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“A Palace on a Mountaintop”: Building Isaac Bashevis Singer’s House of Justice

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“A Palace on a Mountaintop”: Building Isaac Bashevis Singer’s House of Justice

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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To my family, for always being in my corner.

המשך יבוא...

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Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination, and that such illumination may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given them on earth.

—Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*

Introduction

In “The Spinoza of Market Street,” Dr. Fischelson’s gaze extends past his cramped attic room towards the stretching infinity above and below it. Standing on the balcony, he perceives a world divided, the brightness of the starry cosmos above and the crowded, noisy Market Street below, where “thieves, prostitutes, gamblers, and fences loafed in the square which looked from above like a pretzel covered with poppy seeds... A peddler with a keg of lemonade on his back pierced the general din with his intermittent cries. A watermelon vendor shouted in a savage voice, and the long knife which he used for cutting the fruit dripped with the blood-like juice.”¹ From his garret balcony Dr. Fischelson observes the eternal and the temporal, cosmic and human substance, and himself between them. While the short story describes his ascension to the heights of Spinozist rationality and his return through an acceptance of the bodily, emotive pleasures of love, it functions in the frame of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s bibliography as a crucial deliberation over place, vantage, and promise, reaching beyond its particulars and into the categorical structure of his writings.

It was on the balcony of the family home on Warsaw’s Krochmalna Street where young Singer encountered the limits and extensions of his own imagination, where he could taste the other worlds he was necessarily excluded from as not only the son of Pinchos Menachem, a devoted Hasidic rabbi, but also the stubborn victim of his own difference. Recalling his

¹ *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1982), 81–82.

childhood, Singer writes of venturing onto the balcony to watch the people and their movements on the street below, and to wonder at the vastness of the sky above:

I stood on the balcony in my satin gabardine and my velvet hat, and gazed above me. How vast was this world, and how rich in all kinds of people and strange happenings! And how high was the sky above the rooftops! And how deep the earth beneath the flagstones! And why did men and women love each other? And where was God, who was constantly spoken of in our house? I was amazed, delighted, entranced. I felt that I must solve this riddle, I alone, with my own understanding.”²

The balcony, in Singer’s early life, is the place from which his imagination launches and extends itself beyond the bounds of the home, the gesture of a divided realm, above and below, assuming shape and form in his later works. Questions about the mystery of the universe and its varied complexity spring from the strange business of the street, informed at the same time by the religious devotion within the home, where the presence of God “who was constantly spoken of,” is felt everywhere.

For Pinchos Menachem, the balcony was already dangerously close in proximity to irreverence, profanity, and impossible violence, the inner rooms of the home a sanctuary in their midst. His rejection of the outside world and Singer’s inflamed curiosity about it is made clear in recollections of Singer’s childhood. “Father himself never stepped out on the balcony, except on very hot summer evenings, when the heat indoors was unbearable. The balcony was already a part of the street, of the crowd, of the Gentile world and its savagery,” he recounts in *In My Father’s Court*.³ In his place between the divided worlds of his father’s purview and the people

² Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 1st Farrar, Straus and Giroux pbk. ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 72.

³ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 77.

and places outside it, Singer understood his own difference, his sense of “exist[ing] on several levels,” as he says. Though his words are spatially evocative, they reveal also a distinct embarrassment at the fact of his precociousness. His endless pondering, philosophical curiosity, and heavy anxiety at the thought of injustice were unusual traits in a child, and they suffused even his adult recollection with a kind of uncomfortable awareness of his separation from others:

I was a cheder boy, yet I probed the eternal questions. I asked a question about the Gemara and tried to explain the mysteries of Zeno. I studied the cabala and I went down to play tag and hide-and-seek with the boys in the courtyard. I was aware of being quite different from all the other boys, and I was deeply ashamed of this fact. Simultaneously I read Dostoevski in Yiddish translation and penny dreadfuls that I bought on Twarda Street for a kopeck. I suffered deep crises, was subject to hallucinations.⁴

Singer characterizes his divergence almost as a form of impairment, cause for shame and confusion. And while he was different from others, he was also divided within his own interests, reading Dostoyevsky in translation and purchasing popular fictions, “penny dreadfuls,” to enjoy at the same time. “This was precisely what I was—cloven, torn, perhaps a single body with many souls each pulling in a different direction,”⁵ he writes, describing the feeling as it reappeared in his adult years.

The unusual features of the family home also served to impress upon Singer the fact of his difference. Unlike the neighbors whose houses were filled with “carpets, pictures on the walls, copper bowls, lamps, and figurines,” his own “was always half unfurnished. Father’s study

⁴ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile*, 1st ed (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1984), 17.

⁵ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 94.

was empty except for books. In the bedroom there were two bedsteads, and that was all.”⁶ The spare and unassuming rooms reflected Pinchos Menachem’s aversion to embellishment and luxury, appropriate for his position as rabbi to the residents of Krochmalna Street. His rabbinical court, the Beth Din, kept from the home, dealt with various civil concerns including granting bills of divorce, settling financial disagreements, and occasionally dealing with mild criminal offenses. Singer describes the Beth Din—in English translation “house of justice”—in his own words, defining “a kind of blend of a court of law, synagogue, house of study, and, if you will, a psychoanalyst’s office where people of troubled spirit could come to unburden themselves.”⁷ Raised in this setting, Singer heard the struggles and triumphs of the neighboring Jews, listened to their stories and judged their characters from his position behind the door of his father’s study. Within the home, he confesses, he “listen[ed] to everything: to the stories of the Chassidim, to my brother’s debates with my parents, to the arguments of the litigants who came for the ‘Din Torah’...I was especially interested in the conflict between couples who sought divorce.”⁸

While Pinchos Menachem spent his days immersed in study and in the needs of the community, Singer’s preoccupation with the subjects of morality and ethics took another shape, moving him towards literature and the secular world of Warsaw’s writer’s clubs, and away from rabbinical legacy. Even in his departure, Singer maintained unbreakable ties to his childhood, taking on his mother’s name, Bathsheba, as his own literary reconstruction, “Bashevis,” under

⁶ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 67.

⁷ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, vii.

⁸ Singer, *Love and Exile*, xvii.

which he penned his fiction for the rest of his life. He describes this act as almost a religious affirmation of his history, revealing to Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, “This name is sacred to me, and I won’t sign my journalism with it.”⁹ “Bashevis” was then the author of fiction written with greatest care, work that engaged the pressing questions of love, suffering, tradition, dissolution, the anxiety of being as he understood it.

This project asks how ethics and morality function under the pressure of cataclysm in Singer’s bibliography. Swimming in questions of identity unearthed by radical change, his writing puts forth a picture of the stumbling transformations and painful mutability of Jewish life, discarding a conception of its eternal fixedness. By placing his work within its history, the political and social turmoil of the twentieth century swirling, this project aims to trace the development of Singer’s conception of justice, his ethical imagination, necessarily informed by the world in which he was raised and by the political machinations through which it was destroyed.

The following pages examine a selection of Singer’s novels, short stories, and autobiographical sketches that uncover moments of tension, disorder, and disillusionment within Jewish history. *Love and Exile* and *In My Father’s Court*, the memoiristic subjects of the first chapter, describe Singer’s personal history as inseparable from the creative, fictitious work of his later life, revealing a rooted dependence on the memory of his Hasidic upbringing even as he later defined himself against its strictures and orthodoxy. The second chapter follows Herman Broder in *Enemies, a Love Story*, confronting pricks of residual trauma after the Holocaust, and

⁹ Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, “An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer,” in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 9.

their manifestation in the devastating impulse to hide, pass unseen, to escape his own liminality. *Satan in Goray*, in the final section, charts the path of destruction followed by worshippers of a false messiah in a Polish shtetl, the moral depravity a consequence of unequivocal trust in miracle. In each work, Singer gives voice to the questions of continuity and dissolutions, presence and absence, successively building a peeking ethical perspective through which the lives of his characters brightly illumine our own.

Chapter One

Isaac Bashevis Singer as Textual and Paratextual Presence: *Love and Exile* and *In My Father's Court*

“The suspense in my life and in my writing fused in such a fashion that I often didn’t know where one began and the other ended,”¹⁰ reveals Isaac Bashevis Singer in his collection of autobiographical fragments, *Love and Exile* (1984). Already over eighty years old at the time of its publication, Singer intended the project to continue the work of his first autobiographical treatment of his childhood, *In My Father's Court* (1962), an amalgam of early memories and later hindsight, both showing how the movements of his private life manifested themselves in large and small ways within his work. This notable “fusion” of life and art stresses the assumed separation between nonfiction and fiction, drawing readers into an intimate space in which Singer’s sense of the world becomes synonymous with his fictitious forming of it. As Leslie Fiedler relevantly argues, each Singer character “sees always in his mirror the same face, white-skinned, blue-eyed, red-headed but balding fast”¹¹ that characterize Singer himself, becoming an ever-reflective rendering of the author.

In the Author’s Note before *Love and Exile*, Singer blurs conventions of genre, confusing the apparent clarity of the autobiographical form. The contents of the book, he writes, should be understood as “spiritual autobiography, fiction set against a background of truth, or contributions to an autobiography I never intend to write.” The work’s fragmentation, being a

¹⁰ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 131.

¹¹ Leslie Fiedler, “Isaac Bashevis Singer; or, The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer,” in *Critical Essays on Isaac Bashevis Singer* ed. Grace Farrell (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1996), 116.

series of chronological though otherwise disparately arranged moments of Singer's past, escapes both generic and stylistic conclusiveness. Having established the incompleteness of the work, the impossibility of a full account of his life in all of "its good and bad deeds, its mistakes and follies," Singer reminds readers that the details are only "in God's archive, in His divine computer." There, his words assure us, "nothing is ever lost." Insofar as it is neither a fully developed autobiography (rather, a "contribution to an autobiography [Singer] never intend[s] to write") nor a work of fiction, it hovers between formal distinctions. Similarly, *In My Father's Court* is prefaced as "a literary experiment," an "attempt to combine two styles—that of memoirs and that of belles-lettres"¹² in echoing categorical evasion.

Scholarship has pointed to the fact of his genre-bending. David Neal Miller, parsing the huge number of interviews Singer gave over his lifetime, suggests that his treatment of the form—a "radical reorientation of generic expectation"—was in service of transforming widely scattered interviews into a single work of literary invention. Singer's unusual contextual erasure, Miller shows, allows the interviews to lose their biographical focus in service of a larger artistic cohesion. Published in the same year that *Love and Exile* came to print, "Isaac Bashevis Singer: The Interview as Fictional Genre" submits:

Singer offers these interviews not as biographical documents but as literary texts—that is, as utterances not dependent upon a reconstruction of their original instrumental contexts for proper apprehension... The insistent intertextualities that we have begun to explore undermine the discreteness of a given interview and encourage the reader to view it as a segment of a single, far larger, and as yet unfinished, work.¹³

¹² Singer, "Author's Note," in *In My Father's Court*, vii.

¹³ David Neal Miller, "Isaac Bashevis Singer: The Interview as Fictional Genre," *Contemporary Literature* 25, no. 2 (1984): 198, doi:10.2307/1208005.

Miller notes Singer's practice of "mov[ing] personal history toward fiction" as a process by which he can establish "the interview as a genre on the margin of literariness."¹⁴ The interviews, he shows, inch toward fictiveness in ways visible through examining their titles, for one example. Where earlier pieces retained labels like "'A Conversation with...,' 'An Interview with...,'" often later work is given framing that seems to elide words whose purpose is to indicate the interview form or, Miller says, its origins as oral communication. "'The Magician of West 86th Street,' 'His Demons are Real,' 'The Story of Isaac,'"¹⁵ describe the later conversations of Miller's probing, suggesting a short story-like quality to the supposed biographically truthful interviews.

Singer's approach to the interview genre requires that readers "participate with him in the game."¹⁶ Even as he defers power in calling his audience the ultimate interpreters of his fiction, Miller's analysis suggests the author's own control over the interview narrative and therefore readers' reception of both fictive and nonfictive texts—his personal convictions and history are studded within both. The sketches of his early life experience in *Love and Exile*, for example, seem to originate the ethical logic of later (non-autobiographical) books, to preface and even to explicate their moral concerns. The ethics of consuming meat, an oft-repeated motif in Singer's fiction, is treated early in the story of his childhood. In his own argument, Miller makes use of Singer's vegetarianism to illustrate his manipulation of the interview form. In his example, a conversation with Grace Farrell Lee, Singer voices agreement with her suggestion of hopelessness as humanity's unifying cry against God, only to supplant her interpretation with the

¹⁴ Miller, "The Interview as Fictional Genre," 198.

¹⁵ Miller, "The Interview as Fictional Genre," 191.

¹⁶ Miller, "The Interview as Fictional Genre," 200.

importance of remembering also the animal in anguish. Miller notes this “lateral” slippage “into a none-too-subtle denunciation of carnivorousism.” Quoting Singer, “Not only does anguish unite the Jewish and the non-Jewish, but the man and the animal. It does not express it in words, but when an animal screams it is the same scream as that of a human being. The animal also asks God, why have you forsaken us?”¹⁷ The incursion of Singer’s personal ethics into the conversation, into the fabric of the short story discussed, shows his willingness to utilize the interview to gesture towards his self-admitted particularity, its overt and covert presence within his writings.

The opening pages of *Love and Exile* offer some insight into Singer’s thematic fixation on animals. Describing his childhood imagination already active in chasing answers to the mysteries of the world, Singer writes of coming face to face with the question of morality. As a boy, he would “catch flies, tear off their wings and put them into boxes of matches with a drop of water and a grain of sugar for nourishment,” only later perceiving the cruelty of the game in a crushing realization: “It occurred to me that I was committing terrible crimes against those creatures just because I was bigger than they, stronger, and defter... This thought tormented me to such a degree that for a long time I could think about nothing else. I began to repent and to pray to God to forgive my vicious deeds.”¹⁸ The heaviness of this repentance and prayer, and the resulting questions—“Has a fly a soul? Can its soul go up to Paradise and be compensated for its suffering?”¹⁹—cause Singer to imagine for the first time his own responsibility, and his

¹⁷ Miller, “The Interview as Fictional Genre,” 190.

