Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 251

Volume 251

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, "there is nothing comparable available." *TCLC* "is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own."

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism,* (*CLC*) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

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A *TCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author's actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it originally appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style,* 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC.* A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in *TCLC* as well as other Literature Criticism series.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC.* Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations,* edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism.* Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008. The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009. Print); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations.* Ed. Reginald M. Nischik. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. 163-74. Rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism.* Eds. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 206. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 227-32. Print.

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Sholem Asch
1880-1957

(Also transliterated as Schalom, Shalom, and Sholom; also Ash) Polish-born American novelist, playwright, short story writer, and essayist.

The following entry provides an overview of Asch's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC,* Volume 3.

INTRODUCTION

Asch is considered one of the foremost Yiddish novelists of the early twentieth century. Best remembered for *Three Cities* (1933), his epic three-volume work depicting the Russian Revolution, and the novels *The Nazarene* (1939), *The Apostle* (1943), and *Mary* (1949), which comprise his so-called Christological series, Asch devoted much of his literary career to the creation of rich and vivid portraits of the Jewish experience throughout history. As a novelist, he explored a variety of subjects, including religious piety, the corruption of society, immigration, and the contrast between the Old and New Worlds, and recreated such disparate settings as the urban ghetto, the Jewish *shtetl,* and ancient Israel. In several works, Asch also promoted ecumenical ideals and emphasized the spiritual and historical connections between Christianity and Judaism. Although his reputation has declined significantly in recent decades, the author is nevertheless respected as an important and influential figure of his time, whose depictions of Old World European Jewry and New World immigrant experiences have been appreciated by a wide audience and inspired the writings of subsequent generations. As a result, Asch is generally acknowledged as a pivotal figure of Jewish letters, who provided a necessary bridge between Yiddish and mainstream twentieth-century European culture.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Asch was born in 1880 in Kutno, a small town near Warsaw, Poland, to Malke Widowski and Moyshe Gombiner Asch, a sheep dealer and innkeeper. The exact date of his birth is unknown. As a child, Asch was enrolled in the best Jewish school but was also taught the Bible by his father, who was known for his knowledge of the Torah. At the age of seventeen, he was sent to live with relatives in a nearby village, where he served as a Hebrew teacher, and then spent two years working various jobs in Wloclawek, Poland. In 1900, Asch traveled to Warsaw to meet with the preeminent Yiddish critic Isaac Leib Peretz, under whose direction he began writing short stories in Yiddish. He published his first story, "Moyshele," in the Yiddish periodical *Der Yud* soon after. During this time, Asch married Matilde Shapiro, and their son, Nathan Asch, a well-known American-Jewish writer, was born in 1902. Asch's first play, *Tsurikgekumen,* as well as his first novel, *A shtetl,* appeared in 1904. Over the next few years, the young author became acquainted with a number of prominent Polish writers, including Stanislaw Witkiewicz, and continued to write and produce plays, such as *Got fun nekome* (1907; *The God of Vengeance*). He also visited Palestine, and in 1912 moved to Paris. With the outbreak of World War I, however, Asch immigrated with his family to the United States, settling in New York City. The author continued to write but also helped raise money for Jewish war victims and refugees. In 1920, he became an United States citizen.

Asch returned to Poland in 1921 but moved his family to France a few years later, although he remained active in Polish politics. During the late 1920s, the author produced one of his most celebrated works, a trilogy of novels collected under the English title of *Three Cities.* He received numerous honors over the next few years and published what is sometimes regarded as his best novel, *Der Tehilim-Yid* (*Salvation*), in 1934. Asch traveled extensively over the next few years, including Europe and return visits to Palestine and America. In 1938, he and his family moved to the United States for a period of fifteen years, settling first in New York and finally Connecticut. During this time, he wrote and published his so-called Christological works, *The Nazarene, The Apostle,* and *Mary,* which brought the author international fame among non-Jewish readers but harsh condemnation from his fellow Jews. In the fall of 1953, Asch and his wife returned to Europe and divided their time between Nice, London, and Israel. He produced several novels during the last years of his life, including *The Prophet,* which was published in 1955. Asch died on August 1, 1957, after suffering a stroke while visiting his daughter in London.

MAJOR WORKS

One of Asch's early literary achievements, as well as his best-know play, *The God of Vengeance* explores ur-

ban ghetto life and the Jewish underworld, while it more generally treats the subject of religious belief and sin. The play revolves around Yankel Shapshovitsh, a brothel-keeper; his wife, a former prostitute; and their daughter, Rivkele. Shapshovitsh, eager to protect his daughter from the evils of the outside world, including those that his business exposes her to, obtains a Torah scroll, which he places in Rivkele's room in the upper level of the house. His efforts, however, prove to be fruitless. When Rivkele develops a relationship with one of the prostitutes, thus tarnishing her pristine reputation, Shapshovitsh accuses God of being vengeful and flings the scroll down the stairs and into the brothel. The *Three Cities* trilogy, which includes *Petersburg* (1929; *St. Petersburg*), *Warschau* (1930; *Warsaw*), and *Moskau* (1930; *Moscow*), is considered by many Asch's greatest work of fiction. In this multi-volume novel, the author details the religious, philosophical, and sociopolitical issues associated with the Russian Revolution, centering the plot on the cities of St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and Moscow, each of which serve as a focal point for events, both during and after the conflict. Written from the perspective of Zachary Mirkin, the son of a rich merchant and timber mogul, the trilogy is presented as a *Bildungsroman,* or "coming of age" narrative, and spans Zachary's life from birth to manhood. Asch juxtaposes his protagonist's personal search for a purpose in life, as well as his interactions with God, family, love, his homeland, and friends, against the larger political upheavals of the Russian Revolution. Scholars have particularly praised his detailed descriptions of the collapse of the Romanovs, the extravagance of Russia's upper-classes, and the mounting tension among the Russian workers. In addition to holding a significant place within Yiddish fiction, *Three Cities* is also considered an important social document, for its meticulous portrayal of Jewish life in Russia.

