

## Isaac Singer's Stories

There is no doubt about the achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer. He is one of the foremost story-tellers of our time. His output has been prolific and *The Image* (1986), published in his eighty-second year, is a collection of a further twenty-two stories gathered from twenty years of magazine publication. Translated from the Yiddish sometimes by the author himself, sometimes by or in collaboration with others, they nonetheless have a consistency of tone. It would be hard indeed to speculate which come from the mid-sixties, which from the mid-eighties. The same personality runs through all of them, that same love of storytelling.

It is tempting to write 'genial' of the personality but that would be to disregard the sometimes rebarbative note that reveals itself. For beneath the unpretentious, effortless seeming surface of these stories is a firm, calculated attitude of mind. The 'Author's Note' makes it clear that there is a combative, even embattled stance from which these so natural, so accessible stories issue.

In the years I have been writing I have heard many discouraging words about my themes and language. I was told that Jewishness and Yiddish were dying, the short story was out of vogue and about to disappear from the literary market. Some critics decided that the art of telling stories with a beginning, middle, and end – as Aristotle demanded – was archaic, a primitive form of fiction. I heard similar degrading opinions about the value of folklore in the literature of our times. I was living in a civilization which despised the old and worshipped the young. But somehow I never took these dire threats seriously. I belong to an old tribe and I knew that literature thrives best on ancient faith, timeless hopes, and illusions. (vii)

Singer has always stood out against the lures of modernism. The strength of his stories is the strength gathered from returning to the

living sources of story-telling: not to some past asserted source, but to that continuum of storytelling that still goes on when people tell their life stories, gossip, illustrative anecdotes to each other. What we hear in his stories is the voice of the story-teller, not only the professional writer Singer, though he is always there, but the amateur, natural story-teller who comes to the writer with an episode to tell. The basis of Singer's humanity lies here, in the recognition that everyone has a story to tell, and not just one story, but a multiplicity. And so a frequent framing situation of *The Image* is of someone meeting or phoning the writer and then launching into a narrative. 'Advice' opens:

In the years when I worked at a Yiddish newspaper in New York, giving advice, I heard many bizarre stories. (3)

Sometimes this need to unburden stories is presented as something to be resisted.

I often receive telephone calls from readers who assure me that they have a true story that would shock me. Usually I get rid of such propositions with any kind of excuse. ('A Telephone Call on Yom Kippur') (235)

Though the point is never spelled out, it is clear that Singer, the Rabbi's son who trained at the Rabbinical Seminary in Warsaw but became a secular writer for the Yiddish press, is re-enacting the listening, advice-giving role of his father. Many of the stories come from episodes overheard when a child. 'The Divorce' begins:

Many divorce cases were handled in my father's court. The court was nothing more than our living room, where my father kept his religious books and the ark for the Torah scrolls. As the rabbi's son, I never missed an opportunity to listen in on the petitioners who came for a divorce. Why should a man and a wife, often parents of children, suddenly decide to become strangers? I seldom got a satisfactory answer. (58)

And then there are the stories of times long past that Aunt Yentl tells, stories that draw on the infinite resources of oral history and

that merge into the world of the folk tale.

My Aunt Yentl and her cronies were talking about love, and Aunt Yentl was saying, 'There is such a thing as love. There is. It even existed in former times. People think that it's new. It is not true. Love is even mentioned in the Bible.' ('Strong as Death is Love') (70)

For all the opening polemic against that modernism without narrative, that lack of beginning, middle and end, Singer's conservatism is not a blind refusal. He is not in this a reactionary. That self-referential nature of modernism, art aware of and concerned with its own processes, is not absent from Singer's work. There are frequent stories about stories, stories about writers. The Warsaw Yiddish Writers' club is a frequent setting or departure point in this as in earlier works. Indeed the themes revolve as much around the behaviour and contradictions of writers as around Jewishness. In this regard Singer has absorbed one of the dicta of modernist realism: writing about what you know, the romantic heritage of writing about what has personally been experienced. In reaction to that awful authorial confidence of the great nineteenth-century writers who so proclaimed a knowledge of everything, a vast social comprehensiveness, these stories consistently attest their personal authenticity, the directly vouched for. If not what happened to the narrator, they are what happened to people the narrator has known; or stories told to the narrator by people he has met. In his memoir *Love and Exile*, Singer stressed the importance of suspense.