¹⁸ Singer, *Love and Exile*, xxi-xxii.

¹⁹ Singer, *Love and Exile*, xxii.

conception of justice. This moment is isolated in *Love and Exile* as an origin spark to launch the questioning of his later life, an early strand of thought that would make its way into nearly all his works, developing repetitiousness even within his autobiographical sketches. The following paragraph describes the widening outwards of his ethical focus from this particle of thought:

The ponderings about the suffering of flies expanded and soon included all people, all animals, all lands, all times. I had passed Yanash's bazaar a number of times and had seen the slaughterers killing chickens, ducks, geese. The butchers began to pluck their feathers even while those creatures were still alive and wallowing in their own blood. I once saw my own mother kill a trembling fish for the Sabbath. My mother told me that when a fish is eaten for the honor of the Sabbath and a pious Jew makes a blessing over it, its spirit is elevated. Sometimes sinful souls of humans enter the fish and the fish's death is an atonement for sins of those souls. But how about the fish that are not killed for the Sabbath? How about the fish that are eaten by Gentiles or by sinners? And how about the pigs that are killed, scorched in hot water while still alive? What spirit was atoned in them? Where is their compensation for the tortures they went through? Neither my father nor my mother nor the morality books that I began to read in Yiddish translation or even in Hebrew, could give me a satisfying answer. I had studied in the Book of Leviticus about the sacrifices the priests used to burn on the altar: the sheep, the rams, the goats, and the doves whose heads they wrung off and whose blood they sprung as a sweet savor unto the Lord. And again and again I asked myself why should God, the Creator of all men and all creatures, enjoy these horrors?²⁰

Describing the insufficiency of the answers his mother, father, and older brother Israel Joshua offered him, the insufficiency even of the seminal books on the subject of ethical behavior, he continues pondering, questioning, considering. Though clarifying that his interest in morality soon "included all people" in addition to animals, Singer keeps his focus on the latter and the specific tragedy of their sacrifice. This thinking can be traced across genres, novels and short stories both, where the heavy theme of right behavior hangs on the question of animal life.

²⁰ Singer, *Love and Exile*, xxii.

In “The Slaughterer,” a short story saturated with the desperation of a ritual slaughterer unable to reconcile his work with his revulsion towards bloodshed, Singer is particularly equipped to insert his feelings on the matter. While Yoineh Meir is “softhearted; he could not bear the sight of blood,” he is nonetheless tasked with the duties of kosher butcher. After all, the village rabbi insists in a letter addressed to him, “Man may not be more compassionate than the Almighty, the Source of all compassion. When you slaughter an animal with a pure knife and with piety, you liberate the soul that resides in it. For it is well known that the souls of saints often transmigrate into the bodies of cows, fowl, and fish to do penance for some offense.”²¹ The idea of animal sacrifice as spiritual atonement bears a striking resemblance to the logic Singer met as a child, in the answers his mother gave to his early questions. Despite this, Yoineh Meir remains as unconvinced as his author, spending increasing hours poring over Kabbalistic works in which there were “no stomachs and intestines, no hearts or lungs or livers, no membranes, and no impurities.”²² He soon also encounters the same deliberations we recognize as pangs in Singer’s own childhood. “Where did flies come from?” Yoineh Meir asks the universe, “Were they born out of their mother’s womb, or did they hatch from eggs?” Finally, in a moment of spiralling madness spiked by his inability to reconcile the teachings of God with the act of killing, Yoineh Meir, woken from sleep,

went outside and began to walk toward the river, the bridge, the wood. His prayer shawl and phylacteries? He needed none! The parchment was taken from the hide of a cow. The cases of the phylacteries were made of calf’s leather. The Torah itself was made of animal skin. ‘Father in Heaven, Thou art a slaughterer!’ a voice cried in Yoineh Meir. ‘Thou art a slaughterer and the Angel of Death! The whole world is a slaughterhouse!’”²³

²¹ *The Collected Stories*, 207.

²² *The Collected Stories*, 209.

²³ *The Collected Stories*, 215.

As he walks, he perceives “the sky [turn] red as blood” and the sun cresting, “a round skull pushed up out of the bloody sea as out of the womb of a woman in childbirth,” the stark image reflecting a consuming obsession with permutations of flesh. The close of the story manages a still greater cynicism, offering a sparse paragraph after Yoineh Meir’s suicide announcing his replacement and the village’s return to normalcy. Singer concludes tersely: “Because it was the holiday season and there was danger that Kolomir might remain without meat, the community hastily dispatched two messengers to bring a new slaughterer.”²⁴

This sort of “autobiographical fiction” that Singer practices naturally in his autobiographies, interviews, and short stories also appears in his novels. *The Penitent*, a short work published in 1983, finds itself mired in familiar controversies. Joseph Shapiro, the character most likely to be confused with his author on multiple counts—not least because he is “inevitably a crusading vegetarian”²⁵—is fixated on the problems circling the modern Jew, on the survival of Jewish identity. The solution to modernity’s continual erosion of tradition, Shapiro vehemently concludes, is a complete reversion to the piety and faith of Old World Judaism. Not only must Jews “become Jewish” again, he insists, they must also embrace their faith at the expense of the rapidly modernizing world. Shapiro understands that he must “turn to the very opposite of it...must become someone as far removed from this kind of culture as our grandfathers had been.”²⁶ In a categorical assertion, he lays down the ultimate opinion that “the

²⁴ *The Collected Stories*, 215.

²⁵ Fiedler, “The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer,” 116.

²⁶ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Penitent* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), 78.

slightest compromise that you make with the pagan culture of our time is a gesture toward evil.”

²⁷ The particular religious dogmatism threading through the work, which is written in confessional style as a monologue in the voice of Shapiro, might almost suggest a reading in which our main character is really Singer himself, or his mouthpiece. Because he engages in the same circling ethical concerns, the same moral denominators, and a similar hope for world Jewry, Shapiro has often been conflated with his creator even as Singer resists this interpretation, most clearly in the Author’s Note at the close of the book, where he inserts his own voice to quell the comparison. Referencing an interview with Richard Burgin, he insists, “In the novel, Joseph Shapiro continuously berates men and women who have forsaken God, the Torah, and the Shulhan Arukh, but in that interview I voiced a severe protest against creation and the Creator. I recall saying that although I believed in God and admired His divine wisdom, I could not see or glorify His mercy.”²⁸ Singer here, clearly at pains to establish distance from Shapiro, addresses himself directly to his readers and, notably, inserts the content of an interview within the very pages of the fictional *Penitent*. The insertion becomes then equal confirmation of both a calculated “fictiveness” in Singer’s interviews and of the biographical truth of his fiction.

In “Author versus Narrator in *The Penitent*: Reconsidering Isaac Bashevis Singer’s ‘Tirade,’” Joseph Sherman looks with close attention at the novel and its afternote. Though critics have dwelled on the work’s moralizing tone, perceiving it as an uncompromising “tirade,” Sherman offers new engagement with its meaning. The work is, he posits, “carefully orchestrated to produce, not an unambiguous statement from the author, but rather a

²⁷ Singer, *The Penitent*, 79.

²⁸ Singer, *The Penitent*, 116.

problematical debate, in which the author is in effect arguing with himself about his most abiding concerns.”²⁹ Rather than conceptualizing the text as presenting a fixed, dogmatic point of view shared between title character and author, a closer reading sees Singer in the act of debate with the crosscurrents of his own belief. The moral certainty and obsessiveness should not be seen as a reflection of Singer’s own viewpoint, but as an attempt to isolate the particular religious fervor he cannot himself understand, to present it alone, starkly, in order to examine it.

Singer’s slippage into *The Penitent* through its afternote reaffirms the inextricability of his personal beliefs from the fiction he crafts. As a show of generic contortion, the event throws David Neal Miller’s observations about Singer’s interviews into clear relief—the use of his own dialogue within the novel is clearly noted. Before introducing it into the fictional landscape, Singer prefaces with perhaps calculated humbleness, “Like other writers, I nurture the illusion that there exists at least one reader who follows everything I have published, even things I have said in interviews. This devoted reader might have read my conversation with Richard Burgin in the magazine section of *The New York Times*, upon my return from Stockholm in January 1979.”

³⁰ The precisely placed and dated interview is, of course, where Singer expresses opinions “the opposite of what the protagonist of *The Penitent* is saying.” Importantly, the suggestion of the afternote, that readers familiar with his collective writings will be most ready to discern the delicate nuance of *The Penitent*, is evidence of his paratextuality, his reliance on information seemingly far removed from the work under consideration. His invocation of the conversation

²⁹ Joseph Sherman, “Author versus Narrator in *The Penitent*: Reconsidering Isaac Bashevis Singer’s ‘Tirade,’ *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 18, no. 3 (1988), 245.

³⁰ Singer, *The Penitent*, 115.

with Richard Burgin, its effective placement as an addendum to the fictional story, allows for readings like Sherman's own, whereby "Singer himself steps out of the frame of the story"³¹ so as to define its terms, becoming an extratextual character. We might infer from this that almost none of his work stands alone, each story, essay, novel, interview instead maintaining a line of dependence on the variously scattered pieces and parts of the author's own history.

Joseph Shapiro (like Yoineh Meir, among others) gives frequent voice to the words and ideas Singer has himself expressed in other discursive modes, effectively creating the rippling, mirroring intertextuality we have observed across the expanse of writings. When Shapiro admits to readers in *The Penitent*, "I had the feeling that I was reading this out of some book. My life had turned into a story,"³² the words call to mind Singer's own admission of the "fusion" of his life and art at the opening of this chapter. In another instance, Shapiro's similar concern for animal welfare parallels the thought of Yoineh Meir, rendering him temporarily incapable of the full religious devotion he champions. In a discouraging moment of prayer, Shapiro,

started to pray and was assailed by painful thoughts. Even as I wound the thongs around my arm and kissed the fringes, the Evil Spirit harangued me: 'You're acting out a farce. You know damn well that the phylacteries are hunks of leather torn from the skin of a cow. And that what you're reciting—the firstborn of an ass must be redeemed with a sheep, otherwise the ass's head must be chopped off—is a product of Phoenician idolatry. The cow did not deserve to have its hide stripped, nor did the sheep deserve to be sacrificed, nor did the firstborn ass deserve to lose its head.'³³

³¹ Sherman, "Author versus Narrator," 245.

³² Singer, *The Penitent*, 45.

³³ Singer, *The Penitent*, 92.

It is Shapiro's personal morality, his clear conception of animal suffering, that infiltrates and contaminates the practice of Judaism. As with Yoineh Meir, ritual serves to remind him in painful bursts of the dissonance between private thinking and traditional morality. While the passage here suggests our character's ambivalence, he does not follow the slaughterer's path, instead keeping even stricter observance for his doubts. Humbled, he recovers respect for God and takes up the values of orthodox practice definitively.

While Shapiro girds himself against doubt in the ultraorthodox Mea Shearim enclave of Jerusalem, having "finally made peace with the cruelty of life, and the violence of man's history," Singer's afternote makes no mystery of his own position, announcing, "I haven't."³⁴ Yet for all its divergence from the author's own understanding of morality, *The Penitent* still keeps important commonality. The glimpse that readers catch of Shapiro's indictment of carnivorousism is only one such agreement, supplemented by Singer's claim in the afternote that "to me, a belief in God and a protest against the laws of life are not contradictory." He continues, "There is a great element of protest in all religion. Those who dedicate their lives to serving God have often dared to question His justice and to rebel against His seeming neutrality in man's struggle between good and evil. I feel therefore that there is no basic difference between rebellion and prayer."³⁵ In *Love and Exile* this moral thinking is explicitly named. Singer discusses the emergence of his "ethic," writing, "I had, one might say, created my own basis for an ethic—not a social ethic nor a religious one, but an ethic of protest. This ethic of protest, I told myself, existed in all

³⁴ Singer, *The Penitent*, 116.

³⁵ Singer, *The Penitent*, 116.

people, in all animals, and in everything that lived and suffered.”³⁶ This protest invokes God in order to act contrary to His seeming indifference toward manifold suffering; to “spite” Him becomes nothing less than an ethical responsibility. “I have built my whole morality on this protest,”³⁷ he confesses to Grace Farrell Lee. While Shapiro struggles to reconcile his compassion for animals with religious tradition, Singer makes empathy the premise of his. Simultaneously building upon and rejecting various aspects of Jewish tradition, it vocally protests the laws and cycles of the natural world as Singer perceived them. Perhaps for this reason *The Penitent*, in its competing attitudes of strident orthodoxy and faltering indecision, was reportedly his own best-loved work.³⁸

In a defining moment of his literary career, accepting the 1978 Nobel Prize in Literature, Singer reflected on the subject of his personal belief:

I have many times resigned myself to never finding a true way out. But a new hope always emerges telling me that it is not yet too late for all of us to take stock and make a decision. I was brought up to believe in free will. Although I came to doubt all revelation, I can never accept the idea that the Universe is a physical or chemical accident, a result of blind evolution...There must be a way for man to attain all possible pleasures, all the powers and knowledge that nature can grant him, and still serve God – a God who speaks in deeds, not in words, and whose vocabulary is the Cosmos.³⁹

“A true way out” of the impossible ethical deliberations that pressed Singer still eluded him when he accepted the Prize in December of 1978. Since he had by this time grown a formidable

³⁶ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 44.

³⁷ Grace Farrell Lee and Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 9, no. 2 (1976): 156, doi:10.2307/1345371.

³⁸ Sherman, “Author versus Narrator,” 255.

³⁹ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1978,” *NobelPrize.Org*, accessed May 2, 2020, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1978/singer/lecture/>.

literary career, we can wonder if his own doubt and disillusion aided his craft, in the forming of character and narrative. His work after all wonders at the same things he does, asks the same questions, and finds itself almost always inseparable in its concerns from its creator. Singer's storytelling binds itself to the ever-present question of a morphing Judaism, structuring plot from the uneasiness of this historicity, never quite managing resolution as it mirrors the author's own indecision.