Asch's most controversial work is his so-called Christology, or biblical trilogy. Written in an attempt to provide a bridge between the Jewish and Christian faiths, the novels fictionalize the lives of Jesus, the Apostle Paul, and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Asch recreates the ancient biblical setting for the novels in intricate detail and emphasizes the spiritual connections between Christians and Jews, in the hopes of increasing mutual understanding. In *The Nazarene,* for instance, the author presents Jesus as a pious Jew and portrays the primary tenets of Judaism as an integral aspect of the Christian faith. At the same time, Asch also highlights the aspects of Christianity that conform to Judaic beliefs for Jewish readers. Often regarded as one of the author's most accomplished works of fiction, *Salvation* depicts the story of Polish Jews in the nineteenth century and follows the rise and growth of the Hasidic movement. The protagonist of the novel is a simple Jewish boy who is able to recite the Psalms. The boy inspires respect and admiration from others, as a result of his piety and personal commitment to holiness, as well as his determined belief in the overriding triumph of goodness. Critic Ben Siegel, who described the work as the "most sharply focused and tightly structured of Asch's longer novels," maintained that by "interweaving fiction, history, and childhood memories, Asch catches a dying world's broad outlines as well as its subtle nuances."

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Asch was first recognized during the early 1900s for his Yiddish-language sketches and plays, which attracted the attention of prominent Yiddish literary critics, such as Isaac Leib Peretz and Bal Makhshoves. The author's first novel, *A shtetl,* was also warmly received by popular audiences when it appeared in 1904 and brought him significant fame. In 1907, Asch reached an even wider audience with the production of *The God of Vengeance,* which premiered at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. Although the play established his international reputation, it was also the first of his works to provoke considerable controversy and criticism, particularly among Jewish critics, who considered its treatment of the Torah sacrilegious. The play was further denounced in 1923, when it was staged in New York City, primarily for its homoerotic overtones, and was finally closed on the grounds of "immorality." Despite such controversy, Asch's popularity expanded, and the author continued to draw both Jewish and non-Jewish readers in the years that followed. *Three Cities,* originally published in Berlin between 1929 and 1930, was particularly successful and widely praised, and became a best-seller in both England and the United States after it was translated into English. Asch received several honors and was elected honorary president of the Yiddish PEN Club during the 1930s, and in 1933 was nominated for a Nobel prize in literature. The following decade, however, marked a significant turning point in the author's career. With the publication of his trilogy of Christian-themed novels, he won further international recognition but significantly alienated his Jewish readers. Accused of being an apostate and Christian apologist, he was effectively cut off from the Yiddish-speaking community, when the editor of *The Jewish Daily Forward,* Abraham Cahan, led a boycott of his work. Although warmly received by some audiences during the last years of his life, particularly in England, Asch never recovered his former popularity.

Although Asch's reputation has diminished significantly in the decades following his death, his major works have continued to draw attention from critics in America and abroad. *Three Cities* has been the focus of several critical studies, such as those written by Ben Siegel and Theodore L. Steinberg. Steinberg, who characterized the work as a "twentieth-century epic," emphasized the

author's treatment of class struggle and, particularly, the "situation of the Jews" in the series. Asch's interest in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, especially as presented in his Christology, has also drawn feedback from commentators. Both Goldie Morgentaler and Hannah Berliner Fischthal studied the author's writings prior to his Christian-themed novels, as well as the trilogy itself, and refuted the idea that his concern for Jewish and Christian relations was a new development in his work, beginning with *The Nazarene.* The critics maintained instead that Asch demonstrated an interest in "Christian thematic material" and the "problem of Jewish-Christian relations" throughout his career. According to Morgentaler, "the problem of Jewish-Christian relations figures to a greater or lesser extent in most of Asch's writing. In fact, Asch quite consciously and deliberately used his fiction to illustrate and dramatize his ecumenical ideals." Asch's controversial play, *The God of Vengeance,* has also garnered attention in recent years. Both Naomi Seidman and Warren Hoffman addressed the central themes of the drama and considered early critical reactions to the work's depiction of homoeroticism and Jewish identity. While Seidman argued that the play is "a self-conscious performance of Jewishness itself," Hoffman focused on its depiction of "same-sex desire," claiming that Asch employed this idea as "the central metaphor for societal disorder and a challenge to traditional Jewish bodies of knowledge in the first quarter of the twentieth century." While Asch's significant body of work has failed to attract the wide readership it once enjoyed, the author remains a pivotal figure within twentieth-century Yiddish literature, appreciated by many for his rich evocations of Jewish experience. In his 2004 essay, Theodore L. Steinberg observed that Asch "wrestles in his work with large moral and historical problems, and he often adopts an idealistic stance that can seem hopelessly outdated to contemporary readers, though whether that perception is his problem or ours remains an open question." Steinberg concluded that, "like almost any writer, Asch produced lesser and greater works, but he is a writer worth reading."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

