

Internalizing Tradition in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Novels

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Abstract

Viewing traditional concepts and values with an ambiguous mixture of love, pride, and doubt, he finds no easy answers to the external questions. What few answers there are, he makes clear, each must glean for himself. His refusal to champion group, philosophy, or commandment bothers many. For Singer all mankind constitutes the human reality; hence he spares neither Jew nor Christian, code nor attitude.

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Isaac Bashevis Singer is the only living Yiddish writer whose translated work has caught the imagination of a western (the American) literary public. Though the settings of his stories are frequently strange, the contemporary reader- for whom the determination not to be shocked has become a point of human-is likely to feel closer to Singer than to most other Yiddish writers. Offhand this may be surprising, for Singer's subjects are decidedly remote and exotic - - -.Yet one feels that, unlike many of Yiddish writers who treat more familiar and up-to-date subjects, Singer commands a distinctly "modern" sensibility.

Singer's stories work, or prey, upon the nerves. They leave one unsettled and anxious, the way a rationalist might feel if, walking at night in the woods, he suddenly found himself surrounded by a swarm of bats. Unlike most Yiddish fiction, Singer's stories neither round out the cycle of their intentions nor posit a coherent and ordered universe. They can be seen as paradigms of the arbitrariness, the grating injustice, at the heart of life. They offer instances of pointless suffering, dead-end exhaustion, and inexplicable grace. And sometimes, as in Singer's masterpiece, Gimpel the Fool, they turn about, refusing to rest with the familiar discomforts of the problematic, and drive towards a prospect of salvation on the other side of despair, beyond soiling by error or will. This prospect does not depend on any belief in the comeliness or lawfulness of the universe; whether God is there or not. He is surely no protector.

What is most remarkable about Singer's prose is his ability to unite rich detail with fiercely compressed rhythms. For the translator this presents the almost insuperable problem of how to capture his texture and his pace, his density of specification and his vibrating quickness. More often than not, even the most accomplished translator must choose between one effect and the other, only because the enormous difficulty of rendering Yiddish idiom into another language forces him either to fill out or slow down Singer's sentences .

Within his limits Singer is a genius. He has total command of his imagined world; he is original in his use both of traditional Jewish materials and his modernist attitude towards them; he provides a serious if enigmatic moral prospective; and he is a master of Yiddish prose. Yet there are times when Singer seems to be mired in his own originality, stories in which he displays a weakness for self-imitation that is disconcerting. Second-rate writers imitate others, first-rate writers themselves, and it is not always clear which is the more dangerous.

Singer is a writer of both the pre-Enlightenment and the post-Enlightenment: he would be equally at home with a congregation of medieval Jews and a gathering of 20th century intellectuals, perhaps more so than at a meeting of the Yiddish PEN club. He has a strong sense of the mystical and antique, but also a cool awareness of Psycho-analytic disenchantment. He has evaded both the religious pieties and the humane rationalism of 19th-century East European Judaism. He has skipped over the ideas of the historical epoch which gave rise to Yiddishism, for the truth is, I suppose, that Yiddish literature, in both its writers of acceptance and writers of skepticism, is thoroughly caught up with the Enlightenment. Singer is not. He shares very little in the collective sensibility or the folkstimlichkeit of the Yiddish masters; he does not unambiguously celebrate dos Kleine mensh (the common man) as a paragon of goodness; he is impatient with the sensual deprivations implicit in the values of edelkeit (refinement, nobility); and above all he moves away from a central assumption of both Yiddish literature in particular and the 19th century in general, the assumption of an immanent fate or end human existence - - - -

Singer's first achievement, as a Polish Jew and Yiddish writer in our time, is not to be paralyzed by the horrors of history, nor be rendered important by filial pieties, nor become tendentious and overtly moralistic. Avoiding these pitfalls, he honorably performs his function as a chronicler, epic namer and celebrant of well lived and worthy lives. There are in these books astonishing images of vitality of character, place, emotion, so that while one feels the burden of sadness in realizing that this life was annihilated, one also feels wonder and pleasure that it was truly lived, felt, real. Indeed, this always the effect of good biography or history: mingled sadness and awe at the spectacle of the transitoriness of human life and institutions along with the astonishing persistence of recognizable human motive, desire, and aspiration.