I yearned for some of the suspense found in the works of Balzac, Victor Hugo, Tolstoi, Dostoevski, Flaubert, Alexander Dumas, and Strindberg. Yiddish and Hebrew literature both suffered from a lack of suspense. Everything in them centered around some yeshivah student who had gone astray, sought worldly knowledge, then suffered the consequences at the yeshivah or at his in-laws'. But I had already grasped the fact that suspense was the essence of both life and art. Mere description wasn't enough. What was needed was tangled situations and genuine dilemmas and crises. A work of fiction had to draw in its readers. (130-1)

All of his fiction has this strong narrative surge, this wondering what will happen next. 'Impassioned narrative art' as his 1978 Nobel Prize citation put it. But it is not a naive suspense. The old narrative tricks have become overfamiliar to the experienced reader. It was in reaction to that exhaustion of the old techniques that modernist writers had to look for other strategies; but in abandoning suspense and narrative they lost their readers to television. Singer, for all the seeming simplicity of his narratives, is not unsophisticated. In 'A Telephone Call on Yom Kippur' there is, as often in these stories, the dual perspective of the writer and of the visitor who tells the writer the story. The initial suspense is the writer's anxiety that the visitor will never get to the point, the suspense of wanting it all over and finished. 'I'm coming to the point,' (237) the visitor assures him on the third page. 'But wait, the story is only beginning,' (239) he says on the fifth. 'Now the real story begins,' (240) he promises at the end of the sixth. The ghostly mystery of the dead woman answering the phone that leaves the visitor wiping his forehead and shaking holds no surprises for the writer. 'He sat there pale, pondering his own tale. I said, "Helena was alive, eh?"' (245). These old tricks of suspense are not the rationale of the story. They are still there, they are still functional: without them we would end up with modernist stasis. They carry us along but we know them, they are less matters of surprise than matters of familiarity. No longer privileged as the point of the story, no longer the plot excitement we rush towards as we still do in a thriller, they take a gentler role so that the more numinous qualities of what is narrated can be dwelt on. It is nice to know how we travel through the story – to see the automobile carrying us, to know its make and style as it were, but we don't need the high speed chases, the flashy gravel-showering halt, the all too familiar zig-zag down Lombard. The narrative suspense is now appropriately subordinated, but not elided altogether.

Not that Singer is without the bolder, fearful narrative strokes. 'One Day of Happiness' tells of a young girl who having given herself to be deflowered by a Polish officer-poet slits her wrist on her return to her parents:

Sitting on the toilet bowl in the dark, Fela leaned her head against the wall, ready to die. She could feel the blood running

from her wrist and she was bleeding below, too. (30)

'Strong as Death is Love' concludes with a man so in love with his dead wife that he exhumes her decayed body and is found in bed with her skeleton. 'The Secret' tells of a woman who conceived by her husband's apprentice and years later finds the child and the apprentice have met and fallen in love: 'My daughter lives with her father. He is her lover. They are planning to marry!' (171).

The dominant tone is not as sensational as these abstracted plot details might suggest, however. For Singer's concern is not in the horror, but in the human complexities that the narratives reveal. Violent action and physical cruelties he generally avoids. That constant agonizing about nature, God, meaning, suffering, cruelty that Singer describes in his autobiographical memoir as a child runs through these stories, providing the impetus, the wondering why. A consistent note of his writing is a recoil from the cruelties of man to man and of man to the natural world. Herman in *Enemies: A Love Story* was always planning to become a vegetarian: Aaron in *Shosha* did become so. In *Love and Exile* Singer describes his own shift to vegetarianism from a revulsion from taking life. In the author's note to his novel, *The Penitent* he writes:

I'm still as bewildered and shocked by the misery and brutality of life as I was as a six-year-old child, when my mother read to me the tales of war in the Book of Joshua, and the bloodcurdling stories of the destruction of Jerusalem. I still say to myself that there isn't and there cannot be a justification either for the pain of the famished wolf or that of the wounded sheep. (168-9)

In a world saturated in acts and images of violence, Singer's stories provide a rare, compassionate relief.

