I.B. Singer's Cruel Choice

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Gimpel the Fool, Isaac Bashevis Singer's most famous protagonist, is cuckolded again and again by his shrewish wife and endlessly mocked by the townsfolk of the shtetl of Frampol. He knows, and does not know, what is happening to him. The Polish maid of "Yanda" is turned into a whore by a Jewish innkeeper, made to service his vulgar guests, and finally driven from town by its hypocritical wives, only to be raped by the son of her former lover back in her muddy home village. The wan philosopher Dr. Fischelson of "The Spinoza of Market Street" endures stomach ailments, poverty, anonymity, the vanity of the world. A few stories from Isaac Bashevis Singer. None of his famous demons appears in them. Yet the ground is recognizably his, and theirs. His world is cruel. His heroes are neither those who grapple successfully with it, nor those destroyed by it, but its sufferers, the ones who come to see something. They are the sincere, not the clever; the hapless, not the brazen.

Grappling successfully with the world is what Americans are supposed to do. They also write in English. Yet here is the Library of America welcoming Singer and his heroes into its canonical series of "America's best and most significant writing." It has published his *Collected Stories* in three volumes and added an album of biography, photos, and commentary.[1] It is

a remarkable fate for the only Yiddish writer, with the possible exception of Sholem Aleichem, who will be remembered by anyone but the Jews.

Here are all of Singer's stories in English from the original collections, plus a few new, previously unpublished ones, in three neat volumes, with timeline, copious bibliographical information, and errata for the original English translations. The collection is a pleasure—for the stories, for the useful publication histories and other bibliographical materials, and for seeing Singer amidst the paleface company of Hawthorne and Emerson. For readers already acquainted with Singer, it provides, for the first time, a full picture of his development as a writer, including his breakthrough to a new depth in the mid-1940s, his shift toward stories with American settings, and his deep old age, with its almost spectral late Polish stories.[2] The collection also stands as something of a coda for the curious encounter between Singer and America. Singer, involuted European and eternal greenhorn, was feted and adored by the breezy America to which he escaped from Poland. His American fame spread to the Europe from which he came, and today he stands as the primary representative of Yiddish culture for young Poles and Czechs. He is the only American writer to win the Nobel Prize who did not write in English (Joseph Brodsky won, but he wrote in English as well as in Russian), an outcome which spawned a debate about Singer's Americanness which lasts to this day and is represented ably in the round-table discussion that is included in the album that accompanies this edition.[3]

Singer was called a "cruel writer" by Irving Howe. Certainly the stories set in Poland, especially those of his early and middle periods, are potpourris of cruelty for Singer and his eager demons. One of the contributors to the album was understandably surprised, though, to hear Singer's pungent response to Howe: "Since when has cruelty been a crime?"[4] That does not sound like the somewhat hapless Singer of his memoirs, who bitterly accuses the Almighty of cruelty, or like the isolated but beneficent old man of the many late autobiographical stories set in America. Nor does it sound much like the Polish Jew who, like many in his Yiddish-speaking milieu, lamented the cruelty of his fellow human beings and spoke for the stubborn

goodness and piety of traditional Jewishness. It makes perfect sense that the imagined world of Singer's Polish stories is one of cruelty, given its setting, cruel Poland, not the cheerful and sad America of his late stories. And given that human paradox is one of Singer's most beloved themes, the cruelty of one who despairs over cruelty shouldn't surprise too much. But this paradoxical Singer, cruel yet despairing of cruelty, envelops an elusive truth of the sort his protagonists were so often to see glimpses of.

Singer was known to put people through things, in life as in art. Dvorah Telushkin's brave and insightful memoir of her years as personal secretary to Singer, *Master of Dreams*, recounts the harrowing, if enriching, experience of getting close to him, which involved more cruelty (and cruelty's cousin, paranoia) than the tenderness that accompanied it in tantalizing doses. There were many other unhappy beneficiaries like her of Singer's personal cruelty, which often resembled that of some mad dictator.[5] In his work, the sheer volume and exuberance of the cruelty certainly provoke one to think that Singer rather enjoyed punishing what one might call his regime's many internal enemies. They are the vain, the vulgar, the lewd among his characters; the virgins who like looking at themselves in the mirror, the rabbis who think themselves pious and wise. Also, with equal relish, the deluded, the thoughtless, the sentimental, and the unsuspecting. Their true significance in his work is best understood by their narrative position: usually secondary, whether to the demons who dominate the fantastic stories of 1943-1945, or through the foregrounding of other narrative elements even in those stories in which they appear to dominate the point of view. These ugly or deluded folk beset by Singer's tortures do not get to be protagonists with whom we are to identify because their suffering does them no good.