In *Love and Exile*, Singer devotes pages to explicating the effects of this personal morality. Though his "ethic of protest" abates some of the pushing anxieties of living in the world, he remembers already as young man discovering the artistic and ideological loneliness these beliefs subjected him to:

I often spoke with great rage against God, but I had never ceased to believe in His existence. I wrote about spirits, demons, cabalists, dybbuks. Many Yiddish writers and readers had cut loose from their Jewish roots and from the juices upon which they had been nourished. They yearned once and for all to tear away from the ghetto and its culture—some as Zionists, others as radicals. Both factions preached worldliness. But I remained spiritually rooted deep in the Middle Ages (or so I was told). I evoked in my work memories and emotions that the worldly reader sought to forget and factually had forgotten. To the pious Jews, on the other hand, I was a heretic and a blasphemer. I saw to my astonishment that I belonged neither to my own people nor to any other peoples. Instead of fighting in my writings the political leaders of a decadent Europe and helping to build a new world, I waged a private war against the Almighty.⁴⁰

In his conflation of faith and doubt, Singer places himself at odds with each section of the Jewish community, distanced from both religious Jews, worldly Zionists, and secular "radicals," allowing, perhaps forcing, him to wage a "private war against the Almighty." This private war

⁴⁰ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 39-40.

appeared in various ways within his writing, though he seemed to be working alone in this realm too. Yiddish writers in the early and mid twentieth century had moved away from the “Middle Ages,” the culture of the ghetto in which Singer had been told his work remained, and were interested in exploring newer vistas through modern political engagement. Singer’s objection to these cultural and political ideologies he saw furiously orbiting and fractioning Jewish life even becomes a part of his conception of morality. Jan Schwarz observes that he was ultimately spiritually and socially displaced, “rooted neither here nor there in a self-chosen no man’s land of individual exile...the crux of Singer’s life story in *Globn un tsveyfl* [*Love and Exile*] became his loss of faith in both his father’s God and his brother’s modernity.”⁴¹ Neither fit within Singer’s conception of the universe. Indeed he saw need to address the place of political thought—his brother Israel Joshua’s described modernity—within fiction even in Stockholm, opening his Nobel speech by declaring forthright that “the storyteller and poet of our time, as in any other time, must be an entertainer of the spirit in the full sense of the word, not just a preacher of social or political ideals.”⁴²

In the last chapter of *In My Father’s Court*, “The New Winds,” Singer illustrates this attitude through the memory of lived experience, describing his turn from the popular youth movements of his teens—religious breakaway movements, Bolshevism, Zionism, Bundist socialism, communism—towards a solitary respite in literature. In an embrace of language, books, the brightening worlds of words, he would spend days “on an overturned bookcase in

⁴¹ Jan Schwarz, *Imagining Lives: Autobiographical Fiction of Yiddish Writers* (Madison, Wisc: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 151.

⁴² “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1978.”

the attic...read[ing] among old pots, broken barrels, and stacks of pages torn from sacred books.” “Omnivorously,” he writes,

I read stories, novels, plays, essays, original works in Yiddish, and translations. As I read, I decided which was good, which mediocre, and where truth and falsity lay. At that time America was sending us sacks of white flour and translations of European writers, and those books entranced me. I read Reisen, Strindberg, Don Kaplanovitch, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Maupassant, and Chekhov. One day [a friend] brought me *The Problem of Good and Evil*, by Hillel Zeitlin, and I devoured it. In this book Zeitlin gave the history and summation of world philosophy and the philosophy of the Jews. Sometime later I discovered Stupnicki’s book on Spinoza.⁴³

Though Singer mentions the sacks of flour sent from the United States to Poland, the crates of accompanying books served the purposes of nourishment more manifestly; Singer was obsessed with the history of thought he could glean from the novels, plays, and essays. Even as a child he recounts reaching for the mysteries of life, attempting through the machinations of his imagination to understand them. “I even began to write, in my own fashion. Taking sheets of paper from my father’s drawer, I covered them with scribbles and freakish sketches. I was so eager...that I could scarcely wait for the Sabbath to terminate so that I could get back to it.”⁴⁴ The impulsive questioning took shape on the stolen pages where Singer formed early “scribbles and freakish sketches,” his “infantile” writing.

Importantly, the relation between a storytelling tradition and a marked Jewish tradition is brought forth by Singer in his Nobel speech, where he fuses the two in service of a larger mission. His moralistic belief in the sanctity of letters becomes clear when he links the traditions as a singular impulse in Jewish history, saying,

⁴³ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 304.

⁴⁴ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 155.

I am not ashamed to admit that I belong to those who fantasize that literature is capable of bringing new horizons and new perspectives – philosophical, religious, aesthetic and even social. In the history of old Jewish literature there was never any basic difference between the poet and the prophet. Our ancient poetry often became law and a way of life.⁴⁵

Singer suggests an aim of his writing perhaps previously hidden—the adoption of new modes of living through storytelling. Though he frequently penned his desire to create stories that above all entertained and suspended the imaginations of his readers, Singer here gestures to a larger purpose, the fantasy of a new world order brought by the lines and letters of literature. In *Love and Exile* he writes of encountering an established writer belonging to the Warsaw literary scene who held exactly this dream of literature. Though a skeptic in youth, Singer clearly took up the belief later and advocated for its prospect, offering trails of his influence. After all, he claims, Jewish history has within its legacy an ancient model for the possibility of this reversion.

He continues in later words to inject universal importance into the work of writers, endowing them with powers above those commonly ascribed. He posits a dual purpose central to the aim of the poet:

While the poet entertains he continues to search for eternal truths, for the essence of being. In his own fashion he tries to solve the riddle of time and change, to find an answer to suffering, to reveal love in the very abyss of cruelty and injustice. Strange as these words may sound I often play with the idea that when all the social theories collapse and wars and revolutions leave humanity in utter gloom, the poet – whom Plato banned from his Republic – may rise up to save us all.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1978.”

⁴⁶ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 1978.”

This conception of the poet overflows the role of entertainer, finding itself allied with a grander human mission. Turning to Singer's upbringing offers clues to the development of this thinking; it had undoubtedly imbued him with deep respect for words and their powerful function in ordering laws and lives. Pinchos Menachem "stood all day at a lectern studying large volumes and writing small letters in a composition notebook." When as a child Singer asked what he was writing, his father had responded "'Commentaries.' And when I asked him what commentaries were he said, 'The Torah is bottomless...The deeper you dig into the Torah, the more treasures you uncover. Without the Torah the world would not exist. With the letters of the Torah, God has created Heaven and Earth.'"⁴⁷ That the letters in his father's book had quite literally built worlds—we know the mystical Pinchos Menachem was not speaking in metaphor—was a mesmerizing, profound idea to Singer; he "thought a lot about those words" after hearing them.

As Singer recounts in *In My Father's Court*, his childhood was tinged with the devoutly Hasidic and mystical belief of Pinchos Menachem's influence. Already as a boy however, Singer experienced a sense of spiritual imbalance, suffering crises of loyalty with regular intensity. He clarifies this uneasiness through the dynamic of his parents, who while both highly religious, held often competing biases. Pinchos Menachem exemplified "idealism, mysticism, and withdrawal from the Western World," while his mother Bathsheba "no less religious, was more rigorous and rational."⁴⁸ Singer recalls their divergence in "Why the Geese Shrieked," a story dramatizing the debate between them—the stakes terrifyingly real as a child. When a woman

⁴⁷ Singer, *Love and Exile*, xiii.

⁴⁸ Chava Lapin, "Biographical Note," in *Master of Dreams: A Memoir of Isaac Bashevis Singer* by Dvora Telushkin (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1997), xiii.

enters the rabbinical court (and family home) “carrying a basket in which there were two geese,” and smiling nervously, “Mother and we children saw immediately that something had greatly upset our unexpected visitor.”⁴⁹ The geese, the woman explains “keep shrieking” despite being slaughtered. When she demonstrates this bizarre event before the family, Singer’s mother and father respond in characteristic fashion. Pinchos Menachem for his part, “forgot that one must avert one’s eyes from a woman...His red beard trembled. In his blue eyes could be seen a mixture of fear and vindication. For my father this was a sign that not only to the Rabbi of Graidik, but to him, too, omens were sent from heaven, But perhaps this was a sign from the Evil One, from Satan himself?”⁵⁰ While he locates proof of divine or possibly supernatural intervention in the otherworldly shrieks of the dead birds, Bathsheba, with “the wrath of the rationalist whom someone has tried to frighten in broad daylight”⁵¹ takes the animals and deftly removes their windpipes. Singer narrates his child’s perspective, the mysteries unfolding in the kitchen now reverberating with new significance:

Everything hung in the balance. If the geese shrieked, Mother would have lost it all: her rationalist’s daring, her skepticism which she had inherited from her intellectual father. And I? Although I was afraid, I prayed inwardly that the geese *would* shriek, shriek so loud that people in the street would hear and come running.

After Singer’s mother has been proven right by the following silence of the geese, Pinchos Menachem mutters to his son in the anecdote that closes the tale, “Your mother takes after your grandfather, the Rabbi of Bilgoray. He is a great scholar, but a cold-blooded rationalist. People warned me before our betrothal...’ And then Father threw up his hands, as if to say: It

⁴⁹ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 12.

⁵⁰ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 13.

⁵¹Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 15.

is too late now to call off the wedding.”⁵² Singer’s allegiance to his father’s God, already strained by his mother’s conditioned skepticism as a child, broke permanently in later youth. The hope of a magical universe however, the original, fervent prayer by young Singer “that the geese *would* shriek,” remained.

Though Pinchos Menachem could not accept his son’s interest in secular literature, Singer indexes the advice he was given in childhood as a sort of reappropriated literary counsel. Assuming that when his son grew up he “too would write religious books,” Pinchos Menachem offered his views on religious commentary, instructing his son, ‘Be straightforward in your reasoning and avoid casuistry. None of the great scholars tortured the text. True, they dug deeply, but they never made mountains out of molehills.”⁵³ Though Singer points to his brother Israel Joshua, ten years his senior and a significant artistic influence, as his guide into writing and world literature, his father too “was in his own fashion a ‘littérateur.’” Still, Pinchos Menachem was above all devoted to study, to his books, and to the utmost belief in his God. Singer meanwhile remained unable to copy the steadfastness of either his father or brother, unable to ally himself with either system of total belief or rejection. His childhood memories see him attempting valiantly to make a home between these multifocal points, to find place within the family order.

Singer’s upbringing informs the movement of both of his memoiristic works, and the presence of his father’s faith is perhaps clearest in *Love and Exile*, where the mature light of his reminiscence reflects it brightly. Many of the stories within the later autobiography describe the

⁵² Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 16.

⁵³ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 171.

gesture of Singer's early adulthood, one of gradual widening outwards, extending, accepting the outside world—an impulse his father never understood. Yet having abandoned the lifestyle of his upbringing, Singer found in the vastness of new freedoms the urge to hide, to mourn. Newly transplanted in the United States, Singer recalls the sharp loneliness of being cut off from a comprehensible, familiar place, from the Jewish ghettos of Poland, from his father's world-defining piety. Opening the final section of *Love and Exile*, "Lost In America," is a sort of preemptive memorializing of the world Singer had known since childhood and a tribute to Pinchos Menachem, a character impossibly tied to this expired past:

At the onset of the 1930s, my disillusionment with myself reached a stage in which I had lost all hope... Hitler was on the verge of assuming power in Germany. The Polish fascists proclaimed that as far as the Jews were concerned they had the same plans for them as did the Nazis... My father also died around this time. Even though over forty years have passed, I still cannot go into details about this loss. All I can say is that he lived like a saint and he died like one, blessed with a faith in God, His mercy, His providence. My lack of this faith is actually the story which I am about to tell.⁵⁴

Recognizing the finality of his journey from Poland to the United States at the beginning of the 1930s, Singer reflects both the sense of hopelessness against the dominating political currents of the time and the related, subsuming darkness of his father's death. His arrival in New York at the moment of totalitarianism's rise in Europe marks a new age in which the forces of history as much as the loss of his father, who represented for Singer the model of Jewish ethics, devotion, piety, disrupts the possibility of his own linearity. "Lost In America" then becomes the story of his fumbings, an escalation of the spiritual abandonment and confusion that he experienced as a

⁵⁴ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 183.

young man in Poland. As in Eastern Europe however, it is Israel Joshua, already established in New York working for the *Jewish Daily Forward*, who succeeds again in opening up the conditions of expansive possibility for Singer's imagination.

In "The Studio," Singer recalls the discovery of life beyond his father's court, the brilliant vastness of the world suddenly before him. A visit to Israel Joshua's painting studio on an errand from his mother proves a pivotal revelation in Singer's history, allowing him access to the "worldly" young adults and burgeoning members of the Warsaw intelligentsia who spent time with his brother. As modern and mystifying as the people he meets is the physical space of the studio, where Singer sits under a glass ceiling, the clarity of the world outside displayed mesmerizingly over the walls and art pieces inside. "I was fascinated by the thought of being in a room with a glass roof. Through the skylight I could glimpse blue sky, sun, and birds...the paintings and statues were spangled with light," he recalls. The studio also offers a new conceptualization of the body, Singer's own as well as others'. "No one, in my Hasidic background, had ever mentioned my red hair, white skin and blue eyes," he writes, "but here the body was respected."⁵⁵ In the same moment Singer remembers feeling a rush of astonishment "at the sight of naked breasts on the figures of young and pretty girls, for I had assumed that breasts were solely the property of slovenly women who nursed babies in public."⁵⁶ The aesthetic beauty of the studio hall and its brazenly secular, bohemian atmosphere fanned his curiosity. Juxtaposing this scene with the intentionally spare, unembellished rooms of the family home and its function as rabbinical court, Singer reflects on the uncommon presence of both

⁵⁵ Singer, *In My Father's Court*, 238.

⁵⁶ Singer, *In My Father's Court*, 239.

environments in his later work, “This was quite a change from my father’s studio, but it seems to me that this pattern has become inherent to me. Even in my stories it is just one step from the study house to sexuality and back again. Both phases of human existence have continued to interest me.”⁵⁷

Singer’s comment places into a fitting context the movement of his own work, ever-dependent upon the ethical force of religious observance even as it departs in striking manifestations of doubt and sexual blatency. Singer himself finds evidence in memory for the notion that much of his stories were already alive in his childhood mind, linking an artistic history to the lost people and places of the European ghetto. Though, he writes, “in our house there hovered the fear of the outside, of Gentile languages, of trains, cars, of the hustle and bustle of business, even of Jews who had dealings with lawyers, the police, could speak Russian or even Polish,”⁵⁸ Singer meets the outside world with cautious interest, creating out of his history an extension of time and the forces of change, carrying out an experiment in the blend of opposite impulses, endlessly severing and re-forming the spiritual and artistic linkages to his father’s forgotten world.