The strong narrative drive that is one part of his achievement is not something existent purely for itself. Drawing the reader in, it is Singer's technique for unfolding reality. The replication of reality, not any self-regarding mannerism, is Singer's aim. And the realism has a splendid amplitude. The stories in *The Image* range from contemporary New York apartment life to late nineteenth-century Polish aristocratic estates; from the poorhouse and the gaol to the Rabbi's court; from the Warsaw Yiddish Writers' club of the 1920s

and 30s to modern Israel. But Singer is not confined to a limited material reality. His scope is something that comes with his occult interests. One of the few contemporary writers to offer us a larger world of spirit, he unobtrusively suggests these further dimensions, cosmic reaches, spiritual interminglings, the interface of the spirit world with ours. And the spirit world is unaffectedly part of his realism. As real as the slums of Krochmalna Street or the subway system of Manhattan, it is introduced not to shock or surprise, not for the artificial frisson of the ghost story, but as a natural component of our life. Capturing Jewishness in its cabalistic speculations, this concern with the spirit world widens out into a rendering of those further spiritual dimensions, something not limited to the folklore or arcana of a specific creed or race. The occult both amplifies the realistic picture of Polish and expatriate Jewry, and also offers a wider subject matter in itself.

This occultism is not confined to those stories that deal thematically with dybbuks, astral bodies, clairvoyance and suchlike. These themes are present – in ‘The Enemy’, ‘The Image,’ ‘Miracles’ – though sometimes problematically. At the end of ‘The Image’ it is doubted whether the image of the title is a denizen of the spirit world or a psychological projection, something even harder to deal with. ‘A dybbuk talks, screams, howls, wails and therefore he can be exorcised. Melancholy is silent, and therein lies its uncanny power’ (310). Singer’s occultism is not something reducible to psychic phenomena, but part of a larger world view. The stories enact his belief in the microcosm-macrocosm, that vision that each individual contains in microcosm the forces and tension of the macrocosm. No matter how small the object on which we focus – the single community, the couple, the individual, the atom – it embodies the same forces of the cosmic whole. In the close focus on the claustrophobic settings of closed family life, of compacted tenement slums, of the prison cell, is embodied – looked for properly and interpreted correctly – the grandeur of creation: and the wretchedness, the suffering, too. They open out, these tiny episodes that are never yet miniatures in that usual dismissive sense: they always have this cosmic potential. This is a quality of Singer’s stories that comes not from a secular literary art but from a world view. The stories, with their extraordinary accessibility, their open immediacy, their seeming artlessness are compact seeds, ready

to grow and blossom into fulfilment, meaning. They are not overworked jewellery or embroidered artefacts but spontaneous perceptions of animate life. And this is Singer's greatness as a short story writer. The dissatisfactions that so many readers feel with story collections, with a bundle of discrete episodes, either unconnected or arbitrarily linked, produce all too readily the response, So what ? Nothing is revealed. But Singer's stories have this larger resonance. For all their range of settings and historic moments, their moods of comedy and horror, resignation and disillusion, published together they comprise a coherent totality.

It is tempting to say that Singer has a wonderful source of material. The traditions of Hebraism, the upbringing in the Rabbi's household with its mystical volumes – something so beautifully evoked in his memoir *Love and Exile* – provide a wealth of material both contemporary and historic. But this is to underestimate Singer's very real achievement in bringing these materials to life again. Is Singer's source in fact any richer than anyone else's source? Isn't all life a rich source? Isn't it in fact a mark of his creativity that he gives the impression of a marvellous fund of material, though we can only get such an impression from what he has created of it? The creativity is so rich, the story telling so fertile, that we then postulate a pre-existent pre-formed source. The genius of the stories is that they imply this rich totality, but it is only brought to life through the stories themselves. And even if we say, these are but stories transcribed from a rich culture whose members have told him their tales, again what an immense creativity is glossed over in that 'but'. The art lay in hearing the stories, in finding them, in capturing the pattern in the circumambient world in such a way that that whole world is then illuminated.