But there is another class of citizen in Singer's world: The chosen. Like the Hebrew God, Singer picks his favored ones out for the burden of suffering. They are often sincere and hapless, resembling not the Singer of his pungent reply to Howe, or the Singer who creates and stands over them in cruel omniscience, but the lost and searching man his memoirs reveal.[6] We are able to identify with them; they evoke an empathy the characters

destroyed by his demons do not. Yet where they are concerned Singer is not merely trying to give us the readerly pleasures of nineteenth-century narrative entertainment (even if he did delight in denouncing the absurd literature of the twentieth in its favor). He is after something else. Jean Améry (born Hans Maier of Vienna, later an inmate of Auschwitz) calls it "reality": "Even in direct experience everyday reality is nothing but codified abstraction. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality."[7] Unlike his victims, Singer's chosen—Gimpel the Fool, the philosopher Dr. Fischelson, the Polish maid Yanda, the grieving Rabbi Bainish of "Joy"—endure the extremity of Singer's cruel universe, beset by human baseness, malign demons, illness, sorrow, or the world's indifference, until some key moment arrives. Then they pop out of "codified abstraction," the small world of their self-governing, self-preserving ideas, and see "reality" face to face, like the tortured. Some surprising truth that extends beyond their pain then becomes apparent to them. Invariably enigmatic, on the margins of the graspable, this truth is nonetheless seen plain, and it creates the possibility of a genuine free choice. Singer's tortures, in other words, are delivered to those whom they can do good, so that they may arrive at that moment when they stand face to face with what is to be seen, make a choice, and live on differently, usually with a deepened acceptance of things.

So Gimpel is visited in the depths of his frustration and defeat by the Spirit of Evil, who convinces him to take revenge on his fellow townsfolk by urinating into his baker's dough. Then he is visited again, this time by his dead wife, Elka. He sees something—that "this world is not the real world," as he puts it at the end of the story—and changes everything. He heads off to become a beggar on the road, possessed of Singer's version of tragic knowledge, and full of a saintly joy. Dr. Fischelson, "Der Spinozist" (the faintly ironic Yiddish title), is brought by old age and suffering to marry old Black Dobbe, a market peddler, in a hopeless gesture ("thank you, but I don't look forward to any luck," he tells those who congratulate him on the union).[8] His books, his ideas, his melancholy occupation with the pursuit

of reason are left behind as he gives in to his own deeply foreign impulses. Embracing his wife, he becomes one of the blind, passionate fools he had looked down upon—in Singer's simple metaphor—from his attic room in Warsaw. We sense that he has returned not to life but to the world, with its beauty and ugliness combined in such a way that it must be resisted or embraced. Gimpel the Fool sees (it is one of the most characteristic insights, or intuitions, of Eastern European Jewish life) that this world is not the real world. The Spinozist sees, to his disbelief, that it is ("Divine Spinoza, forgive me. I have become a fool," are the story's marvelous last lines.)[9] Heading in opposite directions, Singer's two fools meet at the crossroads of the two worlds.

What happens to them happens to many of Singer's favored protagonists. Extremity, having shaken them loose from codified abstraction, opens them to deep insight and a corresponding action, what is called recognition and reversal in the Aristotelian account of Greek tragedy. But in a Jewish tradition Singer's characters themselves speak of frequently in these stories, God gave human beings free choice. Unlike Greek tragedy, in which the protagonist will choose a predestined fate, Singer's unfated people are entirely free, indeed are called upon, to choose their paths, which tend to be idiosyncratic and deflated in a very human, rather Chekhovian fashion—the educated Dr. Fischelson's unexpected marriage to an old peddler, for example. For all his portrayals of human beings as playthings of a malicious universe and its demons, Singer ultimately writes un-Greek tales of free choice given by a single God—whom Singer the author, therefore, resembles.