⁵⁷ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 240.

⁵⁸ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 258.

Chapter Two

“The present had swallowed eternity”: Herman’s Shadow in *Enemies, A Love Story*

In *Enemies, a Love Story* (1972), Rabbi Lampert admonishes the ghostly Herman Broder: “Either you’re in the other world or you’re in this world. You can’t stand with one foot on the ground and the other in the sky.”⁵⁹ Singer uses the novel’s following pages to question this certainty, dispelling it through regular eruptions of Herman’s disillusionment—his split consciousness, the various worlds he exists within and without, his liminal presence all defying the rabbi’s clarity. Through the specter of the Second World War, Singer poses the question of life after cataclysm, the impasse threatening continuity. The novel then reflects a moral gray zone in which uncertainties, unrestrained, wind through the text with increasing intensity, eliding the clarity of ethical parameters, fitting Singer’s “eternal questions” to recent memory. Traceable through his *œuvre*, these questions take new shape in *Enemies*: how to expect Herman’s full presence when he remains spatially and temporally tied to the Holocaust past? How to enforce halakhic precedents when they no longer make sense? Most notably, how to insist on the illegality of polygamy when Herman’s life hangs in the balance of each of his three (eventual) wives?

Even in its departure from Jewish ethical principles, Singer’s storytelling is furnished with a legacy of rabbinic thought. “Gimpel the Fool,” the popular short story translated by Saul Bellow, invokes the figure of Maimonides, whose foundational scholarship is centrally important

⁵⁹ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 25.

within Jewish ethics. In this tale, the village fool Gimpel, having brought a domestic disagreement to the local rabbi, is finally assured that his case has been substantiated by the scholar's writings. In a moment of comic gratitude, Gimpel exclaims, "Maimonides says it's right, and therefore it is right!"⁶⁰, situating the figure within the specificity of the scene as well in its larger historical context.

Maimonides' legacy is preserved in Singer's work in more than one way, being both textual reference to the rabbinic authority in Gimpel's town, Frampol, and less obviously as part of the overall contextual framing of Singer's stories, the ethical basis of Jewish life on which the stories depend. In defending his gullibility, Gimpel returns to this rabbinic current, referencing the ethical treatises Maimonides is said to have prefaced: "In the first place, everything is possible, as it is written in *The Wisdom of the Fathers*, I've forgotten just how."⁶¹ It is Gimpel's archetypal status as wise fool that allows him to expound insightfully, "What's the good of *not* believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God himself you won't take stock in."⁶²

Maimonides' writings offer a look at ethical concerns and a way into how they operate within Singer's work. As explained in the *Mishneh Torah*, an expansive corpus of Jewish law he composed around 1178, an ethical life hangs on the practice of balance: "In fine, in every class of dispositions, a man should choose the mean so that all one's dispositions shall occupy the exact middle between the extremes. This is what Solomon expressed in the text, 'Balance the

⁶⁰ *Collected Stories*, 10.

⁶¹ *Collected Stories*, 3.

⁶² *Collected Stories*, 9.

course of your steps, so that all your ways may be right' (Prov. 4:26)."⁶³ he writes. In *Enemies*, Herman practices an impossible existence best described as a precariously shifting balance between the real and unreal, the past and present, and most tragically, between three women.

Herman Broder, the anti-hero who "uncannily resembles his author,"⁶⁴ wakes at the start of *Enemies* to his own reflection in the mirror "on the wall opposite the bed." In it, he sees his "face drawn, his few remaining hairs, once red, now yellowish and streaked with gray. Blue eyes, piercing yet mild, beneath disheveled eyebrows, nose narrow, cheeks sunken, the lips thin."⁶⁵ Like many of Singer's characters in the American context Herman's type is, as Leslie Fiedler characterizes it, predictably

a Yiddish journalist and travelling lecturer; a reader of occultist magazines, forever questing for a God in whose goodness he finds it even harder to believe than in his existence. Endlessly, restlessly, though self-tormentingly polygamous, he is sometimes married and sometimes not, but always essentially a bachelor; and he yearns, even more than he does for God, for an equally polygamous female: a witch, a *revenant*, or a woman possessed, with whom he can achieve a kind of living *Liebestod*, a kind of *eros* undistinguishable from *thanatos*.⁶⁶

While Herman's "endlessly, restlessly, though self-tormentingly" polygamous behavior announces itself as the loudest ethical tension within the story, it branches into several derivations. As Fiedler suggests, Herman develops a tenuous relationship with God, at times

⁶³ Moses Maimonides and Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, Library of Jewish Studies (New York: Behrman House, 1972), 56.

⁶⁴ Fiedler, "The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer," 116.

⁶⁵ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 3.

⁶⁶ Fiedler, "The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer," 116.

moving to accept Judaism into his world and at others determined to separate himself, these shifting attitudes ultimately in flux with the women in his life. When readers meet Herman, he is married to Yadviga, in whose Polish hayloft he evaded the Nazis, and conducting an affair with another survivor, Masha, learning later that his first wife Tamara, believed dead, is in New York where he now lives. Even before the culmination of this tangle, however, *Enemies* promises calamity.

Herman, crafting his life around the impulse to hide, manages an existence of utmost secrecy through veils of increasing separation from the world. Not only must the neighbors who “sat around chatting about the old country, their American children and grandchildren, about the Wall Street crash in 1929, about the cures worked by steam baths, vitamins, and mineral waters at Saratoga Springs”⁶⁷ know nothing about him (“the complications of his life made it necessary to avoid them”), even the American rabbi for whom he works as a ghost writer is diverted in his attempts to know Herman. The irony of this work cannot escape readers, as Herman confesses in a darkly prescient admission his sense of feeling “no longer a part of this world.” But even the questionable Rabbi Lampert, who does not have a congregation and “neither the time nor the patience to study or write,” who “had amassed a fortune from real estate,”⁶⁸ is shunned on the basis of Herman’s shame. This desire for anonymity, he concedes, is partly the product of a stigma he imagines his due for wedding the non-Jewish Yadviga. Rabbi Lampert, after all, “made speeches and wrote articles opposing mixed marriages. More than once, Herman himself had to expound on this theme in his writings for the rabbi, warning

⁶⁷ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 16.

⁶⁸ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 20

against mingling with the ‘enemies of Israel.’”⁶⁹ The warnings that Herman pens for the rabbi, who is himself a corrupted image, are therefore as meaningless as the religion itself has become, the words a shaken, shadowy simulacrum of Jewish promise.

Not only does Herman find reason to escape the rabbi’s searches, he also suffers visions of his arrest and deportation by the American police. His crimes, after all, had taken on new urgency. With Tamara’s sudden return, he had “sinned against Judaism, American law, morality” in offensive totality.⁷⁰ Marrying Yadviga out of gratitude and moral debt, rejecting religious observance, and ghostwriting for the rabbi constitute sins against Judaism, but the return of Tamara, his polygamy, has broken American law too. The relationships and lies, unethical according to Herman himself, seem inescapable, fated as though from his first moment in the moral destitution of the American context.

Herman’s evaporation from the pages of his own story proves him unable to live in any frame of historicity. The past terrifies, bleeding often and uncontrollably into the present, while the future lies unconsidered. When he disappears, readers are unable to follow—his abyss eludes us. Turning to Tamara’s perspective after the loss of Herman, the novel’s epilogue relays her assumption “that Herman had either killed himself or was hiding somewhere in an American version of his Polish hayloft.” The narration reads, “one day the rabbi informed Tamara that, because of the holocaust, the rabbinate had eased restrictions so that deserted wives could be married a second time. And Tamara had replied, ‘Perhaps, in the next

⁶⁹ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 23.

⁷⁰ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 23.

world—to Herman.”⁷¹ Believing them both already lost for this world, Tamara envisions the next.

Apparitional, Herman floats outside of space and time, evading comprehensible placement. Fiedler suggests viewing Herman’s status as a demonstration of Singer’s fixation on the otherworldly. Herman is, he proffers, “by profession a ghost writer; but this means (as anyone who knows anything about Singer’s narrative mode is aware) that he is a ghost who writes, as well as the author of works issued under someone else’s name: not *symbolically* a ghost, let it be clear, but a ghost in all the super-actuality of popular fiction.”⁷² To understand Herman as a ghost, literally conceptualized, is a reading in close alignment with Singer’s own comfort and dependence on the demons and dybbuks that populate his stories and personal anecdotes, fiction and nonfiction. Fiedler positions Herman, among other Singer characters who wind their ways through the strange new “American scene,” as categorically adrift in space. That Singer ultimately loses Herman completely then should not come as a surprise. Arguing the liminality of Singer’s transplanted characters, Fiedler writes:

The language they speak is dying or dead, though they do not know it, being themselves a kind of living dead; either living European Jews who do not believe they are quite living, or dead ones unwilling to believe they are quite dead. Their America is, consequently, neither earth nor heaven nor hell, but Limbo: a twilight landscape in which they can haunt only each other, being imperceptible to the wide awake inhabitants of daylight America. They influence nothing, in fact, change nothing, want to change nothing in the land to which they have come as semi-survivors, not-quite ghosts. They do not vote, sign petitions, put on uniforms; they do not protest anything, cheer anything, join anything. Occasionally they go into business, dealing chiefly with each other; more frequently they write or lecture; always they make love, incestuously,

⁷¹ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 280.

⁷² Fiedler, “The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer,” 118.

of course, and tell stories, true or false, to those who speak their language. But especially, they hide—or get lost.⁷³

The fulfillment of the prophecy, Herman's loss, this being the "*Leitmotif*...of Singer's American tales,"⁷⁴ concludes the questions of his permanence noted from the first pages of *Enemies*. As the above passage suggests, it fulfills also a responsibility to Singer's greater narrative pattern, one in which the endless promise of freedom often shapes itself as merely a deluding force, encouraging spiritual and physical dissolution.

Yet Herman's liminality is not reserved for himself alone. Having admitted to feelings of separation from the world, he also subjects those around him to his parapsychological beliefs. Tamara, a kind of resurrected soul believed dead for years only to return to Herman after the war, is no exception. Constructing her as a symbol of the past, he confides, "whenever he was with her, he re-experienced the miracle of resurrection. Sometimes, as she spoke to him, he had the feeling he was at a séance at which her spirit had materialized. He had even played with the thought that Tamara wasn't really among the living, but that her phantom had returned to him."⁷⁵ Tamara, in turn, admits to having visions of their dead children, of watching them "float over to the other side" of "a hill, some barrier," that she remains unable to cross over herself.⁷⁶

As real in its devastation is the future and Herman's inability to face it, demonstrated in the simultaneous moment of creation and disappearance. When Yadviga is ready to give birth

⁷³ Fiedler, "The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer," 117-18.

⁷⁴ Fiedler, "The Americanness of the American Jewish Writer," 118.

⁷⁵ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 131.

⁷⁶ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 137.

to their child, a manifest representation of hope and futurity perhaps, he departs with urgent finality. The narrative voice describes his dread of biological legacy: among Herman's fears "the greatest was his fear of again becoming a father. He was afraid of a son and more afraid of a daughter, who would be an even stronger affirmation of the positivism he had rejected, the bondage that had no wish to be free, the blindness that wouldn't admit it was blind."⁷⁷ This positivism, this elemental, earthly, bodily legacy, is incompatible with his very existence, a child a reminder of his negligible attachment to the world, linking the unthinkable past and future.

Just as Tamara resurrects the past for Herman, Yadwiga also inhabits a role in relation to her husband. A Polish peasant from Lipsk who worked as a servant in Herman's family home, Yadwiga "had been living in America for three years, but she had retained the freshness and shyness of a Polish village girl. She used no cosmetics. She had learned only a few English words. It even seemed to Herman that she carried with her the odors of Lipsk; in bed she smelled of camomile."⁷⁸ The narrative that follows develops Yadwiga's infantilizing image through depictions of her submission: "Though she was his wife and the neighbors called her Mrs. Broder, she behaved toward Herman as if they were still in Tzivkev and she still a servant in the house of his father."⁷⁹ Outside the apartment, Yadwiga is sensitive to the "deafening roar" of passing trains and all that "vibrated or shook before her," so she had been given "a locket to wear, containing a slip of paper with her name and address written on it in case she got lost, but it was no comfort to Yadwiga; she didn't trust anything in writing."⁸⁰ Though

⁷⁷ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 149.

⁷⁸ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 4.

⁷⁹ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 5.

⁸⁰ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 6.

Yadwiga is not the only woman of this type—portrayed often as helpless, childlike—to function as one of Singer’s subjects, she clearly occupies this role in *Enemies*.

Wholly devoted to her husband, Yadwiga willingly believes what he tells her of his job as a travelling bookseller, work that regularly takes him out of New York. As readers soon learn however, Herman’s travels only take him from Brooklyn, where he keeps a home with Yadwiga, to the Bronx, where he has a room in Masha’s apartment. While we are not given much window into Yadwiga’s mind except for that filtered by Herman, what we glimpse shows steadfast faith in him. In what might be seen as parallel, in Gimpel’s story it is his similarly full-hearted belief in the goodness of his tormentors that defines his character against their own. Though Singer does not go so far as to present a vision of Yadwiga as Herman’s better foil, this is true in Gimpel’s context, where his wife’s adultery and deception secures her punishing fate in the next world, while his faith earns him quiet peace there. In the final words of the story, Gimpel is already an old man readying for death, sure of the fact that for him the next world “will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception,”⁸¹ the parable closing with a resounding message of caution against cynicism.

