

Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Literary Apostate

S. Anin Leema

Assistant Professor of English, Nirmala College for Women, Coimbatore, India

Abstract

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.

KEYWORDS: Vision, sentimental, traditional, Polish Hasidic Element, legendry.

The most advanced and sophisticated Jewish writers of our time-Babel, Kafka, Bellow-have assimilated, even conquered, the whole tradition of modern literature while reminding us of the unmistakable historic core of the Jewish experience. Equally, a contemporary Yiddish writer like Isaac Bashevis Singer uses all the old Jewish capital of folklore, popular speech and legendry, yet from within this tradition itself is able to duplicate a good deal of the conscious absurdity, the sauciness, the abandon of modern art-without for a moment losing his obvious personal commitment to the immemorial Jewish vision of the world.

Singer swims happily in the whole ancient and modern tradition of the Jews-Jews are his life. But he would certainly agree with Mark Twain's reply to anti-Semites: "Jews are members of the human race: worse than that I cannot say of them." And he would also say, as Jews know better than anyone, that oppression is not good for people - - [Singer is among other things the most rueful and the funniest novelist of the erotic life in Yiddish literature].

I believe that Singer, in his short and humorous tales drawn from an old tradition, celebrates the dignity, mystery and unexpected joy of living with more art and fervor than any other writers alive. He is concerned with all the major themes, with good and evil, belief and doubt, action and contemplation, the nature of illusion and the joys of flesh, the falling-out of generations, and the mercy and rigor of the law.

Singer's vision is rarely sentimental; neither pessimism nor disgust [touches] his world, illuminated solely by a distant irony, lucid and chilling, creating the illusion that Singer's men and women are autonomous, beyond his control. More and more, the nameless narrators become personae with all the literal biographical baggage of the author. Usually this kind of whimsy is dangerous material to control and my response to Singer the reporter are tinged with irritation. But the result, the reader's sense of Singer's

helplessness in the face of his own creation; is the basis for the powerful effects of frustration and grief he creates.

It seems to me that the worldlier the author becomes the more private, idiosyncratic and self-indulgent the fiction grows. Again, Singer's delightful obsession with the supernatural which in his earlier fiction could be taken as symbolic of humanity's essential irrationality now seems less metaphoric, peculiarly literal. Nevertheless his literary craftsmanship and sophistication and the special Singer voice are here and gratifying; only in comparison with his past achievements does the book fall short, give less pleasure. Singer never deals directly, as far as I know, with the experience of occupation and deportation. Instead, that nightmare comes to us through the minds of the survivors, through the chilling foreknowledge of Polish life on the eve of the war. The Holocaust is seen in the implicit fate of Asa Heshel, who waits for the bombs to fall on Warsaw. That is despair without self-pity, numbing and empty gratification. It is a vision of heroic proportions, and our eyes widen in recognition that what is still mourned by Singer are the verities defeated. Here is literary humanism's last great tragic voice. After Singer, who has enough credence in human dignity to despair of its loss? After Singer, we are amid the knaves and the fools.

With his contempt for Knowledge-as-control, his desire to leave all those centuries of Jewish tradition behind him. Mailer represents the unrelenting effort and overreaching of the individual Jewish writer who seeks to be nothing but an individual (and if possible, a hero).

No one else in modern Jewish writing stems so completely from the Orthodox and even mystical East European tradition. No one else has turned "the tradition" into the freedom of fiction, the subtlety and mischievousness and truthfulness, of story-telling. Singer, totally a fiction writer but summing up the East European Yiddish tradition in his detached, fatalistic, plain-spoken way, represents a peculiar effortlessness in the writing of "Jewish fiction", when compared with the storminess of Bellow and Mailer. That is because Singer shares the Orthodox point of view without its belief, and he meticulously describes, without sentimentalizing any Jew whatever, a way of life which was murdered with the millions who lived it. The demons and spirits so prominent in Singer's East European narratives have in his "American ones become necessary to the survivors". It is chilling", V.S. Pritchett noticed, "to know that he is describing ghosts who cannot even haunt because their habitat has been wiped out."

Singer understands as few writers understand the distances that can separate men from men, men from women, Children from parents, Children from grandparents. Distances: not quarrels or bitterness or fixations, but moral and cultural space.

