

Displacement of Penitence in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story*

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Abstract

Through his novels, Singer highlights how the characters suffer due to their doubt in the existence of God. Due to their conflict between faith and doubt, it results in family dissolution and finally they realize that without faith in God, they will end only in failure and finally repent and return to God. This is not only applicable to the characters in Singer's novels, but also applicable to the whole universe.

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Although Singer has lived the greater part of his life in the United States, his fictional subjects remain the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Poland. Whatever the role of the Jewish community, its very existence is indispensable to those novels set before 1939. After the Holocaust destroyed their world, and with it Singer's natural setting, his people grow more fragile, his themes more tentative. In his author's note to *Enemies, A Love Story*, Singer resists historical determinism: "The characters are not only Nazi victims of their own personalities and fates". Yet history has stamped upon them, as indelible as a concentration camp tattoo, a new identity-survivor. The more contemporary the setting, the more omnipresent the Holocaust and the more likely are Yiddish speaking Jews to be survivors.

Enemies, A Love Story-serialized in the *Forward* in 1966 and published in English in 1972-is the first of Singer's novels to be set in the post-Holocaust world. While the heroes of his two later works are also Polish-Jewish survivors, *The Penitent* and *Shosha* treat the Holocaust only tangentially. Neither Joseph Shapiro nor Aaron Greidinger seems fashioned primarily by his wartime experiences. Even Herman Broder "had been a victim long before Hitler's day"; yet his "sorrow that could not be assuaged," while not engendered by the Nazis, is shaped and intensified by the Holocaust. "Anyone who's gone through all I have is no longer a part of this world" (25), explains Herman, justifying his reclusive behavior to his employer, Rabbi Lampert. "Cliches, empty words," retorts the rabbi, unwittingly disclosing the unbridgeable chasm separating Holocaust survivors like Herman from those who passed the war safely in America, like himself. That Herman remains the same man he was before the war-"a fatalistic hedonist who lived in presuicidal gloom"-and that he is not above invoking the Holocaust to condone his own amorality, strips his endemic irresponsibility of its protective camouflage.

In Singer's complex portrait Herman is at once an innocent victim and a heedless victimizer. So strong is the sense of victimization in *Enemies* that Herman not only refuses to eat flesh but gets up in the middle of the night to free mice from Masha's traps. Because all of its principal characters are victims of the Holocaust, *Enemies* falls into that important subgenre of Jewish literature dedicated to remembrance. Even more critical than the task of memorializing the world of prewar Jewry is the sacred duty of bearing

witness to its annihilation. Among Hitler's countless victims were those whose burning desire to record the greatest infamy in human history may partially explain their survival. To their records, which consist mainly of diaries and retrospective memoirs, must be added a growing body of fiction like *Enemies* which seeks to re-create their experiences. Herman's wife, Tamara; his mistress, Masha; and Masha's mother, Shifrah Puah, survived both ghettos and concentration camps, the archetypal hells of Jewish incarceration and extermination.

Singer's Holocaust survivors can never forget eyewitnesses to the slaughter of their people. As in Herman's case, their personalities were not forged in the crucible of the Holocaust; but the Holocaust impinges so cruelly upon their present lives as to negate them. Ghosts of their former selves, they can only relieve the past and despair of the future.

The conflict between faith and doubt that plagues Reb Abraham Nissen extends to nearly every major character in *Enemies, A Love Story*. While it is true that the problem of belief dominates all of Singer's fiction, it is particularly critical in the post-Holocaust era. As always, the clash between belief and denial is reflected in his protagonist's inner life. Herman Brooder is another of Singer's moral schizophrenics who wish to believe but are unable to do so. Like earlier Singer heroes whose compulsive womanizing stems from alienation, Herman employs hedonism as a mode of evasion. By multiplying their sexual partners, they devour time which might otherwise be spent in grappling with the problem of leading meaningful lives.