Yet while Gimpel remains faithful to his wife and to the law, Herman is unfaithful to both. Yadwiga, though unconverted, observes the rules of Judaism with greater seriousness than her husband; on Friday evenings she prepares cholent, challah, and “Sabbath cakes” and would “cover her eyes with her fingers for a moment after lighting the Sabbath candles and mumble something, just as she had seen Herman’s mother do” in an enactment of the weekly

⁸¹ *Collected Stories*, 14.

ritual.⁸² Herman meanwhile “turned on the lights and shut them off, even though it was forbidden. After the Sabbath meal of fish, rice and beans, chicken and carrot stew, he sat down to write, though this too was proscribed. When Yadviga asked him why he was breaking God’s commandment, he said, ‘There is no God, do you hear? And even if there were, I would defy Him.’” Singer imparts notable irony to the fact of Herman’s writing on the Sabbath—his ghostwriting, the purported words of Rabbi Lampert, are doctrinal and religious in nature. As Yadviga becomes more closely identified with Jewish ritual and tradition, however, Herman distances himself from it, and in effect, from her.

Language too is illustrative of Herman’s departure. When Yadviga requests that he teach her Yiddish, Herman’s response betrays a bitter irresolution. She asks,

“‘Speak so that I can understand you.’
 ‘I thought you wanted me to speak Yiddish to you.’
 ‘Talk the way your mother did.’
 ‘I can’t talk the way my mother did. She believed and I am not even an atheist.’”⁸³

Herman’s statement shows his position beyond the binary categories of believer and nonbeliever, an unsteady placement that finds him in unending oscillation between the poles of faith and doubt. Since he cannot even claim the label of atheist, he is unable to instruct Yadviga, stressing the pair’s already cracked domestic peace. Implied in their discourse is the notion that the expression of Yiddish, Herman’s mother’s kind, necessitates within itself a holiness, reverence, tradition unable to be replicated in the Brooklyn apartment; Herman cannot speak his

⁸² Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 105.

⁸³ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 187.

mother's language because he cannot accept God. Importantly, Singer elsewhere expressed the sentiment that "a language does not consist only of words. It has its ideas, its spirit, its tradition,"⁸⁴ each in part contributing to the fullness of a lingual legacy. Running over its linguistic bounds with meaning and cultural history, Herman keeps this language sealed in memory. Even while he is controlled and contorted by the memorialized past, ceaselessly lifting its relics into the present, he is unable to resurrect Yiddish in its full expression.

The passage seems doubly resonant in the context of Singer's relation to the language, being first a Yiddish author steeped in its rich tradition. After his immigration to the United States, however, newly aware of Yiddish's decline, Singer made an opposite lingual leap to Herman's in translating the works for an English audience. He has admitted to his own involvement in the process, saying to Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "I have taken part in the translation of every one of my books," since "only in this way can a translation come out bearable...writers inevitably lose a great deal."⁸⁵ "Nevertheless," he amends, "a good translation is possible, but it involves hard work for the writer, the translator, and the editor." By instituting a practice of authoring a "second original" through translation, Singer maintained effective authority over his words. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he recognized the importance of preserving Yiddish, its linguistic and moral significance. The Prize was, he said,

also a recognition of...a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews. The truth is that what the great religions preached, the Yiddish-speaking people of the ghettos practiced day in and day out. They were the

⁸⁴ Joseph Sherman, "Guilt as Subtext: I.B. Singer's Memoiristic Fictions," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981-) 13 (1994): 106.

⁸⁵ Blocker and Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," 19.

people of The Book in the truest sense of the word. They knew of no greater joy than the study of man and human relations, which they called Torah, Talmud, Mussar, Cabala.
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Singer's position here echoes Herman's understanding of his mother's Yiddish, a language dressed in tradition and an essential humanity. Its properties, he implies, necessitate particular behavior; the love of study and adherence to a high morality discourages, as far as linguistically practicable, militarism. In a critical blow to modern Hebrew in contrast, *The Penitent's* Joseph Shapiro makes the unequivocal claim that "a language used to build ships and airplanes and to manufacture guns and bombs cannot be a Sacred Tongue."⁸⁷ Singer's conception of language and morality is then in close connection; whether or not he believes as Shapiro does that modern Hebrew has "swallowed up" ancient sacredness, that Yiddish is a superior moral force, does not dissolve the importance of his repetitious conflation of morality and language across the modalities of his writing.

Singer's love of Yiddish is nowhere made clearer than in the lines of "The Last Demon," a short story endowing Hebrew letters with bodily and culturally nourishing properties. In the wake of the "great catastrophe," a Jewish demon hungrily searches an empty Polish town for souls to corrupt, and finally, starving, chews the characters of a Yiddish storybook. "I suck on the letters and feed myself," the imp narrates, "I count the words, make rhymes, and tortuously interpret and reinterpret each dot.

Aleph, the abyss, what else waited?
Beth, the blow, long since fated.

⁸⁶ "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1978."

⁸⁷ Singer, *The Penitent*, 62.

Gimel, God, pretending He knew,
Daleth, death, its shadow grew.
Hai, the hangman, he stood prepared;
Vov, wisdom, ignorance bared.
Zayeen, the zodiac, signs distantly loomed;
Chet, the child, prenatally doomed.
Tet, the thinker, an imprisoned lord;
Yud, the judge, the verdict a fraud.”⁸⁸

The demon plays with the function and presentation of the black characters on the storybook page, sustained by their force, nourishing himself with what’s left. He reorders the alphabet’s letters and meanings to reveal darkly poetic ruminations, the final line reading his cryptic meditation: “*when the last letter is gone, / the last of the demons is done.*”⁸⁹ The last Jewish demon can survive in the dusky absence of human beings, but not in the absence of their letters.

Importantly, the signification of the story’s logic—creation sustained by and born of the power of words— and the demon’s obsessive linguistic play, conjure a history of Kabbalistic ideas. According to the Jewish mystical tradition, the world was created from words. The *Sefer Yetzirah*, the Book of Creation, begins,

Through thirty-two hidden paths of wisdom,
 YAH, the Lord of hosts, engraved
 His name—the Lord of Israel,
 Living God and King of the world,
 merciful, gracious God almighty,
 on high and dwelling in eternity,
 His name is holy
 and He is sublime
 and created His world

⁸⁸ *Collected Stories*, 186.

⁸⁹ *Collected Stories*, 187.

out of three words:
sefer, sfar, sippur—
 letter, limit, and tale.⁹⁰

The demon's practice of counting, rhyming, interpreting and reinterpreting storybook words is not unlike the work of Kabbalists. Since letters in Hebrew have numerical equivalents, and the mystical tradition fixates on the creation of the world through them, a linguistic and numerical system as well as a spiritual story is considered as the basis of creation. Importantly, the world was made out of three words, these being letter, limit, and tale, or story,—*sefer, sfar, sippur*—reinforcing the notion that storytelling and letters are in themselves wells of deep nourishment, creating and preserving cultural substance.

If Herman cannot identify with the laws of Judaism, Shmul-Leibele and Shoshe, the husband and wife in Singer's tale "Short Friday," believe them unquestioningly. The short story follows the pious couple's quiet ascension into the heights of Paradise, where "in the stillness they heard the flapping of wings, a quiet singing."⁹¹ The elderly pair die peacefully on the Sabbath, as the title suggests, after having relished and devoted themselves to the rituals of the day. Their faith stands in stark opposition to Herman's Sabbath ritual. Like Gimpel, the couple choose to believe unquestioningly in the motions they practice, despite the taunts and nicknames. In the synagogue,

Shmul-Leibele prayed with fervor. The words were sweet upon his tongue, they seemed to fall from his lips with a life of their own, and he felt that they soared to the eastern wall, rose above the embroidered curtain of the Holy Ark, the gilded lions, and the

⁹⁰ Peter Cole and Aminadav Dykman, eds., *The Poetry of Kabbalah: Mystical Verse from the Jewish Tradition*, 1st ed, The Margellos World Republic of Letters (New Haven, [CT]: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁹¹ *The Collected Stories*, 197.

tablets, and floated up to the ceiling with its painting of the twelve constellations. From there, the prayers surely ascended to the Throne of Glory.⁹²

As his prayers float upwards, ultimately so does the couple, the story extending where Gimpel's parable discontinues, offering readers their own ascension into the realm. While Shmul-Leibele and Shoshe experience this transition as a painless dream, a floating, simultaneous death, Herman experiences the idea of the next world as a nightmarish gate.

Despite the manifold moral questions consuming Herman, he appears truer than Shoshe and Shmul-Leibele, who lived and died as martyrs. *Enemies* stands perhaps as testimony in its right, as answer to the couple's ethical, idyllic lives. In deliberation over his own moral culpability, Herman reasons that since the fate of Europe's Jews did not relate to their goodness or otherwise, religiosity or secularism, the hope of religion failed then as it fails now to provide answers to the questions of life after death. Yet, he returns to familiar thought, Jewish observance seems the only final truth in the pursuit of peace and justice. "If a Jew departed in so much as one step from the *Shulchan Aruch*, he found himself spiritually in the sphere of everything base—Fascism, Bolshevism, murder, adultery, drunkenness" he speculates dryly, referencing the *Shulchan Aruch*, (trans. the "set table"), a practical code of Jewish law authored on the heels of Spanish Expulsion in the sixteenth century. While this title is likely intended by Singer to represent the large body of legal thought and rabbinic scholarship across the ages, it is also the highest standard of morality according to Herman's admission. Just one separation from its religious law is enough to cause a reversion to base instincts. And though it might seem like a

⁹² *The Collected Stories*, 192.

convincing secular replacement, philosophy is not without its problems, since philosophers “all preached some sort of morality but it did not have the power to help withstand temptation. One could be a Spinozist and a Nazi...”⁹³ While Herman turns in repeating rounds of self-defeating thought, Singer interjects with the reminder for readers that “those who doubt everything are also capable of believing everything.”⁹⁴

The women in Herman’s life destabilize and affirm his positions toward Judaism according to their own. When welcome to Yadviga’s influence, Herman pledges fervidly to “never answer the phone again on a holiday,” or to “write on the Sabbath anymore,” adding to his wife instructively, “if we don’t want to become like the Nazis, we must be Jews.” His change of heart is also an acceptance of Yadviga, however short-lived. Following this new resolve to accept religious law, Yadviga asks him, “Will you go to Kuffoth with me today?”

‘Say Hakaffoth, not Kuffoth. Yes, I’ll go with you. You’ll have to go to the ritual bath too, if you want to become a Jewish woman.’

‘When will I become Jewish?’

‘I’ll talk to the rabbi. I’ll teach you how to say the prayers.’

‘Will we have a child?’

‘If God wills it, we’ll have one.’

Yadviga’s face turned red. She seemed overcome with joy.”⁹⁵

After her conversion, newly pregnant, Yadviga listens only to Yiddish radio programs, asks Herman to speak Yiddish to her, and reprimands him “for not conducting himself like other Jews” since, conspicuously, Herman “didn’t go to synagogue, nor did he own a prayer shawl and

⁹³ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 169-70.

⁹⁴ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 136.

⁹⁵ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 171.

phylacteries.”⁹⁶ Despite Yadwiga’s encouragement, Herman is unable to fill his new role. Not only does he fail to acquire a prayer shawl or phylacteries, but he soon gives up on the promise itself. As speedily as it came to him, Herman’s acceptance of Judaism erodes; when he returns to Masha it dissolves.

Masha, just like the other female characters in *Enemies*, inhabits a role and an idea for Herman. If Yadwiga could occasionally inspire religious sympathies in him, Masha accomplishes an opposite devotion, and with greater success:

She aroused in him desires and powers he didn’t know he had. In some mystical way she could temporarily stop the bleeding during her period. Even though neither Masha nor Herman was perverse, they talked endlessly to each other of unusual sexual behavior and perversions. Would she enjoy torturing a Nazi murderer? Would she make love to women if there were no men left on earth? Could Herman turn homosexual? Would he copulate with an animal if all humans had perished? It was only since his affair with Masha that Herman had begun to understand why union, the joining of male and female, was so important in the Cabala.⁹⁷

Consistently, Masha appears as Yadwiga’s opposite. When with her in the Bronx, Herman finds little use for the laws that mattered in Brooklyn, even devoting energy to the creation of a new religion entirely, “a new metaphysic” in which “suffering, emptiness, darkness are nothing more than interruptions of a cosmic orgasm that grows forever in intensity.” Herman bases this orgasmic metaphysic religion in the principle of desire, influenced by Masha, writing that “gravity, light, magnetism, thought” are “aspects of the same universal longing.”⁹⁸ Whether this sanctions the relationship for Herman in ethical terms remains unknown, but it remains one

⁹⁶Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 178.

⁹⁷ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 47.

⁹⁸Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 48.

suffused with a twin longing, the desire to deflect the “suffering, emptiness, darkness” that both Herman and Masha experience. In a twisting of Maimonides’ comments regarding balance, it can be said that Herman is attempting to adhere to the scholar’s ethical principles by moving between the loyalties of Yadviga and Masha: “For when the body gets out of equilibrium, we look to which side it inclines in becoming unbalanced, and then oppose it with its contrary until it returns to equilibrium,” he writes in the fourth chapter of his *Commentary on the Mishnah*. If Yadviga pulls Herman in one direction, Masha does the opposite. Importantly, however, what Herman cannot achieve from this motion is a finally balanced state of equilibrium.

Existing between faith, doubt, and desire, between the women who come to symbolize these, Herman crafts new religions, philosophies, modes by which he might slip past his own shame. Even the nearly religious practice of his hiding finds place in his “private philosophy.” He describes its logic:

Survival itself was based on guile. From microbe to man, life prevailed generation to generation by sneaking past the jealous powers of destruction. Just like the Tzivkever smugglers in World War I, who stuffed their boots and blouses with tobacco, secreted all manner of contraband about their bodies and stole across borders, breaking laws and bribing officials—so did every bit of protoplasm, or conglomerate of protoplasm furtively traffic its way from epoch to epoch. It had been so when the first bacteria appeared in the slime at the ocean’s edge and would be so when the sun became a cinder and the last living creature on earth froze to death, or perished in whichever way the final biological drama dictated. Animals had accepted the precariousness of existence and the necessity for flight and stealth, only man sought certainty and instead succeeded in accomplishing his own downfall. The Jew had always managed to smuggle his way in through crime and madness. He had stolen into Canaan and into Egypt. Abraham had pretended that Sarah was his sister. The whole two thousand years of exile, beginning with Alexandria, Babylon, and Rome and ending in the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna had been one great act of smuggling. The Bible, the Talmud, and the Commentaries instruct the Jew in one strategy: flee from evil, hide from danger, amid

showdowns, give the angry powers of the universe as wide a berth as possible. The Jew never looked askance at the deserter who crept into a cellar or attic while armies clashed in the streets outside.⁹⁹

Survival, Herman had learned, was a matter of secrecy and hiding, of passing unnoticed through the turns of fate. Crime and madness, then, are tools for “sneaking past the jealous powers of destruction,” following the absolute rules of the universe. Herman considers his own existence, his “whole life a game of stealth—the sermons he had written for Rabbi Lampert, the books he sold to rabbis and yeshiva boys, his acceptance of Yadwiga’s conversion to Judaism, and Tamara’s favors.” Readers might add his years in Yadwiga’s hayloft to a list of his acts of quiet stealth. For Herman, the world and all of its pointed systems demand the utmost secrecy, camouflage, hiding.