For Singer, the old Jewish question of free choice is more than a philosophical question, though it was the one he returned to most often, and (as we shall see) which sustained him personally as an artist. It deeply informed his work, calling on him, the omniscient, to give his protagonists freedom, and going to the ground of how they, in turn, move through the world. Because free choice takes place in a moment, Singer brings his attention with great force upon the moment-to-moment. And because free choice can take place only on a basis of accurate perception, perception becomes all-important

for him. Singer locates his entire art in this crucible. He cleaves to concreteness. He disdains promulgators of ideas ("he spoke in the manner of the philosophers" is a line that crops up in more than one story, always when describing a demon or villain). He drives toward a fictional omniscience that unsparingly offers characters the same silence, distance, and free choice granted by an omniscient God. And he deepens the idea of free choice as bestowed by the rabbis by turning it toward the capacity to perceive and take in the real. In his universe, free choice is not merely a matter of making one choice or another, as it was for Cain or Esau, but of accurate perception of reality. He particularly likes showing characters who hesitate on the edge of insight, clinging to their notions, like the Spinozist and the knowing-and-not-knowing Gimpel the Fool, though he also delights in showing those failures who never make it over, like the deluded murderer of his amazing story "Under the Knife." It is only superficially puzzling in this context that his heroes should tend to be believers in another world, those who reflect, rather than act reflexively. They have taken upon themselves the challenge of living up to both worlds, and that, for Singer, is what makes a hero.

At least where it concerns his favored protagonists, Singer's cruelty is not for cruelty's sake, but for the sake of bringing them to the moment of truth. But what is the truth? "If there is such a thing as the truth, it is as intricate and hidden as a crown of feathers," Singer concludes the story of that name.[10] It is as close to a credo as this believer in the other world ever gets. Singer, though he believed in the other world, did not believe in the earthly utopias, what he called "isms," particularly Communism. In his memoirs he relates the disdain he felt for those many around him in Warsaw who were consumed by ideas. That he wrote stories that punctured Améry's "codified abstraction," that crutch of everyday life that lets human beings coast right through it, was, as the Communists used to say, no accident. The Singer who inflicts cruelty and cleaves to concreteness is the same Singer who believes truth is "intricate and hidden." More unwanted than wanted,

truth waits to be found, as the people of his stories find out, but is never really encompassed or grasped; it emerges from the intricacy of life and is not captured by any system of ideas. That makes life difficult for authors as well as characters, Singer knows, for they are especially liable to coast on codified abstraction. When they do, their ready ideas make world-making seem to go easier; but they issue in kitsch, that "translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling," as Milan Kundera puts it.[11] So Singer's stories are truth-embodying, not idea-expounding, creations. They approach intricate and hidden truth by way of the concrete, with structures of unexpected plot developments, and the suddenly changed viewpoints that go with these reversals, that enact the very intricacy and hiddenness of the truth his protagonists seek.

Singer certainly did not lack for ideas, as he revealed in innumerable interviews and lectures in the last decades of his life. He was even known for bludgeoning audiences with his attacks on "absurdist literature," an enemy he saw everywhere. But like one of his masters, Chekhov, who observed that his ideas about life changed from week to week with no appreciable effect on his writing, Singer protected himself against himself with an astonishingly firm grasp of the concrete, so often commented upon by his admirers.[12] In *Pirkei Avot,* R. Akiva says, "Tithes are a fence to wealth." And: "A fence to wisdom is silence."[13] Singer might say: Concreteness is a fence to abstraction. Abstraction seems to be real riches, but as with wealth, human beings may lose themselves in its possibilities, grow vain as they throw it around, mistake it for the world from which it arises, and finally look with puzzlement upon their own foreign creations. Singer's concreteness functions as a fence which keeps him from the dangers of tendentiousness and kitsch and roots him in the difficult labor of actually willing something into existence.