A shtetl (novel) 1904
Tsurikgekumen (play) 1904
Got fun nekome [*The God of Vengeance*] (play) 1907
Sabbatai zewi [*Sabbatai Zevi*] (play) 1908
Die familie Grossglück (play) 1909
Der Besuch aus dem Elysium (play) 1918
Amerika [*America*] (essays) 1911
Der bund der Schwachen [*The League of the Weak*] (play) 1913
Reb Shloyme nogid (novel) 1913
Motke ganev [*Mottke the Thief*] (novel) 1916
Onkel Mozes [*Uncle Moses*] (novel) 1918
Kidesh ha-Shem [*Kiddush ha-Shem*] (novel) 1919
Di muter [*The Mother*] (novel) 1925
Petersburg [*St. Petersburg*] (novel) 1929
Moskau [*Moscow*] (novel) 1930
Warschau [*Warsaw*] (novel) 1930
Die kinder Abrahams [*Children of Abraham*] (short stories) 1931
**Three Cities* (novels) 1933
Der Tehilim-Yid [*Salvation*] (novel) 1934
The War Goes On (novel) 1936
Dos gezang fun tol [*The Song of the Valley*] (novel) 1938
The Nazarene (novel) 1939
The Apostle (novel) 1943
Ist River [*East River*] (novel) 1946
Tales of My People (short stories) 1948
Mary (novel) 1949
Moyshe [*Moses*] (novel) 1951
A Passage in the Night (novel) 1953
The Prophet (novel) 1955
Noveln (short stories) 1958

*This work includes the novels *St. Petersburg, Warsaw,* and *Moscow.*

CRITICISM

Ben Siegel (essay date 1976)

SOURCE: Siegel, Ben. "Midcareer: More Achievements, More Doubts, More Controversy." In *The Controversial Sholem Asch: An Introduction to His Fiction,* pp. 87-110. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976.

[*In the following essay, Siegel discusses key events in Asch's life and literary career from the late 1920s to 1934 and examines his major works of fiction written during this period, specifically the* Three Cities *trilogy and the novel* Salvation, *the latter of which he calls the "most sharply focused and tightly structured of Asch's longer novels."*]

Upon completing ***The Mother,*** Asch turned again to the turmoil in Europe—and was soon embroiled in another controversy; this time it was with some of his fellow Polish Jews-in-exile. In fall 1926 he published in the Warsaw *Today*[1] an open letter to Marshal Joseph Pilsudski, the Polish national hero who had led the fight for his country's independence from Russia. Political events four years earlier had forced Pilsudski to "retire," but

now, having overthrown the Witos cabinet, he was again chief of state. Hailing the event, Asch praised the "noble knight" whose sword had "freed the Polish soul." Many Jews agreed: they too viewed Pilsudski as a moderate who had shielded them from the virulent anti-Semitism of the Polish middle classes and peasantry. But those who had found life difficult under the Marshal attacked Asch for his flattery. Later, when the Pilsudski regime revealed its authoritarian tendencies, they renewed their criticism of Asch's political naivete. The entire affair contributed to an even more bitter attack six years later; now it simply formed an ironic link to events that Asch wished to deal with in a new work.

I *Three Cities*

A large novel of revolutionary Russia had long been in his thoughts; it was to be a trilogy entitled "Before the Flood,"[2] he decided, and it would be by far his most ambitious effort to date. He expected to spend at least four years on this work, but it would gain him, he hoped, the stature of a Thomas Mann, a stature that thus far had eluded him. The plot action was to revolve around the cities of St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and Moscow—each of which had been a focal point of revolutionary events and their aftermath. He expected his lifelong concern with European and American city life to prove invaluable, for if the radical movement had affected town, village, and farm, it had literally dominated the city. Asch hardly introduced, at this late date, big-city political life to European literature; numerous writers had dealt with its upper and lower forms. Strongly influenced by Gorky and Artzybashev, he too had depicted in ***God of Vengeance*** and ***Mottke the Thief*** the city's seamier aspects. But now, grown more bold and experienced, he determined to catch in human terms Eastern Europe's total epoch of crisis between 1905 and 1920. He had, after all, lived through those years and their events.

He succeeds here to a surprising extent. His ***Three Cities*** (as the novel is called in English) proves to be a large triptych on the scale of *War and Peace* and *The Brothers Karamazov.* The first of his works to move far beyond *shtetl* and ghetto—though Jews continue to receive most of his attention—it echoes Gogol, Gorky, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. It also intersects with many events covered later by Israel Joshua Singer's *The Brothers Ashkenazi* (1936) and Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Family Moskat* (1950). In it Asch proves as much social historian as imaginative novelist; he details the collapse of the Romanovs, the extravagant stupidities of the Russian upper-classes, the squalor and mounting anger of the empire's workers, the bloody strife of the Red and White armies, and the internecine savageries of the rival socialist factions. But determined also to prove that he has lost none of his flair for nature's imagery, he unfolds this collective decay and turmoil against an evocative backdrop of soil, sky, and clouds.