Having just made his way from Brooklyn to the Bronx, Yadwiga to Masha, Herman imagines the sensation of being thrown from balance, a sudden chasm dividing the city between them. “What would happen if the earth were to split into two parts, exactly between the Bronx and Brooklyn?” He wonders. He “would have to remain here. The half with Yadwiga would be drawn into a different constellation by another star. What would happen then? If Nietzsche’s theory about the eternal return was true, perhaps this had already occurred a quadrillion years ago.”¹⁰⁰ Though a seemingly impossible occurrence, it is real enough for Herman. This split between the women, the possibilities that they represent, and Herman’s final disappearance frame a world swayed painfully by the unexplainable; perhaps this had even “occurred a

⁹⁹ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 247.

¹⁰⁰ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 32.

quadrillion years ago.” Yet the idea of an eternal continuity in which history continues to repeat itself unendingly is not an abstraction for Herman. In his inability to place himself in this world, he finds himself, quite literally, in all worlds. If such a thing could happen to him in this place, surely it had occurred to another, elsewhere, long before him. Readers are again reminded of Herman’s flotation through time and space, removed from the world by the veils of his own impermanence.

In situating his experience within an unending sequence of moments in history when the universe bent toward violence, Herman plays with the presence of the uncanny, “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.”¹⁰¹ A haunting or delirious repetition is characteristic of Herman’s experience as well as of his readers’, since Singer’s writing is itself encased in repetition and revolution. Tracing a lineage of events from biblical times, Herman places the recently experienced second World War along an axis of pain long familiar. Eroding readers’ conceptions of past and present by fusing the two—“the past is as present as today”—he offers a newly envisaged picture of history in which what appears eternal ever recurs: “Cain continues to murder, Nebuchadnezzar is still slaughtering the sons of Zedekiah and putting out Zedekiah’s eyes. The pogrom in Kesheniev never ceases. Jews are forever being burned at Auschwitz.”¹⁰² Musing further, Herman reflects on the nature of his previously held belief, since understood as illusion, “that some basic change would take place in the world.” In the end, however, “nothing had changed. The same politics, the same phrases, the

¹⁰¹ Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* ed. James Strachey, (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1997), 195.

¹⁰² Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 30.

same false promises. Professors continued to write books about the ideology of murder, the sociology of torture, the philosophy of rape, the psychology of terror.”¹⁰³ History continues to repeat, bowing under its obligation of circularity, and Herman, too, reflects this. After hiding in the hayloft during Poland’s occupation, he arrives in the United States prepared to do it again, and the novel closes with the fulfillment of his pattern, Herman’s disappearing act seemingly proving the theory of history’s recurrence. Early pages too, offer a thematic shadow of this threat. Yawwiga’s anxiety that Herman might not return each time he leaves home is already apparent by the second chapter where the narration reads, “Every time he went away from home, she feared that he would not return—he would lose his way in the turmoil and vastness of America. His every homecoming seemed a miracle.”¹⁰⁴ Herman’s desire to disappear takes on new meaning by the time of his final vanishing, but already here presents itself to readers as a perpetual lostness. Understood through Yawwiga’s perspective, Herman’s escape reveals a pattern rather than a surprising turn of behavior.

Singer’s prose, as well as his plots, bear signs of influence by a biblical tradition steeped in narrative mystery and suspense. Erich Auerbach’s relevant argument in the opening chapter of *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* places the rhetorical qualities of biblical stories in contradistinction to those of an opposite form, the epic of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Writing in terms of contrast, of prosaic light and darkness, clarity and mystery, he suggests the overall discrepancy between the traditions. The epic might be seen as made up of pieces and parts, all detailed, ordered and clear; smoothly-jointed and each piece flowing in service of every other:

¹⁰³ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 269.

¹⁰⁴ Singer, *Enemies, a Love Story*, 11.

a large number of conjunctions, adverbs, particles, and other syntactical tools, all clearly circumscribed and delicately differentiated in meaning, delimit persons, things, and portions of incidents in respect to one another, and at the same time bring them together in a continuous and ever flexible connection; like the separate phenomena themselves, their relationships—their temporal, local, causal, final, consecutive, comparative, concessive, antithetical, and conditional limitations—are brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths.¹⁰⁵

Auerbach characterizes the Homeric impulse to light every person, feeling, or event thoroughly and methodically, so that readers cannot escape the work's intent and clarity. Biblical narratives, on the other hand, remain half-illuminated; they feature “lacuna[s],” “gap[s],” and offer readers frequent “glimpse[s] of unplumbed depths.” Auerbach notes their more complicated textuality which is developed through an expression of “the simultaneous existence of various layers of consciousness and the conflict between them.”¹⁰⁶ They omit almost entirely clarifying digressions, histories, or introductions, favoring rich tonal mystery. Following Auerbach, we can view Singer's work as corresponding on a fundamental level—whether through early religious influence and osmosis or simply stylistic choice—to the Old Testament. In an interview with Richard Burgin, Singer admits as much in his own words:

one of the great things about the book of Genesis, and the Bible generally, is that the stories there are very short... Often a story is told in five or six sentences. I think that modern literature suffers terribly from a kind of verbosity... In the Bible, so much is

¹⁰⁵ Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus' Scar,” in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, 50th anniversary ed (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 6–7.

¹⁰⁶ Auerbach, “Odysseus' Scar,” 13.

left to the reader that actually the story is almost nothing but a hint, and the rest is for the reader to finish...I would say this method I tried in all my short stories.¹⁰⁷

Though Singer reflects on using this technique in his short works, the same elements of style appear also in his novels. A hint is after all the extent of what we receive of our main character's end. The decision to leave Herman in darkness and unknowability, to layer and contrast beliefs and convictions, to hold competing impulses in an idea, and to insert and reinsert into the narrative the "eternal questions" without resolution, point to a biblically-inspired tradition of storytelling apparent across the disparate literary frames of Singer's collection.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Burgin and Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer," *Chicago Review* 31, no. 4 (1980): 59–60, doi:10.2307/25304019.

Chapter Three

Returning to the Present in *Satan in Goray*

In “Isaac Bashevis Singer: Passionate Primitive or Pious Puritan?,” J.A. Eisenberg discusses the force of Singer’s moral universe. Noting the trails of biblical influence, he writes, “Singer uses a technique...found most frequently in the prophetic books. Quite simply, it rests on the premise that the greater the fall, the more effectively the dramatic force of the ethical concepts comes through.”¹⁰⁸ In Singer’s narrative pattern, after biblical precedent, the presence of an “absolute morality, imposed by an omnipotent ruling force”¹⁰⁹ suspends itself in myriad impossible forms before his characters, the space between the ideal and real brightly illuminated. In notable exception, however, in *Satan in Goray* (1955) pious Jews populate a shtetl “in the midst of the hills at the end of the world,”¹¹⁰ a world in which the depth of the fall is not chiefly the product of transgressive departure from the right way but of the utmost faith in messianic promise. This inversion, where characters are thrown from the heights of morality by their belief in miracle, is a striking blow to the shtetl’s fabric, fatal in its destruction.

Written while Singer was still living in Poland, *Satan in Goray* first emerged in serial form in the magazine *Globus*, and was only issued in book form by the Warsaw Yiddish PEN Club when he had already departed the country. “The printed book, with its Introduction, didn’t

¹⁰⁸ J. A. Eisenberg, “Isaac Bashevis Singer: Passionate Primitive or Pious Puritan?” in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 62.

¹⁰⁹ Eisenberg. “Passionate Primitive or Pious Puritan,” 62.

¹¹⁰ Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), 3.

reach me until I was already in America,”¹¹¹ he affirms in *Love and Exile*. The autobiography identifies Aaron Zeitlin, whom Singer praised as a “spiritual giant among spiritual dwarfs,” and one of his greatest friends, as the author of the work’s introduction. But by 1935 Singer had not yet become a particularly visible or prolific writer, and even when settled in New York he did not undertake the process of translating and republishing his first work until a notable twenty years had elapsed.¹¹² Recalling the circumstances of his literary debut with a tinge of bitterness, he writes in *Love and Exile*, “I hadn’t received a penny in payment. Quite the contrary, I had to contribute toward the cost of printing and paper.”¹¹³ “The status of Yiddish and Yiddish literature was such that there was no way it could worsen,” he says of the period just before his immigration.¹¹⁴ Once in the New World, a new immigrant, the realization of Yiddish’s failing endurance there became part of his culture shock. Though managing to sustain itself in Warsaw even as the literary environment experienced roiling change, Singer found little cause in New York for hope in its continuity.

For all of Singer’s concerns, it is perhaps this fact that helped his work, balanced on the margins of the Yiddish tradition, achieve the success it found in its new context. While dependent on Yiddish folklore and intimately familiar with the setting and characters of the Eastern European shtetl, Singer’s writing, as we have since noted, escaped traditional literary prescriptions and turned fluidly toward its own contemporary urgency. Its important separation

¹¹¹ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 186.

¹¹² Marcia Allentuck, “Introduction,” in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, Crosscurrents: Modern Critiques (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), xvi.

¹¹³ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 185-6.

¹¹⁴ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 183.

from the stories of the classical Yiddish writers is recognizable even in his first novel. Presenting a grotesque enmeshing of demonic possession, medieval hysteria, and surreality, *Satan in Goray* immediately announces itself as a separate voice through its treatment of shtetl life. Eli Katz in “Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Classical Yiddish Tradition,” situates the author’s depictions of the village as both opposed to renderings made by figures like Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and I.L. Peretz, the classical writers, and peripherally reminiscent of them, explaining,

It has long been remarked that the body of traditional Yiddish literature offers so clear and detailed a picture of shtetl culture that it can serve virtually as a source of ethnographic data. To the insider, the reader who himself emerged from it, it is instantly recognizable. The outsider, on the other hand, requires elaborate explanations, or at least a glossary, to orient himself in the environment. Singer’s shtetl presents largely the same landmarks. Yet it is unacknowledged by most remaining shtetl immigrants, while readers from the “outside” appear to find their way about easily.¹¹⁵

Singer’s depictions depend not on the recorded minutiae of a reconstructed Jewish village, but on the moral contours of its inhabitants and their history, on “the perpetual struggle between good and evil for the soul of man; a struggle which goes on constantly, and primarily on a plane of human existence which has little to do with the rational,”¹¹⁶ Katz writes. As such, Singer uses the setting to frame a story weighted as much in objective truth as in the unknowable power of the divine and supernatural forces that sway the movements of the world, and especially the

¹¹⁵ Eli Katz, “Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Classical Yiddish Tradition.” In *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 20.

¹¹⁶ Katz, “Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Classical Yiddish Tradition,” 20.

Jews of Goray, those who lived in “the town that lay in the midst of the hills, half in ruins and cut off from the world.”¹¹⁷

The opening pages of *Satan in Goray* establish the “society in disarray” that define the shtetl throughout the novel. The village reels following the historical event of the 1648-49 Chmielnicki Uprising, in which the figure Bogdan Chmielnicki led a Cossack invasion of Poland, inspired the peasants to insurrection, and destroyed shtetls and their Jewish populations in great swaths across the countryside. The novel notes the violence in Goray with characteristic grotesqueness: “they slaughtered on every hand, flayed men alive, murdered small children, violated women and afterward ripped open their bellies and sewed cats inside.”¹¹⁸ Goray, razed and desolate after the events, sees the slow return of some of its former members in the following decade and beyond, among them community leader Rabbi Benish Ashkenazi and the figure of Rechele, born at the height of Chmielnicki’s pogrom, now a young woman.

The events of *Satan in Goray* take place in the months between 1665 and 1666, during which time village life is racked by perversions of faith and spiralling messianic illusions. The rabbi’s return to Goray, however, offers a stabilizing moment in which it seems the shtetl might rebuild itself, his physical and spiritual endurance an omen of normalcy. Having spent seventeen years away, now in his sixties, Rabbi Benish shows little sign of injury. The narrative assures us that “his skin was still smooth, he had lost none of his white hair, and his teeth had not fallen out.”¹¹⁹ In addition, his home had remained whole and unharmed, and his religious writings and

¹¹⁷ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 26.

¹¹⁸ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 6.

volumes preserved: “Miraculously... the two oaken book chests, once more filled with folios and manuscripts, stood where they had previously... Sacred volumes and writings were piled ell deep in the attic.”¹²⁰ Stepping into the prayer house for the first time since fleeing the town years before, he declares the strength of his conviction to the shocked individuals inside, saying, “Enough! . . . It is the will of our blessed God that we begin anew.”¹²¹ Rabbi Benish, perhap Goray’s only unharmed figure, voices his intention to resume the working of the village, to continue, after a pause, its functioning as before.

While Rabbi Benish is presented from early pages as a figure synonymous with high morality, as a learned man of piety, the messianic fervor that soon pushes even into the far reaches of Goray exposes the workings of an opposite force. In 1665,

The greatest cabalists in Poland and other lands uncovered numerous allusions in the Zohar and in antique cabalistic volumes proving that the days of the Exile were numbered. Chmelnicki’s massacres were the birth-pangs of the Messiah. According to a secret formula, these pangs were destined to begin in the year 1648 and extend till the end of the present year, when the full and perfect redemption would come.¹²²

The Kabbalistic calculations pointing to the time of redemption as the year 1665 and news of Sabbatai Zevi, a figure risen in the East as the messiah, soon sweeps the village, triggering the fantastical visions and dreams of its occupants. The end of days, longed for during years of dark wandering and desolation, appears on the horizon, the events of 1648 newly understood as the “birth pangs” of the “perfect redemption.” The villagers speak among themselves of the mysterious, mystical Sabbatai Zevi, the person “for whom Israel had been waiting these

¹²⁰ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 7.