Holocaust survivors are ambivalent about children, torn between the desire to restore Jewish losses and the fear of bringing innocents into an evil world. Shifrah Puah wants a grandchild, "someone to name after the murdered Jews" (184), and Yadwiga finally bears Herman's child. But the former is a saint, the latter a Gentile. More typical of the reactions of Singer's Holocaust survivors to the prospect of childbearing is Tamara's "What for? So that the Gentiles will have someone to burn?" (101). Yadwiga's pregnancy is, of course, accidental: Herman took care not to make Yadwiga pregnant. In a world in which one's children could be dragged away from their mother and shot, one had no right to have more children" (7). It is significant that on the eve of the High Holy Days with their promise of Jewish renewal, Herman admits that "of all his fears, the greatest was his fear of again becoming a father" (149). Herman's nihilism finds its most obsessive expression in his revulsion against children, as if by refusing to procreate he might abolish the creation he finds so depraved.

Theories about the inherent evil of human nature, ever present in Singer's fiction, crop up incessantly in *Enemies, A Love Story*. The Singer novel most directly concerned with the Holocaust, *Enemies, A Love Story* naturally contains some of his most bitter reflections on the human condition. Expanding the horror stories of Holocaust survivors into general conclusions about human nature is the task of several otherwise gratuitous passages. Typical of these is the long monologue delivered by Masha's former husband, Leon Tortshiner, during his meeting with Herman in a cafeteria. Ostensibly a tip-off about Masha's infidelities, Tortshiner's speech abstracts from her scandalous conduct a favourite Singer theory about the degeneration of the human species: "I believe, so to speak, in an evolution in reverse. The last man on earth will be both a criminal and a

madman” (163). Such theories reflect Singer’s view of history as cyclical nightmare and the Holocaust as the unholy paradigm of human action. More devastating even than their conclusions about human nature are their implications about the nature of God. Even the pious Reb Abraham Nissen cannot accept the position of orthodox Jews, “who tried to pretend that the Holocaust in Europe had never taken place” (245). A variation on this theme—that the Holocaust, like previous disasters, was visited upon the Jewish people by God as punishment for their sins—is equally unacceptable to the major characters in *Enemies, A Love Story*.

In the wake of the Holocaust doubts about the nature and existence of God raise the possibility that the vaunted covenant between God and His chosen people is a macabre hoax. Or the covenant may be the product of wishful thinking, the attempt of a desperate people to foist upon God a responsibility for history in general and for Jewish survival in particular that He is unready or unwilling to assume. God looks the other way during the Holocaust to signal His refusal to engage in a dialogue, much less to sign a contract, with a people whom He has not chosen but who have chosen Him. Masha claims that Hitler carried out God’s diabolical plan to destroy the Jews: “The true God hates us, but we have dreamed up an idol who loves us and has made us His chosen people.... the Gentile makes gods of stone and we of theories” (110). An analogous view of Judaism as a fragile and artificial construct surfaces in Herman’s metaphor: “a hothouse growth...kept thriving in an alien environment nourished by the belief in a Messiah, the hope of justice to come, the promise of the Bible—the Book that had hypnotized them forever (52). Masha and Herman define the essential unreality of a religion created from theories and books. In is just such a reliance on words that contributes to the Jewish condition that Hannah Arendt, one of the most profound political thinkers of the twentieth century, describes as worldlessness. The key feature of the modern Jewish history for Arendt worldlessness stems from the Jewish strategy of ensuring survival by dissociating from the dominant Christian society. Successful up to a point, this same strategy that sustained the Jewish community left it politically debilitated. Ignorant of conditions in the real world, Jews were slow to recognize threats to their survival and powerless to meet them. Hitler’s “terrible and bloody annihilation of individual Jews was preceded by the bloodless destruction of the Jewish people”. Arendt’s conclusions are implicit in the contentions of Masha and Herman that Jews have been betrayed by books. That Singer leaves the door to this interpretation ajar is evidence of the despair engendered by the Holocaust.

Linguistic isolation adds to the staggering losses suffered by Holocaust survivors. It is a constant reminder of lost family, lost friends, lost community and of their own marginality. Herman, Tamara, Masha, Shifrah Puah all claim that their lives effectively ended before they arrived in New York. They regard their survival as accidental and themselves as somehow superfluous. Often they pray for death and contemplate suicide, Masha’s eventual suicide, after having survived the death camps, is grimly ironic but not uncommon. Like the gifted young Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski, whose stories comprise some of the most harrowing accounts of concentration camp life, and who survived both Auschwitz and Dachau only to kill himself years later, Masha had lost the will to live. Herman stems from their need to immerse themselves in the present as a means of forgetting the past and warding off the future. When the future impinges

upon them and decisions must be made they can think only of swallowing an overdose or sleeping pills and dying together. So meaningless is the distinction between life and death however that they cannot consciously choose one over the other.