To tell so large and complex a story, Asch centers on the Russian Pale and its Russian and Polish Jews. His strong ethnic interests apart, Asch finds his fellow Jews sensitive barometers of social change, comprising as they do a wide spectrum of rich and poor, pietists and apostates, Zionists and socialists, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, even Czarists and patriots. He develops his varied crises through a dozen major characters and a score of minor ones. Diverse, idiosyncratic, often frantic, his little men and women attain a semblance of unity only when fate or history (the orthodox would say God) starts them scurrying to cope with events. They scurry often, for fate, in the guise of the Russian Revolution, cuts across all personal goals and pleasures to involve and render them virtually helpless by a rapid succession of blows. So disordered a world reveals little logic or form, and its cataclysmic happenings swamp mere mortals; inevitably, character and plot soon diminish here, proving of secondary importance to history and description.

As he finished each part of his trilogy, Asch mailed manuscript copies to Warsaw and New York for its immediate newspaper serialization in *Today* and the *Forward.* He thereby gained for ***Three Cities*** considerable attention on both sides of the Atlantic for several years before its 1933 appearance.

II *Petersburg*

Setting his first section in the years between 1905 and 1914, Asch re-creates luxury-loving prewar Petersburg (as he calls it), with its assimilated upperclass Jews and its Russian aristocrats and officials. In tracing Russia's earlier commercial expansion, he shows that much of this growth has been directed by energetic Jews whose wealth still derives from the land's vast virginal resources. These tea, sugar, and timber kings lead lives far different from those of their poverty-ridden coreligionists. Social position and wealth determine their human relationships, as they play, marry, and intrigue. But they pay heavily for social and economic acceptance in a hostile society governed by corrupt, anti-Semitic functionaries. Believing themselves cosmopolites and idealists, they are in fact committed totally to the established structure, retaining little of their Jewish heritage. Yet they are unable to ignore their suffering brethren, and this reluctant awareness keeps them, in a complex, intangible sense, Jews.

Asch registers the energy and abilities squandered upon idiosyncrasy and whimsical impulse, as well as the desperate futility of lives motivated only by wealth and ostentation. He centers on the celebrated advocate Solomon Halperin and timber king Gabriel Mirkin and their families. The flamboyant Halperin is Russia's most important Jewish lawyer. An irrepressible, vain, posturing liberal, he has amassed a fortune defending unfortu-

nate Jews and lost causes, and shrewdly exploiting his celebrated benevolence. Even members of the powerful anti-Semitic Black Hundred come to him when in trouble. Memorably ironic is the dinner at which Halperin convinces himself and his guests that Petersburg's wealthy Jews are the country's "best Russians." Halperin's wife, Olga, is a voluptuous, self-centered beauty who entertains lavishly her circle of fashionable admirers. Nina, their daughter, is a high-spirited, sensation-seeking charmer who travels with the city's smartest, fastest social set.

Nina is engaged to Zachary Mirkin, her father's young legal assistant and son of the millionaire Gabriel Mirkin. Strongly reminiscent of those sensitive heroes of nineteenth-century European fiction who were toughened or destroyed by harsh realities, Zachary is the narrative's focal point: he is meant to unite the succession of vivid scenes and characters by his direct participation or by his observations and impressions. Lonely, neurotic, self-pitying, and protected from serious work by his father's money, he has ample time to observe Czarist Petersburg's passing parade and to soliloquize with a brooding, perplexed innocence.

Zachary distinctly resembles Jacob Wassermann's Christian Wahnschaffe, Maxim Gorky's Klim Samghin, and especially Tolstoy's introverted, ungainly Pierre Bezuhov;[3] with Pierre he shares a resentment of political authority, an inner turmoil during peace with a degree of emotional stability in war, and, despite great personal wealth, a strong feeling for the masses. If the two differ sharply in social status and personal relationships, each searches desperately for fulfillment and identity. Pierre realizes slowly his estrangement from society; Zachary feels himself an outsider from childhood—that he is without home, family, or fatherland. His mother leaves while he is young and dies without seeing him again. His father raises him as neither Jew nor Christian and with neither love nor hate for Russia. Zachary develops a strong fixation for ripe, confident, large-bosomed women, who respond to his boyish dependency. He soon yearns for Nina's sensual mother—with Asch sparing no Oedipal detail. Unexpectedly consummating his passion, Zachary, driven by shame and guilt, contemplates suicide; lacking the courage to follow through, he flees instead to Warsaw, hoping in its teeming ghetto to find anonymity and a meaning to his life.

But at times he seems more structural device than sharply defined character. Five or six other figures prove more vivid and memorable. Yet all are overshadowed by time and place as Asch defines at length the many social complexities that shape and sustain Czarist Russia. No one here moves forward. Olga Halperin sums up their trifling lives when she says: "We've built up our whole life on words, on beautiful, just, finely-turned words—empty phrases that have no effect" (272). She is, as usual, wrong, yet she is hardly to be blamed, for those few prophets who see that there are to be effects—dire, tragic effects—are being little heeded in Petersburg.

III *Warsaw*

Not surprisingly ***Warsaw*** is the most "Jewish" of the novel segments, centering as it does on Asch's home ground. With Tolstoyan passion he describes the city's groups and factions, its political unrest and repression, and its harassed Jews bedeviled by corrupt officials and restrictions.