Those are real and present dangers. Singer's detractors used to compare him unfavorably with Chaim Grade on "moral seriousness." Certainly Grade had a more humane worldview, and he grappled more consciously with Jewish tragedy. Yet where the challenge of realistic fiction is concerned, the

bringing into being of indubitable people, things, and impulses, Singer could be compared favorably. Take this passage from Grade's *Rabbis and Wives*:

> Asna, tall and supple like a young sapling in spring, felt her entire body tremble quietly and her large eyes become twice their size. She did not realize that she had drawn her hands away from her father's, just as she was unaware of the huge teardrops rolling slowly down her cheeks.[14]

Inevitably there is some slippage in a translated passage. Still, teardrops are no larger on particularly momentous occasions than on more ordinary ones, so they are never "huge." Nor do they ever roll slowly, however much sadness slow-rolling teardrops might evoke; they hesitate on the upper cheek before falling quickly. Eyes, even widened ones, do not really grow to twice their size. Though it sounds dramatic to say so, entire bodies do not tremble in emotion; only extremities and parts of the face do. Young Asna is meant to be seen as so involved in her grief (she faces her dying father) that she loses awareness of herself. But it is odd that she would feel her body trembling, yet not notice the movement of her hand, and feel her eyes growing to twice their size, but not notice her tears. And a young girl may be tall and even supple, but not by a kitsch comparison to a young sapling in spring. That resembles Soviet propaganda comparing steadfast Russian soldiers to a silent stand of Russian birches in autumn.

The author is closer here to his ideas than to his character and her actions. As a consequence he loses track of the physical world, which follows not its own logic but one connected to his ideas and the reaction he wants to elicit. In trying to provoke sympathy for a young girl facing her dying father and identification with her, he so buries us with spring saplings, trembling, large eyes, huge teardrops, and other sentimentalia that we are unable to engage in a reader's act of the imagination. His ideas, codified abstractions of grief and youth, press forward foggily toward the real, failing to meet it, with the result that we do not see a young girl facing her dying father but register the idea of a young girl facing her dying father. Our imaginative resources having been prevented from doing their work, we are left to run our eyes

over the words, unable to quite focus; perhaps, in our distraction, we flash to some other scene of dying fathers or sincere girls from fiction or from life and do the work of making Asna real for ourselves. If not, we will tuck away the ideas for the reading labor we are being asked to perform. We may even feel like doing a bit of Singer-like torturing ourselves and snap her out of this unreal world, making her face her dying father as a real young girl. She serves her author's abstractions; perhaps her passivity is a natural result.

Here is a characteristic passage by Singer, also about a young girl, from *The Slave*:

> Wanda was twenty-five and taller than most of the other women. She had blond hair, blue eyes, a fair skin, and well-modeled features. She braided her hair and twisted it around her head like a wreath of wheat. When she smiled, her cheeks dimpled, and her teeth were so strong she could crush the toughest of pits.[15]

Wanda is also said to be tall, but the comparison here is quite concretely to other women—not a poetic spring sapling. Straightforwardly strong rather than dreamily supple, her nature is conveyed through what she is capable of and what she does, crush pits with her strong teeth. We are certainly able to imagine this unsentimental act, and so we are led to believe in it, and in her. Her hair is not merely braided, but braided through her own activity—she twists it around her head—and so we are able to see her taking an active relation to her own body, too. She is alive, subject to her objects, and we can hardly imagine her ethereally unaware that she is weeping or trembling. A girl's blond braid really does look like a wreath of wheat, a perfect, unforced simile; yet unlike a sapling forced into service as a symbol of vigor, however unlike a girl it may be, this wreath of wheat so like a blond woman's braid actually evokes the fruitfulness of nature, and we imagine Wanda, too, fruitful in her strength and youth. We may even associate the wreath with a stalk, and without being told to, see Wanda herself as a stalk upon which sits a healthy wreath, uniting her even more profoundly with the nature to which she has been unobtrusively likened.

This is a real girl in a world of carefully accurate perception and metaphor, a successful creation of authorial omniscience, whose truth is existence, patent and elusive. She is not an entity half concretized from abstractions, driving us unwillingly into our own confused ethereality. She has truly been willed into existence, furthermore as a character Singer approves of, an agent in the world, not the ghostly object of forces that overwhelm her, not even, or especially not, her author's ideas.

