "Kapusitchka," *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, XXXVI (October 1948), 4; and in Sholom Aleichem's "Schprintze," *Tevye's Daughters*; *Collected Stories* (New York, 1949), p. 150.
- ¹⁷ Sinclair Ross, *As for Me and My House* (1941) (Toronto, 1957), p. 97.