Singer's main subject is sex. Sometimes it is with love, sometimes without; sometimes it is with marriage, sometimes with divorce. As he wrote in *Love and Exile*:

I had made up my mind a long time ago that the creative powers of literature lie not in the forced originality produced by variations of style and word machinations but in the countless situations life keeps creating, especially in the queer complications between man and woman. For the writer, they are potential treasures that could never be exhausted, while all

innovations in language soon become clichés.

*The Image* has tragic tales of young girls seeking yet failing to find the satisfactions of love and sexuality ('One Day of Happiness', 'The Mistake', 'The Image'), tales of momentary transgressions or near transgressions that result in cataclysmic religious consequences ('The Pocket Remembered', 'A Nest Egg for Paradise'), recurrent tales of adultery, divorce and remarriage. 'Confused' in which a writer returns from a lecture tour with its series of one night adventures and gets himself immediately enmeshed with three women is a contemporary tale of New York craziness that in brief recapitulates the structures of Singer's earlier novels *Enemies* and *Shosha*. There is a pattern here of multiple affairs and multiple deceptions that owes as much to the repetition compulsions of biography – the same structure of affairs can be found in *Love and Exile* – as to any fictional imaginings. It is all done comparatively tastefully; there are no four-letter words, none of the remorseless physical detail of Henry Miller's comparable cavortings. Singer's erotic themes are presented less with sensuality than as drives and compulsions. But whereas Miller was able in his excess of physical detail to break through to a self-awareness, was able to demystify male delusions for himself and his readers, Singer's decorum holds back from that abyss and effectively endorses these tales of duplicity and the double standard.

It has never been easy to write about sexuality. To present the ambiguous behaviour, the graspings and deceptions and delusions, requires a considerable selflessness in those writers who draw on their own experiences. The danger has always been that the presentation of the problematic, of disturbing behaviour that needs to be displayed to be able to be analysed and understood and hopefully to be corrected in future practice, will be read as somehow endorsing what is shown and advocating its replication. While on the other hand it is all too easy to take a simply censorious attitude to presented incidents, refusing to see that the author has built into the narration an apparatus of criticism and assessment. Singer raises enormous problems in this area. His story 'The Bond' is about one of those 'cases when a man is forced to slap a woman' (32). Reuben Berger's girlfriend is a victim of 'insane jealousy' which issues in 'fits'. 'One thing alone could stop her delirious

outbursts – slaps. I was forced to slap her repeatedly, and this immediately brought her to her senses’ (33). Berger goes off to give a lecture without telling her and she finds him on the train, becomes hysterical but after he slaps her becomes ‘a quiet and humble lover’ (35). The slap is observed by the librarian who is to introduce the lecture; she meets Berger in his hotel room, abuses him for his behaviour, and ‘I began to slap her just as I had Bella in the train’ (38). This slapping forms ‘The Bond’ of the title. The story ends ‘Sometimes I suspect that what happened between us was the closest contact she ever had with a man’ (40). The story is carefully framed, narrated by Berger to the story-teller, so any identification with Singer’s point of view is thereby prevented. But it remains nonetheless a vicious and dangerous piece, and the strategy of framing it in no way exonerates Singer from the responsibility of reproducing it. This is the sort of story that encourages, indeed creates, those violent and destructive sexist attitudes in impressionable young, and not so young, males; it presents a confirmation of that terrible archetype of the way to deal with a hysterical woman is to slap her.

Literature rarely records stories telling us what to do with hysterical men, of course. Hysteria and responding to being slapped in a positive way are all part of sexist typology, like ‘nymphomania.’ In ‘Remnants’ Zina’s ‘first husband, the lawyer, said openly that his ex-wife was a nymphomaniac’ (103). The expression is in reported speech, so is not necessarily endorsed by Singer; yet there are no comparably dismissive terms in his stories for the many males who are presented as sexually active. For all the humanity that is expressed in these stories, there is a consistent current of disabling sexism. Though there is nothing quite as structural in them as in the cataclysmic triggering episode of *The Penitent*. There the protagonist, after overhearing a quarrel between his mistress and her pregnant daughter in which the daughter reveals the mistress has another lover, goes off home in the middle of the night to find his wife is having an affair with her college professor. It drives him to Israel and religion, he divorces his wife and marries a virgin.