¹²¹ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 6.

¹²² Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 20.

seventeen hundred years,” deliberating over whether he was “the son of Joseph, who, as the holy volumes indicated, was to be killed as the precursor of the true Messiah,” or, as other villagers noted, “Messiah, the son of Joseph, had already come in the person of one Reb Abraham Zalman, who had perished in Tishevitz, martyred for the sanctification of God’s name, and that Sabbatai Zevi would be the true Messiah, the son of David.”¹²³ A group of villagers emerge as a devoted sect, gathering and spreading the news throughout the provinces of Poland that finally “the Exile had come to an end,” that, in a miraculous occurrence, “trees had begun to put forth enormous fruit in the holy land, and in the salt waters of the Dead Sea golden fish had suddenly appeared.”¹²⁴

In the shtetl’s swarming, feverish environment, Rabbi Benish places himself in opposition to the Sabbatean followers. While they gather strength, ridiculing his skepticism towards the Kabbalah, he spends days working through the possibilities and eventualities of true messianic redemption. During this time, his melancholy would not lift. Rabbi Benish

wrote many letters that he did not send, and they were scattered over the table and the floor. No matter how often his dinner was brought to him from the kitchen, he would let it grow cold, until it finally had to be carried off, still untouched... His face yellowed and grew wrinkled, and old age overtook him all at once. Once he sat up all night composing a will, which he burnt in the oven at dawn... [villagers] drew the conclusion that Rabbi Benish was preparing for his end.¹²⁵

¹²³ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 22.

¹²⁴ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 37.

¹²⁵ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 97-8.

Driven to isolation by the state of the village and its inhabitants, the rabbi avoids public life, erupts in outbursts at his family, and slowly shrinks “into himself and [says] nothing.”¹²⁶ The narrative relays the rabbi’s disappointment through his previously harbored assumptions: “To Rabbi Benish the misfortunes of the years 1648 and 1649 were a punishment visited on Polish Jews because they had been unfaithful to the Law; he was certain that, once the persecutions were over, they would return to the ways of their fathers.”¹²⁷ But the Jews of Goray had passed the worst of Chmielnicki’s destruction and still they did not devote themselves to God with the renewed zeal Rabbi Benish anticipated and advocated. Instead, they attached themselves determinedly to the words and teachings of the new messiah, against his wishes.

As Rabbi Benish declines in health and prominence, the sect of Sabbatai Zevi grows in influence. The group privileges the figure of Reb Gedaliya, a renowned Kabbalist, ritual slaughterer, and newcomer to the village whom they elect as their leader. He commands the attention of all strata of village life, individuals crowding into rooms, enraptured, to hear him elaborate upon the coming wonders of redemption:

the more he said the more flushed the faces of his listeners became, and the more crowded and festive it grew in the house. Nechele and the other women who were serving the guest of honor shed tears of joy and embraced one another. The men listened intently so as not to miss a word. They stood shoulder to shoulder, muttering to themselves and trembling at the thought of the great days that were coming. Reb Godel Chasid sought to elbow his way through the crowd so that he might look Reb Gedaliya in the face but was swept off his feet. A boy fainted and had to be carried into the open air. The eyes of the young men were alight with holy enthusiasm, their ear locks shook, and beads of sweat ran down their foreheads.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 26.

¹²⁷ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 26.

¹²⁸ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 141.

The mystical Reb Gedaliya finds himself at the center of all hope and expectation in Goray, the townspeople orbiting him as their new spiritual leader. But his ascension demotes the rabbi, who, one night woken from sleep to the news that the town had gathered in the home of Rechele's father, men and women dancing together, stumbles into the cold to see for himself. As he makes his way through the village, a storm picks up so that "the skull cap fell from his head, the tails of his coat billowed, and began to drag him backward. His head spun and he choked. Suddenly the storm seized him, bore him aloft for a short distance, as on wings, and then cast him down with such violence that...he could hear his bones shatter." The narrative includes the lucidly allegorical words he thinks to himself as he falls to the ground: "'The End.'"¹²⁹ Hearing news of his injury, one ardent supporter of Sabbatai Zevi cries with pleasure, "The demons have him now—may his name perish!"¹³⁰ With the rabbi's fall and injury, and his subsequent desertion of Goray, the ethical beams supporting the town's spiritual center break, an exposure through which Reb Gedaliya, unrestrained, takes his position as unofficial successor. With allegorical clarity, Rabbi Benish's "shattering" and permanent departure signals the devastating moral ruination of the village.

The breakdown of Goray occurs quickly and seemingly without resistance. Entranced by Reb Gedaliya's fervent ideals and opinions, villagers rally around his person as he perverts talmudic teachings according to specific aims, deviating wildly from Rabbi Benish's—and rabbinic Judaism's—prescriptions. Reb Gedaliya determines

¹²⁹ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 107.

¹³⁰ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 109.

by means of cabala that all the laws in the Torah and the Shulchan Aruch referred to the commandment to be fruitful and multiply; and that, when the end of days was come, not only would Rabbi Gershom's ban on polygamy become null and void, but all the strict 'Thou shalt nots,' as well. Every pious woman would then be as fair as Abigail... Men would be permitted to know strange women. Such encounters might even be considered a religious duty; for each time a man and a woman unite they form a mystical combination and promote a union between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence.¹³¹

Reb Gedaliya encourages individuals to hedonism, polygamy, and adultery in interpretation of religious commandment, citing the Kabbalah as evidence of the sanctity of all acts of sexual union. At the same time, he begins working cures through witchcraft and magic. Despite the fact that "his new rulings disagreed with the practices cited in the Shulchan Aruch...the few learned men who remained pretended neither to see nor hear what was happening, for the common people believed in Reb Gedaliya."¹³² In this environment, the influence of the law, of ethical principles in the Shulchan Aruch and other rabbinic works, grows still weaker, almost entirely subsumed by fanatical desire. The village imagination soars in fantasy, guided by Reb Gedaliya, who by way of prophecy and calculation provides a date of redemption, the specific moment when a cloud will lower to the earth to transport the pious of Goray to the holy land. He determines the time of the announcement of the messiah's coming, proclaiming it as the middle of the month of Elul; several days before Rosh Hashanah the people of Goray would "be off to the Land of Israel."¹³³ As the time draws near, shopkeepers shutter their doors, work of all type

¹³¹ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 148.

¹³² Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 161-2.

¹³³ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 174.

halts, and some villagers take to remaining fully clothed while sleeping, so as not to be slowed when the moment arrives.

When on the day of the prophesied messianic coming the sun begins to set and the ram's horn still has not been heard around the world, Goray faces the uncomfortable reality of its collective unpreparedness for the arriving holidays. Still in the Polish countryside, the villagers are without flour, fish, or honey, and without proper clothing or even wearable shoes. Seeking out Reb Gedaliya for explanation and counsel, they learn that "he had gone to commune in the hills."¹³⁴ The villagers convince themselves that the time has yet to come, this setback only a further test of faith. The narration draws out their reaching hope: "Not until sunset did the pious lose hope in the possibility of a miracle. Miracles, they knew, always occur unexpectedly, when people are looking the other way. Perhaps just an instant before sunset the cloud would appear and carry them all off to the holy land."¹³⁵ Yet as the possibility of the messiah's coming lessens to a sliver, the contours of the miraculous change, the miracle itself requiring a miracle.

Transcribing the events of his own life through the 1930s in *Love and Exile*, Singer recalls his realization of the threat facing Jews as a somewhat familiar prescience. While *Satan in Goray* concerned the destruction of seventeenth century life, the moment of its writing and publication coincided directly with the rise of fascism as a looming force in Singer's own time, its division and darkness lit up in clarity. Singer himself establishes the connection between the events of the novel and the contemporary moment, noting the cacophony of social and political noise as its

¹³⁴ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 179.

¹³⁵ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 180.

own manifested messianic zeal, its wild currents too promising miracles. Rejecting these miracles—secular or religious—he recounts with candid darkness,

As for me, since I didn't possess the courage to kill myself, my only chance to survive was to escape from Poland... Only those who were totally hypnotized by silly slogans could not see what was descending upon us. There was no lack of demagogues and plain fools who promised the Jewish masses that they would fight alongside the Polish Gentiles on the barricades and that, following the victory over fascism, the Jews and Gentiles in Poland would evolve into brothers forever after. The pious Jewish leaders, from their side, promised that if the Jews studied the Torah and sent their children to cheders and yeshivahs, the Almighty would perform miracles on their behalf. I had always believed in God, but I knew enough of Jewish history to doubt in His miracles. In Chmielnitzki's times, Jews had studied the Torah and given themselves up to Jewishness perhaps more than in all the generations before and after. There was no Enlightenment or heresy at that time. The tortured and massacred victims were all God-fearing Jews. I had written a book about that period, *Satan in Goray*.¹³⁶

While many Jews held faith in social movements as evidence of a progressing civilization and an equal future, Singer definitively rejected the terms of their utopian confidence. The above passage describes the position of those advocating for assimilation and military engagement as a belated solution to “the Jewish question,” one that saw Polish Jews and non-Jews “evolv[ing] into brothers forever after” following their shared “victory over fascism.” Contra to these entreaties, religious Jews advocated a return to God, not unlike Rabbi Benish's own supplications to the villagers of Goray, so that justice could then be worked for them. Singer invokes the climate of medieval Jewry in answer, noting that it was during the pre-Enlightenment age that the blows of Chmielnicki's pogroms were received, a time when the movements and rhythms of life were still wholly structured by religious tradition and practice.

¹³⁶ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 185-86.

Both a collective return to classical Judaism and a rejection of it in favor of political “progress” exemplified for Singer a blindness to the particularities of Jewish history, and to the close caution necessitated by its marked past.

The bouts of consistent antisemitism developing into various pogroms in the earlier years of the 1920s, along with those brought about through the terror of the First World War and the Polish-Soviet War (1920), also provided a mirror to the events of *Satan in Goray*, fanning the impulse towards radical change that came to a height in the 1930s. The political and religious divisiveness of the period, across disparate elements of Jewish and non-Jewish life, charged by years of questioning and uncertainty, inevitably transformed into calamitous fervor. As Singer shows, his repudiation of the politics of his day is noted within the medieval context of the parable of *Satan in Goray*. In this way the story assumes a distinct urgency, able to be read as caution and warning against the modern calls of seductive promise, of utopian brotherhood. Situating the work within its environment allows for an understanding that sees its polyphonic engagement with both the past and the future. Singer creates the setting for the purposes of interrogating belief, interrogating the impulse to continue believing against better judgement that, like the Sabbateans in Goray at the last moment, “just an instant before sunset the cloud would appear.” If the night is indeed darkest before the dawn, as one hopeful villager insists, Singer responds that it need not be so from blindness to the patterned impressions marking Jewish history, or to the false bearings of a perfect miracle.

The rich symbolism of *Satan in Goray* is heightened through the figure of the acutely troubled Rechele, born in 1648 and representing the years between massacre and redemption.

Having suffered various forms of hysteria resulting in permanent physical and emotional injury, she is hailed as a transcendent visionary and prophetess by Reb Gedaliya, who soon weds her. While messianic hope sweeps through Goray, Singer provides through Rechele a further message and a greater stage for moral contortionism and demonic play. Prone to frequent dream-visions, Rechele one night envisions that she is trapped in a “fenced-in place, full of mounds and thorns and stones,” swiftly pursued by the grotesque and horribly “lunglike, red, and swollen”¹³⁷ figure of Samael himself. The narration describes,

A bearded figure pursued her, hairy and naked, wet and stinking, with long monkey hands and open maw. Catching her at last, he carried her (for she had all at once become weightless) and flew with her over dusk-filled streets and tall buildings, through a skyless space full of mounds, and pits, and pollution. At their back ran hosts of airy things, half-devil and half-man, pointing at them... The Thing swept her over steep rooftops, gutters, and chimneys... It was stifling and the Thing pressed her to him, leaned against her.¹³⁸

“The Thing,” understood as a satanic presence, is found to have impregnated Rechele, attaching to her through Reb Gedaliya, who is revealed as a demonic force himself. As the town devolves into a further bout of painful chaos, even those living beyond Goray discuss the incident, the story having made its way to “Yanov, Turbin, Zamosć, Krasnik, and even to Lublin, for [Rechele’s] name was famous in all these places as that of a prophetess. The peasants, also, knew that Satan had entered into the body of a daughter of the Jews, and this visitation was spoken of at fairs and in taverns.”¹³⁹ The story closes in this climate of uncertainty and desolation, not

¹³⁷ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 208.

¹³⁸ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 209.

¹³⁹ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 217.

unlike the Goray of the novel's opening. Its last pages assume the narrative style of a cautionary tale, the explanatory blurb suffused with the irony of its statement:

A marvelous tale treating of a woman that was possessed of a dybbuk (God preserve us): Taken from the worthy book *The Works of the Earth* and rendered into Yiddish to the end that women and girls and common folk might perfectly comprehend the wonder of it all and that they might set their hearts on returning to God's ways: And that they might be instructed in how great is the punishment of the sinner who staineth his soul (God save us): May the Almighty protect us from all evil and avert his wrath from us and expel Satan and his like for ever and ever Amen."¹⁴⁰

In a departure from the pattern of the preceding pages of the story, the last chapter describes the trials of Goray and especially of Rechele through the form of a morality tale lifted from a fictitious work and translated into the common language of Yiddish. Through the symbolic Rechele, a beautiful cripple tied to the state of medieval Jewry, the parable offers its subtextual message against fanatical dependence on miracle. With dark flourishes it unravels the possibility of the shtetl—even Judaism itself—continuing as before, offering a heavy answer to Rabbi Benish's early cry for Goray to begin anew.