Alone of Yiddish writers, Isaac Bashevis Singer has caught the fancy of critics, teachers, students, and public - - - Singer's fiction evokes a past rich in the sufferings and joys, shapes and sounds of the Jewish exile's last four centuries. His dybbucks and beggars, rabbis and atheists, saints and whores are bound by common spiritual ties, an expressive common tongue, a common destiny, and frequently a common martyrdom. Together they constitute the most varied and coherent cavalcade of Jewish life in modern fiction.

Singer is no primitive. Despite exotic materials and idiomatic style, he is a sophisticated craftsman with the easy fluency attained by only the finest writers in any culture. He is a born story teller, with sure insight and an outrageous compulsion to create. Fable and fantasy, chronicle and saga, tale and essay issue from his pen. His least inspired tales have a tender, gusty, tragic vitality derived from a sensitive fusion of Yiddish and Western traditions - - - - Fiction mirrors God's artistry, Singer believes, only when facts are extended and enlarged by images from the unconscious or supernatural. This fusion of fact and image, of objective report and subjective fancy, he terms chronicle-"external chronicle and psychological chronicle.

Singer's tough, intimate, earthy prose conveys the rhythms of Yiddish folk speech- its human beat and stress, intonations and embodied gestures. His frequently archaic, at times obsolete, Yiddish reinforces a complex interweaving of fact and fantasy, and comedy and terror.

Singer does have a perverse, if not morbid, taste for violence, blood, and animal slaughter, not to mention rape, demons, and the grave-all gothic horror story elements. He relishes those medieval superstitions -and fears that clung to shtetl life into the twentieth century. His devils, demons, and imps may represent a partial deference to the strong contemporary taste for “black humor” in its myriad forms. But primarily his demonology enables Singer to expose the demons driving us all. His devils and imps symbolize those erratic, wayward, and diabolic, impulses that detour men from their fathers piety and morality.

Singer’s fiction sets out always from the experience of suffering. Theodicy is its plot. His people seek reasons for their pain, and they usually do not find them. What they find instead are ideas, a vast profusion of dangerous doctrines to do the work of the faith that has gone unrewarded. Singer’s people are what they believe, or do not believe. Many turn dramatically to heresy, which they do not always quite understand.

There is, indeed, a great measure of human truth in the ordinariness of these adopted heterodoxies - - - There is, unfortunately, also a certain Philosophical insouciance about them. Singer plays too fast and too carelessly with his warring world views. There are too many imponderables, too much shear, and lingering mystery. All this obsessive heaven-storming comes to seem mannered and even mischievous - - -What delights Singer most is the very spectacle of the struggle; he is sardonically amused by the inadequacy of his addled Jews resources. He hobbles the devout and then laughs.

He discredits even their defections. For Singer’s wronged believers demand not illumination as much as license. They yearn to sin. And it is in his rapt fascination with sin that singer’s sly modernism is disclosed. The sacrilegious practices of the Sabbatians and the abominations of the eighteenth-century false messiah Jacob Frank join here with the Satanism of Baudelaire and the criminality of Dostoevsky vice; it is as if inspired depravity is the only religious expression that remains. And the most numinous vice, the outrage that will best engage the angry, hidden God is fornication- - - Singer’s eroticism is a matter of principle and it is vivid and inexhaustible. He reveals in his voluptuaries in their caftans, taunting the Lord of the Universe in the fleshpots of Galicia.

Singer alludes to “the great adventures inherent in Jewish history-the false Messiahs, the expulsions, the flexible conversions, the Emancipations, and the assimilations - - - -“Illusion, disorder, transgression, apostasy: in these are to be found the florid romances of Jewish experience. Not a world, however of what was surely the most unlikely and daring Jewish adventure of all-the adventure of a life in halakha, of allegiance to the law in even the direst adversity, of individuals and communities fired by traditions discipline and willing to remain steadfast unto death. Of those Jews who would seek release from the rabbinical way Singer writes with asperity, even scorn. He is not alive to their special strength. They appear in his works caricatured, as bizarre and frozen culture. And it is this proud and bilious indifference to the character of piety that further vitiates Singer’s thirst for its collapse- - -

He has taken an extraordinary vengeance in literature: a joyless, acid portrait of Jewish life surrendered to demons and doubt, a grotesque congeries of the uncanny and the perverse. Singer moves straight from the disappointments of reason to the

raising of tables. His comedy is often brilliant, and just as often cruel. And it agrees nicely with that facile infatuation with the demonic that currently prevails in American culture, not least among American Jews.