Even if the atomization of Jewish life in the wake of the Holocaust does not prefigure the end of Judaism itself, it raises the possibility that whatever Jewishness that survives will be radically altered. The shaved New York Jews among whom Reb Abraham Nissen disdains to be buried, the vulgar “modern Jewry” encountered by Herman and Masha in the Catskills, and, above all, Rabbi Lampert, epitomize the new Jew. Traditionally holy men and scholars, rabbis devoted themselves to studying and interpreting Torah and to transmitting Jewish values. Rabbi Lampert, who has made a fortune in real estate and whose speeches and articles are ghost-written by Herman, is the antithesis of the classical rabbi.

This corrosive portrait of an American rabbi who reduces God to an afterthought evidences Singer’s deepest pessimism about the future of Judaism. The symbolic failure of the American rabbinate to provide moral leadership for a reconstituted Jewish community throws Jews back on their individual resources. Masha’s compulsive attachment to Shifrah Puah “back from the other world,” to the moment when she refuses to leave her mother’s corpse unburied, constitutes the same desire to preserve the valued past that motivates Reb Abraham Nissen and his wife. It is significant that the suicidal Masha postpones taking her own life until after her mother’s death, and then does so only after specifying “a grave next to hers.” That Masha chooses death with Shifrah Puah over life with Herman testifies not only to the bankruptcy of selfish hedonism but to her indissoluble bonding to the Jewishness that is its antithesis.

Lacking a community, Jews retain their faith by revivifying a vanished past. Yet without communal reinforcement will and memory cannot guarantee the survival of a people. Individual gestures such as Reb Abraham Nissen’s wish to be buried on the Mount of Olives and Masha’s insistence on a grave next to her mother’s are limited affirmations at best, nonrepeatable and void of future application. Laden with the imagery of death, such gestures function chiefly as reminders that a viable Jewish community no longer exists.

This loss of a Jewish world occasions a marked thematic shift in the two novels in which Singer confronts the Holocaust most directly. In *The Family Moskat* and again in *Enemies*, the penitential journey of the hero is either aborted or nullified by the impending or actual destruction of the Jewish community. Asa Heshel Bannet and Herman Broder recognize the futility and waste of their hedonistic lives, suffer pangs of remorse, and in moments of intense soul-searching vow to repent. Since both are scions of traditional families, they understand from the outset that repentance consists of returning to Jewishness.

Herman’s disappearance confirms his inability to believe in a Jewish future. Herman distances himself from its ends, Jews grow adept at modes of evasion to ensure their survival as a people. As practised by Herman, “who no longer even had his faith in the Torah to depend on” (248), evasion is merely a strategy for dodging responsibility.

His faithlessness, abundantly evident in his duplicitous personal relationships and in his deceptive ghost-writing for Rabbi Lamperi, is most striking in his many outbursts against children. Herman's repudiation of children, born and unborn, is the verbal equivalent of Hitler's program of genocide, for it cancels the prospects of a Jewish future. Yet it is the same Herman, apparently indifferent to the fate of his people and fearing above all "to have his seed multiply like the sands of the sea" (248), who fathers Yadwiga's child, the symbolic hope of Jewish survival. Named Masha, the baby is the symbolic linchpin binding the Jewish past to the Jewish future. That Jewish hope must be vested in a child born to a convert is an irony previously employed by Singer in *The Slave*.

In *Enemies* only Yadwiga is inspired by the faith that was burned out of the Jewish Holocaust survivors. And only Yadwiga, who wants "to have a Jewish child", is able to shoulder the moral burden of preserving the Jewish people. Her faith is the antithesis of Herman's faithlessness, her affirmation the antidote to his denial. Yadwiga and little Masha, along with Tamara, form the nucleus of a reborn Jewish community.

Fittingly, they live in the very apartment vacated by Reb Abraham Nissen, whose bookstore devoted to Judaica Tamara maintains. Their symbolic reconstitution of the family invokes the ancient Jewish formula for survival. Only by the multiplication of such mini-communities can Jewish losses be offset and Judaism be preserved.

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