Weary of his empty Petersburg existence, shamed by his feelings for his fiancée's mother, Zachary has come to Warsaw to find his identity and destiny. He is drawn to the maternal Rachel-Leah Hurvitz, whom he had met in Petersburg and who promises to fulfill his obsessive need for a mother figure. Another of Asch's all-loving Jewish mothers, Rachel-Leah is more aggressive and worldly than her counterparts; her concern embraces not only family and neighbors but a suffering humanity. Solomon Hurvitz, a teacher, has dedicated himself to science, to a free Poland, and to spreading secular knowledge among *yeshiva* students. Like their prototypes—Matilda Asch's family the Spiros—the Hurvitzes make their home a center for radical ideas and politics; they and their friends conspire against the Czar and for a better day. In addition, they help newcomers to Warsaw, and they soon have Zachary embroiled in communal strife and subversive actions. (They also initiate into Warsaw life an unnamed provincial youth who hopes to be a "playwright" and who is helped by "a famous Yiddish writer" (565) revered by the younger generation. Obviously Asch is acknowledging his own debts to his in-laws and to Isaac Leib Peretz.)

Warsaw's revolutionary fervor moves Zachary to sublimate for a time his passion for matrons, while its ghetto forces him to rediscover his Jewishness. Amid Bonipart Street's labyrinthine tenements, courtyards, and workshops he meets Zionists, Marxists, Polish patriots, humanists, and humanitarians; orthodox and radical, cynical and idealistic, they expose a seething ghetto's confusions and pressures. These Jews, barred from soil and factory, are neither peasants nor proletarians: they belong to none of Poland's embattled classes. Harassed and starved, and dependent upon a mix of ingenious, non-productive endeavors, they exist precariously. Most await either Biblical righteousness among men or the great social revolution that promises to all security and plenty. Having departed from their fathers' speech, dress, and beliefs, they search still for a higher will or force. United by classlessness and alienation, most—the young especially—work for the Revolution. Zachary tries to share their lives, but he sees blind dogmatism in

every doctrine. Attracted first to Zionism, he soon migrates toward the workers and revolutionaries. After a fierce struggle to conquer his pride and upbringing, he finds among these social radicals the acceptance and camaraderie he seeks. He also finds, as he had in Petersburg, the same widespread human inability to avoid suspicion, envy, and ambition—or to establish lasting bonds. Among the hungry even a newcomer's wish to be kind, he learns, may appear a cruelty.

Yet Jewish inclinations toward brotherhood and socialism stem here only in part from Czarist persecution; traditional idealism plays an equal role. This idealism, Asch insists, is inherent in Judaism. His spokesman for this view is Baruch Chomsky, a venerable Hasidic leader. Seeing that Zachary doubts man's perfectibility or that justice and logic govern the world, Chomsky argues the converse: man should not imagine there is no justice simply because he glimpses no sign of it. No, God rules His world with justice, declares the elder, despite man's limited vision. "Ultimately justice always conquers" (231). Zachary does recognize faith's importance, but he also sees its potential dangers—especially in the psychological resemblances between pietists and communists: many Jewish communists appear merely inverted Hasids who have shifted their zeal from orthodoxy to socialism, from Moses to Marx.

Asch is here disciplined and persuasive. He renders vivid and deeply moving Warsaw's prewar social unrest, political crises, and human suffering. Both ***Petersburg*** and ***Moscow*** reveal literary debts, primarily to Tolstoy, but ***Warsaw***—especially Bonipart Street's tenements and industrial Lodz's back-courtyards—draws upon sources indigenous and instinctive in Asch. Where "***Petersburg*** exhibits power," writes Harry Slochower, "***Warsaw*** exudes warmth and generosity. It has the cohesion of water particles."[4] These positive qualities override the shattering horrors of a day in a dehumanizing weaving mill, a First of May riot, and young David Hurvitz's execution. Even the war that explodes ending this section enforces, rather than obliterates, Asch's compassion for Warsaw's struggling Jews and Poles.

IV *Moscow*

War, rebellion, and Bolshevism, in the novel's final portion, demolish everyone's plans and dreams. All classes and groups are caught up in a bristling Moscow where gathered Petersburg aristocrats and Warsaw idealists meet their fates. So entangled here are good and bad that no one group can lay valid claim to right or justice. Repeatedly interrupting his narrative with expository or background detail, Asch strives to be the objective artist-historian, to depict in depth the October Revolution and the Bolshevist rise to triumph. But his political views and analysis are essentially those of a liberal now unsympathetic to the Revolution and keenly aware of its flaws. He bears down hard on the inevitable conflicts between any individual cherishing freedom of thought or action and a party discipline demanding blind loyalty. He excoriates the mixed motives and self-seeking of some revolutionary leaders, and he conveys tellingly the frenzied exultation, misery, and chaos of mob rule. He catches also the near-religious ecstasy animating at tense moments both leaders and followers, as well as the altered psychology of certain "comrades" (among them Jews) who change from generous idealists into cruel avengers of capitalist crimes.

The October Revolution finds Zachary in Moscow, where he has come with the younger Hurvitzes who are Red activists. Now a dedicated Bolshevik, he sees the Revolution as the sole champion of the suffering masses. So convinced is Zachary of the Revolution's essential morality that during the streetfighting he overcomes his hatred of violence to command a machine gun squad on a roof above Moscow's Theatre Square. After the Red victory he leads a detachment against the Hotel Metropole where huddle aristocrats and capitalists, including his father and the lawyer Halperin. In scenes bitingly reminiscent of Gogol and Gorky, Asch caricatures the curious offbeats that comprise Russia's "polite society." When bread, flour, and meat give out, the besieged make do with caviar and champagne; only when the sleekly respectful waiters, doormen, and chambermaids are shouldered aside by grimy, menacing figures from the great hotel's cellars and dark corners do the fine ladies and gentlemen realize their old world no longer exists; suddenly desperate and frightened, they begin to bargain for their safety.