With few exceptions, Singer writes about Eastern European Jewry as it existed between the mid-seventeenth century and the beginning of the Second World War. More specifically, he tends to concentrate on the Polish Hasidic element, the fanatically Orthodox mystics, as we think of them today: Against this seemingly staid background Singer has created incredible tales of fantastic and lusty happenings. Out of situations in which modesty and control dominate there develop situations in which intemperance and insanity run wild. A strange world is made stranger by the incongruous and the

unexpected. Nevertheless, the reader for his part, is fascinated. The action and its developments are intriguing. The characters come to life with amazing vigor. And in spite of its strangeness and oddities, the world of Singer's creation comes vividly, making itself felt in all its fullness. But what is felt with clarity is not always clearly understood. From the very beginning the reader is beset by very perplexing problems of interpretation. Singer does not appear to be at all consistent. He seems to hop from view to view, from position to position; he never asserts a view firmly or directly. Rather, he infuses a tension of mystery into his stories by means of this apparent ambivalence.

Probably the oddest aspects of Singer's works are his themes. An inordinate stress, certainly for a Yiddish writer, is placed on sex-on evocative scenes of passionate sensualism. Astonishingly, the participants are often old-fashioned pious Jews with ear locks and beards, or devout, bewigged matrons. No combination seems incredible to Singer. Not even the aged and malformed are excluded from his lusty erotic imagination. Adultery is prevalent, orgies crown sequences of intemperate behavior, and shutters are insidiously closed in the middle of the day. The reader, conditioned to expect a more conventional version of the pre-modern world of the Hasidim, may well wonder, what ever happened to the Torah! - - -

One of the best writers of prose fiction in America today is Isaac Bashevis Singer, - - [who presents] a meaningful vision of reality consistently moral and beautifully individual. The nature of this vision may become clearer if we follow one theme which runs insistently through his work- the theme of faith.

Singer's greatest achievement is the convincing authenticity with which he handles the supernatural as a real but different dimension in human experience - - Certainly he has the problem faced by every visionary writer, that of convincingly representing the super sensual world with data of the apprehensible one. Poets and mystics tend to work in this medium with symbolic systems and their powers of allusive evocation. Singer does too, although since the frame of reference he uses is generally unfamiliar the reader may only sense the solidity it gives his work without knowing what it is or how it works. On the other hand, as a novelist Singer uses a very credible Psychology-one is almost tempted to say a Psychopathology - to develop characters and situations susceptible of producing a visionary or transcendental resonance.

Singer's mythology is most interesting. Being dualistic it assumes a certain kind of metaphysical balance. Unstable though that might appear to be in human experience. In Kabbalistic tradition this unstable dualism acquires a vast, interlocking significance.

No other living writer has yielded himself so completely and recklessly as has Isaac Bashevis Singer to the claims of the human imagination. Singer writes in Yiddish, a language that no amount of energy or affection seems likely to save from extinction. He writes about a world that is gone, destroyed with a brutality beyond historical comparison. He writes within a culture, the remnant of Yiddish in the western world that is more than a little dubious about his purpose and stress. He seems to take entirely for granted his role as a traditional story-teller speaking to an audience attuned to his every hint and nuance, an audience that values story-telling both in its own right and as a binding communal action-but also, as it happens, an audience that keeps fading week by

week, shrinking day by day. And he does all this without a sigh or apology, without so much as a Jewish gown. It strikes one as a kind of inspired madness: here is a man living in New York City, a sophisticated and clever writer, who composes stories about places like Frampol, Bilgoray, Kreshev, as if they were still there. His work is shot through with the bravado of a performer who enjoys making his listeners gasp, weep, laugh, and yearn for more. Above and beyond everything else he is a great performer, in ways that remind one of Twain, Dickens, Sholom Aleichem - - - Singer's stories claim attention through their vivacity and strangeness of surface. He is devoted to the grotesque, the demonic, the erotic, the quasi-mystical.

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 perspective; 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.

References

1. Alexander, Edward. Isaac Bashevis Singer. Boston: Twayne Publishers. 1980.
2. Andersen, David M. Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations with Abraham. Berkeley, California. Modern Fiction Studies 16 (Winter 1970-71).
3. Allentuck, Maria Ed. The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP. 1969.
4. Bezanker, Abraham. Isaac Bashevis Singer's Crisis of Identity. Critique 14. 1972.