Grade's sentimentally constructed Asna would fare badly in a Singer story. A demon would come along, provoked by her teardrops and her lack of awareness of them. There is Singer's cruelty at its least benevolent: ruthless to the unaware, the sentimental, the ethereal, the pleading, the needy. Wanda, one of Singer's favored, has agency; she perceives reality and she can make a free decision. Unreal Asna cannot, because she is not pulling her own strings. This agency of Wanda's is the natural analogue of Singer's successful act of omniscience. It makes for a kind of fellowship between character and author. They both pass from moment to moment, attending to concrete detail, actively making, perceiving accurately, and choosing freely. They are kindred spirits.

It is a cruel regime—but the author Singer is one of its subjects. Like his people, he cannot be sentimental or befogged by notions. Like Wanda, he must be a continual free agent, at every moment in contact with the movements of the real, freely deciding at every moment, even in the face of what he felt to be a terrible indifference. That required a kind of hardness with himself, which he worked to develop—unlike Gimpel and the Spinozist, he lacked an omniscient narrator to torture him—even as his respect for piety and goodness pulled him powerfully toward haplessness. What Singer did have was his touchstone, free will, and a European culture of mastery.

Singer, the witty, charming old Yiddish writer loved by his American admirers, was the self-sired offspring of a self-inflicted program of hardness. In his youth he participated in a common European preoccupation with

will and self-mastery in the face of antithetical forces, a preoccupation now associated above all with Nietzsche, but really a broad phenomenon of his day. As his memoir *Love and Exile* recounts, he fought bitterly with himself as recalcitrant human material to which nothing would come cheaply. The struggle never ended; in the sometimes sad, sometimes enervated late stories, where the transformations are rarely momentous and insight is wounded—"The Cafeteria" and "A Wedding in Brownsville" are probably the best of these stories—his getting-along protagonists struggle with a puzzling life and with puzzling, unmastered selves. They are unhappy observers of their own failings, and stunned observers, not transformed visionaries, of complex and paradoxical truth. Explicitly autobiographical, unlike his early and middle work, with an aging Yiddish writer protagonist, these stories suggest Singer turned out much the same himself. Earlier stories, however, tell the tale of a younger author who followed his own golden rule. He bestowed upon his characters what he bestowed upon himself: the cruelty of free choice and its mysteries. Autobiographical in their own way, at once unsparing (they are free of getting along) and hopeful, they bear the mark of the powerful strivings of his youth in Warsaw, when he starved in cold rooms, carried around a Yiddish translation of Jules Payot's *Education of the Will* (his "second Bible"), and wrote dozens of poems addressed exclusively to himself (never for publication)—"whips" as he called them—to drive himself forward.

Payot's curious book was a natural find for the timid young writer seeking his own strength. An early self-help guide for the modern "intellectual worker," it is something like an intellectual version of J.P. Muller's *My System*, the book of exercises for physical and mental health to which Kafka was so devoted. (And which probably killed him. It was no "communication between brain and lungs" that did him in, as he speculated, but rather Muller's belief in leaving windows open year-round, which Kafka followed through the long Prague winters.) Payot describes what the neurasthenic young worker of the intellect must do to attain the desired self-mastery: Conduct an "education of the will" that will enable him to handle the diffusing

tendencies of the modern swarm of ideas and influences. Meditative reflection, consciousness of the "enemies to combat," engaged dwelling within chosen associations of ideas instead of fanciful fantasizing, and a relentless concretizing of abstraction are the program's main components.

It is tempting to speculate on the influence Payot really had on Singer. In any case, an "education of the will" is a pretty good formula for Singer's "whips" and what they were meant to do. These "whips" of his, and Singer's own account of their importance to his development as a young writer, are in Dvorah Telushkin's memoir. They are the remarkable little non-lyrical lyrics, quasi-Nietzschean in tone, of someone in a mood of total earnestness who wants to hold himself to himself.