Much of Russian humanity wanders through Moscow: former landowners, officers and enlisted men, political opportunists, footloose intellectuals, disenfranchised aristocrats, and enfranchised peasants and laborers. Through this welter of displaced beings walks the Mongolian figure of Nikolai Lenin, dominating the volatile revolutionary factions by sheer intelligence, energy, and will. Only when alone does he suffer doubt and uncertainty, especially before the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. But for Zachary the months following victory bring crushing disillusion; men may make revolutions, he discovers, but each revolution remakes men. His Bolshevik comrades arouse in him anger and aversion. Long society's underdogs, they are now vindictive, wasteful, and brutal. Most lack even the limited humanity of their bourgeois victims. Nowhere in Moscow does he find the communal spirit of Warsaw's poor. Those unable to twist conscience to party doctrine are rejected as weaklings and renegades. Rejected also is any belief in man's inalienable dignity. "But, Comrade, what is a man?" a Bolshevik leader asks Zachary. "A sausage-skin that can be stuffed with anything. The essential point is, whom does the man serve?" Zachary protests that "A man represents an absolute value . . . [he] is sacred

. . . an end in himself." His views soon get him decried as "an anarchist" (827-28).

As the October Revolution hardens into terror and bloodshed, Zachary pities those despised rich now victimized and destitute. Their general tragedy soon becomes personal: his father's sincere efforts to assist the new rulers in behalf of his beloved Russia are rewarded with death, despite Zachary's frantic efforts to save him. Rebelling against party discipline, Zachary returns to Warsaw and to Helene, the older Hurvitz daughter, who throughout the turmoil has been quietly teaching and comforting small children. He has learned much on his pilgrimage through Petersburg, Warsaw, and Moscow, yet he remains uncertain as to what humanitarian activity is right for him.

Some reviewers pounced on Zachary as too weak and vacillating a figure to unite a narrative so teeming with social and human action.[5] These readers missed not only Asch's basic conception of his hero but his central theme: to die is relatively easy, whereas to keep living—to keep hoping and trying—requires courage and endurance. Because Zachary does endure, and without compromising his principles, he embodies hope for himself and for all men. Yet much more vital than the stumbling, uncertain Zachary is his proud, hard-driving father. A wealthy Russified Jew, Gabriel Mirkin thirsts for position, power, and life. Under Red duress he proves courageous and honest, with a Biblical patriarch's regenerative powers. For him Russia symbolizes a social amalgam of Christians and Jews; so long have both peoples lived under oppression, he argues, that their common ideals of freedom and justice should override all differences. Neither personal loss nor abuse lessens his love of Russia. Even a rebellious Zachary recognizes belatedly his father's oaklike strength and dignity.

Asch literally swamps his struggling figures with the flow of historical detail and event. Taking on a character's dimensions is the Revolution itself, as it evolves from verbal abstraction to social cataclysm. Each major phase is viewed and expressed by varied representative individuals: all exemplify Asch's belief in man's potential and his rejection of those dogmas that downgrade man. Any society harboring other ideals, Asch makes clear, courts and merits disaster. Each "city" narrative makes these points. ***Petersburg*** provides a revealing autopsy of that morally loose, sycophantic prewar capital—despite seeming, as Louis Kronenberger has suggested, "a little old-fashioned, a little derivative from the great Russian masters."[6] ***Warsaw*** is another matter, proving a powerful, unrivaled portrait of that city's Jews and feverish ghetto. Asch's sympathy for the victimized on all levels imbues this section with compassion and integrity. His detailed flow-chart of neighboring Lodz's daily life and textile mills ranks easily with such mill-and-weaver fiction as Gerhart Hauptmann's drama *The Weavers,* Charles Dickens' *Hard Times,* George Eliot's *Silas Marner,* Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky,* I.J. Singer's *The Brothers Ashkenazi,* and his own later ***East River.***

Asch had several times vividly depicted the ghetto, as had others. But ***Moscow*** is virtually unique in modern fiction. Nowhere else has a novelist described as thoroughly and movingly the "October" Moscow with its inflated hopes and ideals, its crushed dreams and political connivance, and its sheer human misery. The segment rings with Bolshevik, Menshevik, and White Army gunfire, the stormy session of the first Russian Constitutent Assembly, and the "calculated crimes" committed in the name of the proletariat. Only the chronicles of participant Leon Trotsky offer a comparable in-depth view of these happenings. Obviously, Asch cannot make the professional historian's—or even Trotsky's—claim of "historical accuracy"; he was writing not "history" but fiction. Yet life has the unseemly habit of contradicting history and its laws: fact and fiction often merge to become indistinguishable. Perhaps events should have occurred as Asch presents them, for they convey here the depth and complexity of the revolutionary mind—its entangled motives, dreams, and lore. Avoiding glib partisanship, Asch rejects primarily that which is inhumane and unfeeling. If he points up flaws in Communist thinking and behavior, he proves more scornful of the scavenging ragtag White Army for its lack of political ideology or moral discipline. Schoolteacher Solomon Hurvitz's final judgment evokes several decades of shattered hopes and ideals: "We thought," he sighs, "it would all turn out very differently" (898).