In his translator's note before *Satan in Goray*, Jacob Sloan links the novel to the present time through the creation of the state of Israel, suggesting, "The long tradition of Jewish Messianism, associated since the days of the followers of Jesus with a universalistic rejection of the Law, persists to the twentieth century, to find its final expression in the cosmopolitan person of the journalist Theodor Herzl."¹⁴¹ The establishment of the state of Israel has been conceived by some as in its own right a "kind of temporal Messianic fulfillment" in the aftermath of the

¹⁴⁰ Singer, *Satan in Goray*, 219.

¹⁴¹ Jacob Sloan, "Introduction," in *Satan in Goray*, ix.

Holocaust, one put forth by dominant Zionist figures already in the nineteenth century in secular terms. In a story seemingly far removed from the concerns of seventeenth century Poland, *The Penitent* nonetheless engages just this thematic strain, asking of the reader a similar recognition of historicity. The novel's setting in modern Israel, far from being an arbitrary placement, functions as a lens focused on the question of monumental change in Jewish understanding and self-positioning. *The Penitent's* opening line is spoken by a framing narrator who says: "In 1969 I had my first opportunity to catch a glimpse of the Wailing Wall," situating readers within the symbolic context of Jerusalem. Though a site charged with deep significance, the writer remarks that in person "it looked somewhat different from the Wailing Wall carved on the wooden cover of my prayer book. That one showed cypresses, but I didn't see any trees here. Jewish soldiers guarded the entrance way."¹⁴² Under a sun "blaz[ing] with a dry heat," the narrator realizes that this holy spot, when seen up close, shows several cracks. The presence of soldiers on the scene serves to impress already a somewhat altered perspective, making the site, and the novel more broadly, "the perfect locality from which to launch a debate on the nature of modern Jewish identity and its relationship both to revelation and to 'enlightenment.'"¹⁴³

While Shapiro escapes New York in an ambivalent rejection of modern life—modernity with its moral failures represented by the United States—he later settles in Jerusalem and liberates himself from uncertainty in commitment to orthodoxy. But the questions that the work, in concert with its important afternote, produces are larger in scope and historical significance. The possibility of genuine self-fashioning, the place of tradition, the question of

¹⁴² Singer, *The Penitent*, 1.

¹⁴³ Sherman, "Author versus Narrator," 246.

secular belonging all plague Shapiro, who finds himself for much of the novel unable to locate himself morally, religiously, geographically in any frame of Jewish understanding. The competing gestures his character is positioned between, the uncertainty of whether he can accept the seemingly unchanging Judaism of the rabbinic tradition or must necessarily reject it for its inability to describe the world in the wreckage of the twentieth century, are centrally important. Shapiro's choice to embrace the former ultimately exemplifies rather than fixes the problematical position. In his own analysis of the novel, Joseph Sherman observes that "Shapiro's dogmatism highlights rather than resolves the problem that while it is impossible to live in the present as if the past has never existed, it is equally impossible to live in the past as if the present has neither actuality nor relevance."¹⁴⁴ These questions on the role of tradition and history within contemporary Jewish understanding, put forth by Singer through Shapiro and foregrounded by his setting, remain central debates today; the seemingly unsolvable tangle, in the Israeli context and elsewhere, continuing unabated. Modern Jewish identity, racked by violent hiccups and change, finds itself barreling toward the future in an unknowably altered state, still carrying the past.

Satan in Goray and *The Penitent* (and, we might add, *Enemies*, *A Love Story*) unravel the notion of an immutable conception of Judaism, placing characters in impossible positions in order to efface this idea of eternal permanence, of unchangeability. In *Judaism, the Evidence of the Mishnah*, Jacob Neusner traces the conception of a fixed tradition to the earliest surviving rabbinic document. The Mishnah, he writes, an important foundation for what is today

¹⁴⁴ Sherman, "Author versus Narrator," 250.

understood as classical or rabbinic Judaism, superseding and eliding other modes of early cultural creation, was a fundamental determinant in the rabbinical response to social and political reality of the following millenia. Notably, as a compilation of notes and observations on Jewish law, the work maintained remarkably little engagement with the political reality of its own time. The historical facts of the violent disruptions in the centuries before and during its composition are catalogued by Neusner: the destruction of the Temple in 70 during a significant war against Rome, a second war against Rome after several generations which resulted in the prohibition of priests from returning to the Temple's remains and Israelites from entering Jerusalem, and finally, the realization that "for some time to come, after over a thousand years there now would be no Temple and no cult."¹⁴⁵ The Mishnah itself, Neusner says, remains unable to tell us much, if anything, of the lives and thought of the mass of people who fought in these successive wars and led movements of rebellion against the Romans, who were kept outside of Jerusalem, and who reckoned with the violent breakdown of their way of life. What it exemplifies, by contrast, is the desire for a quiet normalcy and lawful routine.

"The Mishnah's is not a plan for that construction of the world which will make ample place for the kind of history that the Jews then wanted to make and did make. Its critical issues are elsewhere than on the battlefield,"¹⁴⁶ Neusner writes. Concerned with everyday questions and habits of village life, it did not venture beyond the minute ordering of civil behavior. Significantly, Neusner's note that "the Mishnah's framers' deepest yearning is not for historical change but for ahistorical stasis" reveals the document as one in deliberate defiance of its larger

¹⁴⁵ Jacob Neusner, *Judaism, the Evidence of the Mishnah* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 25.

¹⁴⁶ Neusner, *Judaism, the Evidence of the Mishnah*, 27.

environment and the debilitating and unprecedented change occurring in it. Neusner juxtaposes the Mishnah's "ahistorical stasis" against the apocalyptic poetry "of suffering, hope, and despair"¹⁴⁷ of 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, works created after the Temple's destruction in 70 A.D., and necessarily intertwined with the violently shifting moment. Viewing these documents as another modality of early expression, an "apocalyptic Judaism" based in the tradition of biblical history and prophecy, provides a lens into a separate community in urgent reckoning with catastrophe, with the movements and meanings of history. "The question of the age," raised and debated within the apocalyptic literature, "thus is framed in terms of Israel's condition" following the Temple's destruction. Unlike the Mishnah's intentioned silence, this literary mode responds directly to the threat of community dissolution and suffering.

Emil Fackenheim agrees in *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* that "the 'normative' thought of rabbinic Judaism and its 'Midrashic framework'...is generally thought to affirm that nothing decisive has occurred, or can occur, between Sinai and the Messianic Days,"¹⁴⁸ these being what he terms "root experiences" of Judaism. But following the paradigm-shifting events of the twentieth century, he asks, how to make sense of the present and future? And particularly, following the Holocaust and the creation of the state of Israel, how to understand Jewish belonging in new terms, even in terms independent of religious worship or a static, often seemingly immutable rabbinic tradition? Fackenheim admits the turn in his own thinking, confessing, "Doubtless the greatest doctrinal change in my whole career came with the view that

¹⁴⁷ Neusner, *Judaism, the Evidence of the Mishnah*, 44.

¹⁴⁸ Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World: Foundations of Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 16.

at least *Jewish* faith is, after all, *not absolutely* immune to *all* empirical events.”¹⁴⁹ The events of recent memory, having toppled uncritical acceptance of the “Midrashic framework,” demand a reckoning. For Fackenheim, then, the need to move Judaism toward an understanding of its own history, the need to collect the disparate parts and pasts of this history, becomes central. The “epoch-making” events of history (to be distinguished from the “rooted experiences” of revelation and redemption) must be acknowledged in their various forms, including, naturally, the story of the diaspora. Fackenheim’s thought offers remarkable parallel to Singer’s own statement to Sander Gilman on the importance of cultural memory:

Forgetting is never good, especially when it comes to culture and literature. Actually we should remember every phase of our history, of our cultural development. . . . How important it is will be discovered even later, when people do away with these prejudices, with these silly notions that we should skip from the Bible to Ben-Gurion and forget everything that happened in between.¹⁵⁰

The significance of Goray’s trials, like other diasporic recollections, must be held on the same plane of Jewish memory as the creation of the state of Israel and even of the Bible, Singer suggests. This history, along with the demoted Yiddish language, should not be supplanted by efforts to forget or slip out from the tired past and into a falsely liberated, autonomous, somehow singularly victorious present.

Singer’s literary engagement with the questions of continuity, past and future, through the medium of Yiddish—and secondarily English—is not merely intended to restore the past, but also, more manifestly, to acknowledge the disparate yet braided history of Jews and Judaism

¹⁴⁹ Fackenheim, *To Mend the World*, 13.

¹⁵⁰ Sherman, “Author versus Narrator,” 250.

in its present urgency. His writings reveal, in their fullness, a marked commitment to the role of literature in the remembrance and redemption of this past, taking on shapes and forms from the workings of his imagination, its endless play. As a child, Singer confesses, he experienced intense visions of “fiery flower[s], glittering like gold, luminous as the sun,”¹⁵¹ visions of a “radiant eye,” of impossibly bright “flowers and gems.”¹⁵² In one fantastical moment, the great strides of his mind take him from the bare walls of the family home on Krochmalna Street to the holy land, where he becomes the messiah himself, in final, triumphant possession of the knowledge of ages, the secrets of God:

In my fantasies or daydreams I brought the Messiah or was myself the Messiah. By uttering magic words, I built a palace on a mountaintop in the Land of Israel or in the desert region, and I lived there with Shosha. Angels and demons served me. I flew to the farthest stars. I discovered a potion which when drunk revealed all the world’s wisdom and made one immortal. I spoke with God and He disclosed His secrets to me.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 79.

¹⁵² Singer, *In My Father’s Court*, 155.

¹⁵³ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 17.

Conclusion

With the same reaching wonder with which Dr. Fischelson looked towards the cosmos, perceiving “the heavens, thickly strewn with stars,” watching “a shooting star trace a wide arc across the sky and disappear, leaving a fiery trail behind it,”¹⁵⁴ the glimmering heat of the sky, Singer viewed the world in its shaded realms, its levels of spirit, matter, divine promises. Out of his imagination he constructed worlds of order and chaos, morality and emptiness, and the dusky places between their categorical poles. The wonderment of it all suffuses his work, setting him at a distance from Yiddish forebears, inscribing a singular legacy.

Speaking with Joel Blocker and Richard Elman in an early interview, Singer confessed that he did not view his own work within the bounds of classical Yiddish literature, placing it within a broadly defined Jewish tradition instead: “I feel myself naturally a part of the Jewish tradition. Very strongly so! But I wouldn’t say I feel myself a part of the Yiddish tradition. Somehow I always wanted to write in my own way, and I never felt that I was somebody’s disciple.”¹⁵⁵ In taking the symbolic, thematic, even political resonance of a distant past and compressing it towards newness, Singer wrote within his own bounded conventions. His avowed love for Yiddish was, he writes, reflective of his divergence from the traditionalists, who though they wrote in the language, “called Yiddish a jargon.”¹⁵⁶ The value of its literature lay, for Singer, in the forgotten people of the “Jewish underworld,” in the “great adventures inherent in

¹⁵⁴ *Collected Stories*, 81.

¹⁵⁵ Blocker and Elman, “An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer,” 9.

¹⁵⁶ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 85

Jewish history—the false Messiahs, the expulsions, the forcible conversions, the Emancipation, and the assimilations.”¹⁵⁷

Yiddish literature in the 1930s “remained provincial and backwards,” reminiscent of the feeling of being back in “my father’s courtroom where almost everything was forbidden,”¹⁵⁸ Singer remarks. Yet however much his writing was estranged from the rooted conditioning of his upbringing, his literary worlds turned on the same supernatural and mythical questions that Pinchos Menachem engaged in. The landscapes of devils and dybbuks, the mystical forces shaping the contours of human lives, the worldview dominating his bibliography through his father’s influence, “saw no sharp separation between the natural and the supernatural, nor, for that matter, between the religious and the magical.”¹⁵⁹ In Singer’s own fashion, logic and the supernatural, evolution and God, philosophy and mysticism found home on his pages, their tensions poised in delicate concurrence.

In Singer’s duality, his recurrent mixing of the old and new, he moved toward an alternate literary expressiveness, one focused in both directions. The question of historicity, necessitated by the dark climate of rising fascism that hovered over his early career and was treated in multiple guises in his later work, is present in clarity. Faced with urgent, driving change, Singer asks through his bibliography how to persist, how to refashion Jewish identity, how to sustain it. In Leo Strauss’s aptly titled essay “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” he locates an enduring current of belief in the Western world, an

¹⁵⁷ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 85-6.

¹⁵⁸ Singer, *Love and Exile*, 86.

¹⁵⁹ Katz, “Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Classical Yiddish Tradition,” 22.

ideology of progress in which “infinite intellectual and social progress is actually possible,” an understanding that believes “once mankind has reached a certain stage of development, there exists a solid floor beneath which man can no longer sink.”¹⁶⁰ Cataclysmically disproven by the events of the twentieth century, Strauss argues, this conception of the world has become untenable. Supplanting the ethical framework of “good and bad” with the contemporary binary of “progressive and reactionary,” what he sees as the pattern of modernity, has incomprehensibly blurred moral valuation, shaping individuals into “blind giant[s].” Propped up by the humming machinations and industries of progress and power, modern man is, crucially, “a giant of whom we do not know whether he is better or worse than earlier man.” For Singer, blind progress remains no more an assurance of rightness than blind faith.

In answering the question of where to turn, of how to continue, Singer declares, “The greatest joy is free choice. God has bestowed upon men the greatest gift perhaps which He could have given us and this was free choice.”¹⁶¹ The answer for Singer is unquestionably fixed in the boundlessness of human action, grounded in his ethic of protest, the extension of his ethical imagination, in the truth of agency and choice. Michael Fixler perceives this thematic strain across the breadth of Singer’s writing, lifting up his conception of personal responsibility, his ethical corrective:

The root of the error in every case is the illusion...that it is possible miraculously to be redeemed from the burden of the past, from the burden of the intolerable present, or from the burden of self. In short, the mistake is what leads one to believe that one is destined to be redeemed instead of being destined to be a redeemer.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 1 (1981): 27, doi:10.1093/mj/1.1.17.

¹⁶¹ Lee and Singer, “Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer,” 159.

¹⁶² Michael Fixler, “Themes in the Fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer,” 79.

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