> In full power
> Postpone the battle
> And full of confidence
> Prepare for conquest.
>
> Architect of the word
> Your building can be perfect.
>
> The greatest might, the greatest profit
> Is to decide and do according to one's decision.[16]

Here are none of the mournful plaints or feverish praise often unfairly associated with Yiddish poetry. These are the words of a young writer who will go on to eschew the lyrical for his building project, with German echoes which befit the German translator the young Singer was. Singer, translator into Yiddish of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* and the German version of Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun's lengthy novel *Pan*, was, in fact, an acolyte more of Mann and Hamsun and Dostoyevsky than his fellow Yiddish writers, including his own worldly brother. He thus became neither an avant-garde Yiddish or Hebrew poet, a writer-as-thinker, nor a naturalist

fictioneer of the shtetl or the new Jewish world—more obvious and well-trod paths. Nor was he mainly an explorer of older Jewish folkways, or even a "modernist" transformer of folk materials. Singer was an entirely European writer of the era of the mastery of the will. Influenced most of all by Hamsun, he eschewed cultivation, sentiment, the certainties and consolations of ideology. Instead, he took to Hamsun's contrary taste for freely chosen extremity, the blow-by-blow of a consciousness under extremity's pressures, and those counterintuitive movements when that consciousness gives in to impulse instead of fighting it and something unexpected happens.

The crucial model for Singer seems to have been Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, which he read in his teens and for which he wrote an introduction in 1967, describing the sensation it created in all of Europe and acknowledging his debt to Hamsun. In *Hunger* these movements are continuously depicted in a manner that bowled over Hamsun's contemporaries, already primed by Nietzsche for a hero of unassailable willfulness and loyalty to his most obscure impulses. Its hero mercilessly observes himself as he forces himself to live a threadbare existence. This existence is tied deeply and enigmatically to his efforts to write. He is the model not for any of Singer's characters in particular, but for the way so many of them think and go through the world. At once more thoughtful and more alone than the people around him, he is beset by passions and impulses he does not understand. He nonetheless recognizes that they are more valuable than any money or success he might acquire. He punishes himself, then watches for his own reaction, wondering what it might mean, pleased with the game he plays with the universe. It is so much more worthwhile than the proper existence of a proper burgher of the city of Christiania.

> I began running so as to punish myself... "Not so fast!" I said. And to torture myself right, I stood up again and forced myself to stand there, laughing at myself, and gloating over my own fatigue.

> Finally I put my forefinger in my mouth and started sucking on it. Something started to flicker in my brain, an idea that had gotten free in there,

> a lunatic notion. Suppose I took a bite? Without a moment's hesitation I shut my eyes and clamped down hard with my teeth.
>
> I started once more to punish my flesh, ran my forehead deliberately against lampposts, drove my fingernails deep into the backs of my hands, bit my tongue madly every time it failed to pronounce clearly and then laughed wildly whenever I caused a fairly good pain.[17]

Hunger's self-torture is the dialogue a human being of "extraordinary sincerity" holds with himself, which makes him a "spiritual aristocrat" instead of a burgher, in Singer's description of the "truly original" artist in his essay on Hamsun.[18] From that self-torture Singer takes out chaotic brokenness and the "pantheistic exultation" he saw in Hamsun's work, but crucially adds the question of free will, so beloved of the Jews. It hovers over Singer's protagonists like a protective shield (though it may deprive them of certain experiences, of the most radical uncertainty, for example, that Hamsun's hero's chaos brings him). Singer's hero-consciousness moves through the world in uneasy relation with a mysterious, invisible God, much the same as that of Hamsun, of whom Singer writes, "His God, nature, is indifferent, neutral toward good and evil, and frequently cruel. One speaks to it, but it remains silent."[19] He is describing his own God as well: cruelly indifferent, silent, seemingly neutral toward good and evil; yet Singer's God paradoxically requires him to choose freely.

It was a requirement Singer held himself to "every minute," as he put it in one of his whips, which recalls Deuteronomy 30:19, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life":

> And thou shalt choose life
> Free choice is here
> Free choice is necessary
> Every minute.

And:

> Free choice be my strength and success
> Mastery my blessed fortune.[20]

This Singer of his whips chooses free choice; he must hold himself to it continually, its paradoxical reward the strength and mastery it depends upon. Likewise, his favored protagonists come to sense within themselves their own agency, their capacity for free choice. They are helped in that by their sense that a seemingly indifferent God does offer them something, a meaning which, however elusive, really is available. A Singer protagonist will endure or inflict upon himself a similar sort of physical cruelty as that of a Hamsun lone wolf, with a similarly ironic, jesting relation to existence, and a bitter determination to get to the bottom of it. Yet Singer's people are not really attacking themselves to the psychotic core like Hamsun's, and they tend to find something in the end.