The sexuality of Singer’s fiction is very much a male sexuality. Insofar as this reveals and demystifies male delusion and fantasy, it can be positive and cathartic. But there is an undeniable reactionary edge. Machla Krumbein, the sexually liberated writer in ‘The

Interview', is presented as a grotesque, and, the ultimate insult, a bad writer. There are certainly male writers who are presented as irredeemably bad, but they are generally disabled in some further way: Heisherik, in 'Why Heisherik Was Born', is a peasant, Mark Lenchner, in 'Advice', is 'a well-known writer and a Communist, whose wife had tried suicide three times because of his constant betrayals' (4). In 'Remnants' not only is the philandering Benjamin Rashkes' last novel rated as 'the worst kind of mishmash' (115), but it is the 'nymphomaniac' Zina, his ex-lover, who is promoting it and who wants the narrator to write an introduction for it. And Zina is one of a recurrent type in Singer's writing, the Jewish girl who has become a communist. There is Tamara in *Enemies*, Dora in *Shosha*, Zena in *Love and Exile*. Politically in implacable opposition to them, Singer is nonetheless fascinated by these women. Indeed this is noted by the American consul when he applies for a visa in *Love and Exile*.

The consul had received information from someone that I was having an affair with a leftist woman and he asked, 'How is it that you come to be involved with such individuals?'

I was overcome by a silly sense of frankness and I countered his question with another: 'Where else can you get free love?'

The interpreter laughed, and after she had translated my response, laughter broke out among the other officials.

This answer, like all my others, was not true. Many of the so-called bourgeois girls were already far from being chaste. The only difference lay in that the bourgeois girls weren't interested in some Yiddish scribbler who was a pauper besides. They sought doctors, lawyers, or wealthy merchants. They demanded to be taken to the theater, to cafes. Neither was I interested in their banalities. With Lena at least I could have discussions, dash her hopes for a better world. To her I was a cynic, not a *schlemiel*. (215)

But these political discussions find no place in Singer's stories. 'The Conference' deals with 'a cultural conference. Actually, it was an attempt by the Party hacks to create a united front with various leftist groups' (204). But the politics are absent, the manoeuvres of Comrade Flora's fending off sexual propositions the foregrounded

subject. The ideas of socialism and communism are never confronted by Singer, though his consistent opposition to them is firmly enough established. Stalin is equated with Hitler, but what communism involves is left unexplored. That the cold war paralleling of Hitler and Stalin begs more questions than it answers seems not to worry him. His rejection of radical politics goes back to the 1920s. And though there is much about the disillusion of those Polish communists who went to the Soviet Union in the years after the revolution, the explicit debate of ideas is something that for Singer has no place in fiction. In *Love and Exile* he wrote of Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*:

Both these works represented long essays spiced with description. Neither Jean Christophe nor Hans Castorp were living beings but mouthpieces through which the authors spoke. Both books lacked the suspense and vitality that great literature evokes in a reader even if he is a simple soul. These were works for intellectuals seeking a purpose, a sum total, a cross section of culture, an indication for the future, and other such fine things that no art (and actually no philosophy) is capable of supplying. These were works for critics, not readers. They bored me, but I was afraid to say so since all so-called aesthetes had seized on them as if they were treasures. Already then I realized that there was emerging in the world the kind of reader who sought in a book not the synthetic but the analytical. They dissected the books they read and the deader the corpse, the more successful the autopsy. (134-5)

But if the political is avoided, if that realism that issues in socially meaningful observation and analysis, like Gorki's, is rejected, then something has to take its place. If work cannot be foregrounded – and what experience of the work-place does the professional writer have? – then what remains? The preoccupation with sexuality and the occult in Singer's work is an inevitable consequence of his political exclusions. And the conservative nature of those exclusions and choices inevitably permeates the sexual attitudes.

Despite all this, and for some readers that is despite quite a lot,

*Isaac Singer*

Singer's stories retain their appeal. That there are issues to disagree with is not in itself something to be condemned, but a welcome mark of content. Singer's conservatism, even if contentious, is certainly not evasive. At the point when late or post modernism, having lost its non-professional readers, now loses confidence in its own processes, when the foregrounded manner fails to allure and seems only an advertisement for the absence of anything to say, the unpretentious manner of these traditional stories endures.

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