In his own writing, Singer does his best to avoid distortion, and to portray real events as truthfully as honour and decency permit. Acting on the fundamentally religious assumption that although we cannot change the world appreciably, our best protest against gratuitous suffering is to improve ourselves and do our best not to perpetrate evil, he charts moral difficulty by dramatizing with obvious intimacy the spiritual conflicts to which his own life bears witness. Concerned, as Wordsworth was, to bring us tidings of the invisible, he calls attention to “the things which we cannot prove” but which nonetheless determine our individual fates. It is not, however, the antics of his celebrated dybbuks which occasion his most interesting reflections on human possibility, but the normal actions of people “beset” by “devils within”. Taking as his starting point the clash between the piety of the world of his childhood and the uncertainties of the secular universe which succeeded it, he habitually renders tensions which defy resolution-especially the tensions produced by man’s desire on the one hand to express, and on the other to contain, his most terrible passions.

One of the obvious problems facing a writer whose favourite subject is irreconcilable impulse is, that unless he either withholds vital information about the contraries plaguing a single soul or alternates between contraries at the same high pitch, narrative force will be difficult for him to maintain over the whole of a long work. In the novels of a man whose forte is the rapid sketch-arrested moments which suggest an era or traits of character which clearly imply destiny-this problem is likely to be formidable; for the temptation to say too much too soon will be very great. Despite his awareness of the importance of suspense in all literature. Singer’s tendency in his longer fiction is to delineate all of his protagonist’s essential qualities early on, introduce him to a family of tempers, and provide variations on-rather than development of-an initial theme. Dwelling more on oddities of character and event than on the qualities or forces which compel strong movement, he meanders and trails off. Only rarely are his plots propelled by sufficient psychic and intellectual energy to create the intensity of interest basic to the most successful novels.

It can of course be argued that Singer’s fidelity to reality prevents him from producing fiction with sustained dramatic power. Most people-this argument runs-simply repeat early blunders and wander from one disaster to another without either destroying themselves completely or learning enough from patterns of error to forsake them. Thus a writer with a reliable eye for what is usual in human affairs is perfectly justified in depicting normality in all its dispiriting fragmentedness. Although this may be so, the fact remains that imitation of the ordinary, and in particular the ordinarily fallible, is not the only requirement of serious fiction-not even of the comic or tragic-comic novel. Especially because Singer has himself acknowledged that the greatest men are those who have struggled hardest and most constantly with their own devils, we have good reason for wanting to observe in his longer works the efforts of the extraordinary.

The absence in Singer’s novels of central characters of unusual moral capacity points not only to his profound historical sense, to his painful recognition of the place of folly, waste, and catastrophe in the lives of the people closest to him, and to his

engaging modesty, but to a lassitude consonant with the constipation, insomnia, and despair which render so many of his fictional creatures maddeningly immobile. It is hard to explain on entirely felicitous grounds the fact that his typical protagonists are caught up in hopeless dilemmas caused by failures in self-knowledge and self-control, and that they respond to bitter experience by infecting others with their own restless confusion, lying about for days doing nothing-not even eating, and finally acting on disappointment by capriciously pursuing illusions fatally reminiscent of the ones that got them into trouble in the first place. Key periods in the life described in the autobiographical pieces closely resemble depressingly prominent stages in the lives of the most imposing figures in the longer fiction. Learning is desultory, dislocation chronic, and progress uncommon.

By being faithful to the truth no matter into what dangerous places it leads him, he has created a book that is funny, frightening and impossible to put down. In an eloquent prefatory note, Mr. Singer defines literature as “the story of love and fate, a description of the mad hurricane of human passions and the struggle with them”. It is his characters’ cravings that drive them on-and as often as not, drag them down.

Believing in the soul, sustained by the residues of religious tradition, he knows that the world he writes about-a world in large part vanished-is morally real. He repudiates the nihilistic tendency of modernism and its esthetic ideology; its “forced originality,” in favor of “the originality of events”.

Literature in his view must have ethical content. The intense subjectivity of modernist heroes, even in Joyce and Proust, bores him. Though the writer must in some sense write about himself, the great writers deflect self-concern into a moral rendering of the objective world.

Singer’s aging refugees encounter in Manhattan a world in which Jewish dress and customs, the Yiddish language, and even worship itself seem barely to exist. Virtue comes to consist mainly in holding on to the crumbs of Jewishness that a dominant secular culture threatens to swallow. Understandably passive, these survivors often view themselves as the ironic remnants of a vanished way of life.

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