Translated immediately into six languages, ***Three Cities*** was widely acclaimed. The American edition gained special interest from the Washington visit in 1933 of a Jewish commissar, Maxim Litvinov, then Russian foreign minister, whose negotiations with President Roosevelt led to American recognition of Soviet Russia. Asch's first bestseller in England and the United States, ***Three Cities*** assured the English translation of his later works and their reviews in the important magazines. Louis Kronenberger, in a *New York Times Book Review* lead essay, hailed the novel as "one of the most absorbing . . . vital . . . richly creative works of fiction that has appeared in our day."[7] Other critics, here and abroad, were equally enthusiastic.[8]

Their praise now seems excessive. Asch had learned from his Russian masters how to handle convincingly large, complex themes and events while conveying a strong familiarity with the places and peoples described. But the English version of ***Three Cities,*** as did that of several other Asch novels, derived from a German translation of the original Yiddish; though Asch's work never depended on "style" in the narrow sense, the effects of this third-hand approach (despite the conscientious, if

unimaginative, craftsmanship of Willa and Edwin Muir) are evident. Not that any translation could disguise the structural sprawl, character inconsistencies, and irrelevant philosophizings; yet so vividly conceived are its events and so wide-ranging its moral and social implications that ***Three Cities*** overcomes all defects to capture rich, momentous segments of both Jewish life and western history. This narrative, wrote Herbert Read, is "yeasty with the very substance of life." He then added that "It would be begging the question to ask whether Sholem Asch is therefore as good a novelist as Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. To me he seems just as good and just as bad."[9] Most novelists would be flattered indeed to be "as bad" as the two Russians. In addition, what Asch failed to provide here in selection, clarity, and rigorous design, he would supply in his next significant novel, ***Salvation,*** wherein a priest and a rabbi battle not for a multitude but for a single Jewish soul.

V A Double Jubilee

Despite his public clashes, Asch found the late 1920's to be generally good years for his career and his family. His writing was going well, and his children were grown and leading their own lives, with only his son John, a skilled horticulturalist, still living at home. He and Matilda entertained frequently at their comfortable house near Paris and visited often on the continent. In summer 1929, for instance, they were in Warsaw for the International PEN Congress and then Asch was off on his third trip to Palestine. Yet life was not without dark spots. Germany was in turmoil, and Asch complained in print of not receiving his German royalties. His complaint evoked a satiric open letter from Yiddish writer Moshe Nadir, who recalled visiting Asch's luxurious villa and being impressed by his host's expensive clothes and large collection of art and religious objects. He charged that Asch had not offered a night's lodging to him or their old companion H.D. Nomberg, whose demise Asch had been lamenting in print. Nadir tells Asch repeatedly not to take to heart their friend's death or the loss of his royalties. Nadir will appeal for financial help for Asch, if the latter wishes, to President Coolidge or to other community leaders.[10]

Nadir's pique is understandable. Asch could be abrasive and abrupt with visitors, even old friends. Later he would try to soothe trampled sensibilities, but when preoccupied with his writing or public activities—which was most of the time—he could be oblivious to others' needs or expectations. To a degree he had to be, as an unending line of charities, fund-raisers, and freeloaders made him their target. But if Asch could not escape some public irritations, he also enjoyed many pleasant experiences, both public and private. Nathan Asch, for instance, appeared for a visit in summer 1930, and father and son spent several rare happy weeks together. They made a ritual of taking the train to Paris and then walking the city streets, engaging in playful banter, and usually drifting toward Montparnasse for lunch.[11] Soon separated once more by several thousand miles, they again found communication difficult. Asch did not write English, employing a phonetic English script only when necessary; important matters he wrote in Yiddish. Then Nathan was in the American courts and newspapers on charges that his novel *Pay Day* (1930) was obscene.[12] Some observers were quick to recall that similar legal charges had been leveled seven years earlier at his father's play ***God of Vengeance.***

Asch celebrated a double jubilee in fall 1930: his fiftieth birthday and thirtieth year of literary work. He and Matilda headed for Warsaw and Vienna, where public gatherings in his honor had been arranged. In Warsaw the Jewish Socialist Bund[13] urged boycott of his celebration because he had praised the Zionists. Yet Bund members helped pack the hall. Asch rejected the charges, declaring himself a creative artist who belonged to all Jews and who was above partisanship. He insisted on his right to praise both Zionism and the Bundist movement. The front row that evening held Matilda, Asch, his old mother, his brother Jacob, and several other relatives and close friends. Asch rose. "My friends," he declared, "I ask you all to rise to honor my mother, the woman who gave me birth and brought me up. I have her to thank for everything."[14] The crowd gave Malka Asch a standing ovation. Asch's gesture offers insight, perhaps, into his heroes' obsessions with their mothers. A few days later the Yiddish PEN Club held a "literary" evening for Asch in the same hall. But the most impressive gathering was in Vienna. Here Franz Werfel and Stefan Zweig,[15] among others, paid tribute to his work, and almost 300 congratulatory messages were collected. Albert Einstein, Chaim Weitzmann, and Stephen S. Wise were among those extending good wishes.[16]

Asch had so enjoyed his Warsaw visit, however, that he planned to build his permanent home there. He never did. Walking about his chosen site one evening, he fell into a pit; badly shaken, he returned to Paris.[17]

VI Habits and Foibles

Recently Asch had hired as secretary a young novelist-journalist named Solomon Rosenberg, who was Matilda's second cousin. Rosenberg would later describe his ten years with Asch in a candid but sympathetic portrait titled *Sholem Asch Face to Face.* Asch was now working on ***Three Cities,*** and Rosenberg was to transcribe in a clear script the master's longhand. The job sounded simple but proved otherwise. Work for Asch had to be done quickly and well. His handwriting was difficult to read, and Rosenburg had to correct his grammar and punctuation; Asch had no patience for technical niceties.[18] Yet Rosenberg was not to change the master's

style. After the latter's final revisions, Rosenberg would make two new copies of each chapter, one for the *Forward* in New York and the other for *Today* in Warsaw. He performed his tasks with "great piety," as he considered Asch a major writer. He also grew quite fond of his temperamental employer.