> The water was cold, but it made no difference to him. "Who is cold? And if one is cold, what of it?" The coldness cut his breath, and he clung to the railing. Then he plunged and stayed for a long while under the water. Something within him was laughing. "As long as you breathe, you must breathe."[21]

This passage from Singer's story "Joy" could almost come from Hamsun. "Something within him was laughing" rings of *Hunger*. The indifference to painful sensation, and the self-prodding into the pain, is the same, too. But the laughter has none of the splintered exaltation of Hamsun's protagonists, and the grieving, self-torturing Rabbi Bainish of this story (he is mourning his dead daughter) would not think of actually harming himself, even in his worst moments.

Similarly the hunger Rabbi Bainish experiences, like and unlike that of Hamsun's nameless hero:

> During the month of Elul he had fasted. His body felt as though it had been hollowed. Hunger still gnawed somewhere in his stomach, but it was

> a hunger unrelated to him. What had he, Bainish of Komarov, to do with food?[22]

This is a hunger much like Hamsun's, one that is more than a description of the travails that it describes. Like all the novel's self-inflicted pain, it is part of a program by which the protagonist comes to know himself in and through his impulses, separate himself from them, and achieve some inner movement out of them. Rabbi Bainish also achieves separation from his hunger, which, like Hamsun's hero, he makes himself withstand to the point that he finds it is "unrelated" to him. But although it is this extremity that will bring him to insight, he is able to locate it, specifically as a fast in the month of Elul—that is, as a Jewish gesture—and in so doing he is not a splintered personality without a name, like Hamsun's hero. He is, rather, Bainish of Komarov—a Jew with a name and a place in the world. He may experience extremity, but even as an outsider he does not exist as utterly outside human society as Hamsun's character; and as a Jew he knows something is wanted of him. And the paradox of free choice is a sustaining touchstone for him. After a vision of his dead daughter (these Sophoclean visions are common in Singer's stories) the rabbi recovers a cheer that had long left him, and he is moved to comment on the Tora, "a thing he had not done in years":

> His voice was low but audible. The rabbi took up the question of why the moon is obscured on Rosh Hashonah. The answer is that on Rosh Hashanah one prays for life, and life means free choice, and freedom is Mystery. If one knew the truth how could there be freedom?[23]

Different as they are, Rabbi Bainish and Hamsun's young protagonist do share a kind of aloneness that is very nearly hermetic. Both face their difficulties inside their own heads, unhelped. (Human help does arrive in the works of both Singer and Hamsun, but it is usually fortuitous, unexpected, not a merely human generosity but human help as plotted event.) That aloneness enables them to pay attention to the pull of contradictory inner

impulses that, in the conventional human beings who also populate Singer's and Hamsun's work, passes unnoticed beneath social convention, the emotional demands of others, and the banalities and business of everyday life. Rabbi Bainish can come to see something because he has withdrawn deeply enough into himself, away from the demands of wife and congregation. This is the high cost of the difficult path of free decision of Singer's favored protagonists. It is also, perhaps, the price Singer himself paid when he prepared for "conquest" and "mastery," his "blessed fortune."

No Singer protagonist ever decides he will give up his brooding for the love of his wife, or finds in deep and lasting friendship the path out of confusion and despair. Just the opposite: he may come to a kind of joyful communing with others (rarely friendship), but only after some key experience that aloneness has given him. Even then, lasting care for others, the kind that humbles and that mellows cruelty, is seldom to be encountered in Singer's stories. The possibility is alluded to distantly, while disturbing passions and events are described in close detail. There are encounters with others which enable some movement within, but no love which could lift the burden of self-mastery or be its own answer to free will. It is wrong to suppose that the Spinozist Dr. Fischelson, for example, has found in love for Black Dobbe the way out of his enclosed world. She is human being as third term, means for the surprising movement of impulses to take place. Even in a lengthy novel like *The Slave*, with its powerful coupling of Jew and Slav, the love is transitory; when it ends, the hero goes on alone, the same self-propelled man. Singer's characters look for something from the base of their aloneness, wanting some shift to occur inside themselves that they lack the means to cause, but they are immune to affection, invulnerable to a root need for closeness; and they do not find support in the collective. None will become a social worker, dream of tilling the land in Palestine with fellow Jews, start an avant-garde movement, fight the Nazis.