Asch lived and worked in comfort. He dressed expensively and stopped only in luxury hotels. His homes had the prosperous look he needed. His walls held canvases by Corot, Chagall, Levitan, and a drawing by Rembrandt. He collected antiques and furniture with associations, including a table at which Nietzsche had written and a cupboard once Ibsen's. He gathered, in addition to paintings and sculpture, old Hanukah lamps, silver kiddush cups, Hebrew incunabula, and rare books. A true connoisseur, Asch bought several major artists before they had made reputations. Dealers in Nice, Paris, London, and New York offered articles they felt he would want. He liked such things around him when he wrote. In 1932 Asch moved from Bellevue to Nice; there he paced his apartment, and later his villa, puffing contentedly on a cigar and admiring from his windows either the snow-capped Alps or blue Mediterranean. An Italian maid named Rose brought him tea and cookies. His study or "workshop" held his big writing table and an array of books, pictures, and antiques. Wherever he went he searched the nearby libraries and bookstores. Books were a passion. "I require books," he stated, "as I require air."[19] He loved handling them and lined his study with volumes in several languages. One bookcase held his own books in Yiddish, another their various translations, including some in Japanese.

Having completed so exhausting a novel as ***Three Cities,*** most writers would have rested. Asch had several books in progress. He talked of a lengthy vacation but could never completely lay aside his writing. Ideas, plots, characters crowded his imagination. By summer 1932 he was engrossed in ***Salvation,*** which would prove one of his finest efforts. His absorption when writing was total. After an early breakfast he wrote nonstop for five hours. His thoughts outstripping his pen, he left out or ran words together, now relying on the faithful Rosenberg to unscramble his prose. Out walking, he jotted ideas in a notebook, and during social evenings he regaled friends with ideas and figures that would appear in his fiction years later. "If I waited for the Muse," he declared, "I would have written very little."[20] On another occasion, he stated: "I do not understand these writers who find inspiration only between eleven and one; when I write I do nothing else."[21] He worked late, slept briefly, then was back writing. He might take a half-hour afternoon nap on the couch in his study. When working well, he was affable—when not, impossible. Caught up in a story, trembling excitedly, he was unapproachable. He identified with his characters as strongly as an actor with a new role. Focusing on Yechiel, his gentle "Psalm Jew," Asch was kindness itself; trying to catch on paper the quick-tempered Pan Wydawski, who liked to loose his dog on visitors, Asch could be as bad-tempered as that irascible noble.

Despite his dislike of intrusions, he was interrupted frequently. Many Jews considered a visit to Nice incomplete without a call on the great Sholem Asch. Periodically he paused to take "atmosphere" trips. He might romanticize a character beyond credibility, but he was a stickler for getting the feel of a scene or setting. Describing in ***Salvation*** a cabalist Jew who is found frozen, Asch wanted to re-experience a snow scene. At four one morning, toting a heavy suitcase, he boarded a train for a two-week stay in the Alps. Ten that evening he was back: he had felt lonely in the mountains. But the one day enabled him to feel and smell freezing mountain air, to see shadows deepening on snow-covered trees and slopes, to visualize a body freezing into icy rigidity. Now he could put it all into words.

He also visited Poland at this time to observe Hasidic Jews in their familiar setting, to hear the lilt and idiom of their speech, to see again Polish city and country life. He had experienced these things since infancy, but he wanted to sharpen and update his recollections. He even stopped Hasidim on the street to question them about their lives, actions, thoughts. But familiar materials do not guarantee inspiration. Asch spoke offhandedly to interviewers of his literary exertions; he compared fiction writing to writing checks: if one has money in the bank, he was fond of saying, one can write checks easily.[22] His private wrestlings, however, could be painful and shattering. At such times he appealed for reassurance to some friend. Rosenberg once found him tossing and groaning in bed. Frightened, he asked Asch what was wrong. "I can't write," Asch replied. "What do you mean, you can't write? You have written such wonderful works!" "I can't write any more," Asch cried. "It's no good. I'm going to tear up all the pages I've written till now. I'm too old."[23] Asch then was fifty-two. He did not destroy his manuscript; told by Rosenberg that ***Salvation*** would prove his masterpiece, he resumed work. On another occasion he woke his friend Mayer Mendelsohn in the middle of the night to be convinced his fears of faltering creativity were unfounded.

Despite the obvious self-drama, such incidents help give lie to the legend that Asch was too interested in fame and money to care about his work's quality. Those close to him also testify to its falsity. Asch destroyed all writing he considered below standard, being moved to boast that "What I discard, other Yiddish writers would have made into entire books."[24] Maurice Samuel, the distinguished translator of Asch's most popular novels in English, dismissed such charges of venality as "silly" in view of Asch's"massive conception of himself as an