It is in Chaim Grade's work, in fact, where such collective aims are consciously pursued and the fate of the Jews assumes thematic importance. But Grade was engaged in that fate in a way that Singer was

not. “One time,” Singer told Dvorah Telushkin, recounting the social aversiveness of his youth, “my brother even called me a snake.”[24] Like so many devotees of the other world, and unlike Grade or his successful brother, Singer lived on the edges of social life, unsure if he really belonged to the world of human beings. Demons were more natural company for him than politicians; impulses and passions more central to his inner life than lasting care; and crowns of feathers better bearers of the truth than the Bund. Yet from that place of retreat the shy Singer, doubtful of God, surrounded by a Hamsunian universe of indifferent chaos and cruelty, nonetheless held passionately to free choice. It remained available to him “every minute,” as he chose to remind himself continually, and with his cleaving to it came mastery and Mystery. When this cleaving Singer asserts that his protagonist passes beneath an electric streetlight, it seems really to exist in all the mystery of its mute thereness, as an electric streetlight does not when Grade makes a like assertion. Yet in Grade’s work, illustrative as it may be, there is tempered emotion, happy marriage, wisdom that is an answer to troubles, and a deep sense of loss and of the tragic movement of Jewish history. Singer’s painful pair, cruelty and haplessness, two poles of the solitary, are surmounted by a more elegiac vision of Jewish life, with difficult, conscious negotiations of complex spiritual and emotional conflicts instead of the ecstatic redemptions that befit Singer’s Hasidic background. Each reader of Yiddish literature will decide which of these competing visions most compels and which best accounts for the way the world is, or ought to be.

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Notes

1. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Collected Stories* (New York: Library of America, 2004).

2. The publication history provided for each story is particularly useful. It includes the titles of the Yiddish originals (where they exist), the books and magazines in which they were published in Yiddish and in English, and the various publication dates. This is a valuable resource, since the collections published during Singer's lifetime yoked together stories from different periods, making it hard to trace his development and the way stories from different periods, most notably 1943-1945, fit together thematically. The chronology of his life in the back of the volumes provides plenty of interesting detail from Singer's life without overwhelming, and James Gibbons' excellent short biography in the album provides a real sense of what he was like.

3. The documents and photographs included in the album are very well chosen. They include book jackets of the translations Singer made as a youth, as well as later ones of international editions (Spanish, Serbo-Croatian) of his work, with their curious choice of Jewish themes. One photo of a disheveled, overdressed Singer outside his Florida condominium in jacket, tie, hat, sunglasses, sneakers, overcoat and a superfluous umbrella, looking to all the world like a confused retiree from New York, is especially delightful.

4. From the album accompanying the Library of America edition, p. 121.

5. See Telushkin's account of his treatment of her and his long-suffering wife in Dvorah Telushkin, *Master of Dreams* (New York: William Morrow, 1997). See also the contributors to this edition's album, who highlight his interactions with colleagues and the public.

6. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986).

7. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (New York: Shocken, 1986), p. 26.

8. Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 1, p. 174.

9. Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 1, p. 176.

10. Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 2, pp. 273-296.

11. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove, 1986), p. 163.

12. See Morris Dickstein's observant comments, in this edition's album's round-table discussion, on the affinities between the stories in this collection and Singer's pseudonymous popular writing for the Yiddish daily *Forward*, with its tart concreteness and avoidance of abstraction.

13. Mishna Avot 3:13.

14. Chaim Grade, *Rabbis and Wives* (New York: Vintage, 1983), p. 229.

15. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Slave*, trans. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Cecil Hemley (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962), p. 10

16. Singer's "whips" can be found in Telushkin, *Master of Dreams*, pp. 228–238.

17. Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), pp. 96, 130, 104.

18. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Knut Hamsun, Artist of Skepticism," in Hamsun, *Hunger*, pp. v, vi.

19. Singer, "Knut Hamsun," in Hamsun, *Hunger*, p. viii.

20. Telushkin, *Master of Dreams*, pp. 229, 234.

21. Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 1, p. 98.

22. Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 1, p. 99.

23. Singer, *Collected Stories*, vol. 1, p. 100.

24. Telushkin, *Master of Dreams*, p. 192.