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The Art of Creative Betrayal  
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## Itchele, Yasha and "I": Singer's Fictional Autobiographies

### I

I would argue that if Singer has a single great, masterpiece character in all his work, it is the figure of the Artist, carefully cultivated and delineated through numerous short stories and entire novels. Even the superb crafting of the demon narrator, the Artist's alter-ego, cannot match the artistry of the fiction that Singer has woven around the legendary figure of Isaac Bashevis, in all his incarnations. This is due in no small measure, I believe, to the fact that Singer refuses to admit—and gets away with refusing to admit—that the created persona of the Artist *is* a fiction: a rather remarkable feat. Particularly through works such as *In My Father's Court*, the *Love and Exile* trilogy, and even the obviously fictional *Magician of Lublin*, the reader comes to feel that he truly *knows* the real Singer, knows his foibles and weaknesses, his secret hopes and dreams and fears. Of course, the reader only comes to know precisely what Singer, the master manipulator, wishes him to know. David G. Roskies, in his chapter on Singer in *A Bridge of Longing*, wryly observes that “the biographies of Y. Bashevis, pen name of Yitskhok Singer...and I.B. Singer, the magician of West 86<sup>th</sup> Street, diverge in so many ways that it

would be too confusing to play one off against the other.”<sup>1</sup> I will not attempt, then, to cross-reference Singer’s autobiographies against an objective “truth” and to catch him in “lies”; instead, starting from the premise that his “autobiographical” works are and ought to be read and analyzed as fiction, I will examine some of the particular aspects of the literary persona these works so skillfully create.

The three works mentioned above might well be titled *Portrait of the Artist as a Boy*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Portrait of the Artist at the Height of his Powers*. And each is precisely that: not a photographic record, but rather a portrait—an artist’s interpretation of a life. What does the artist wish to show us? The three works offer overlapping, sometimes contradictory, versions of the self, but similar fault lines run through each of them. Itchele of *In My Father’s Court*, the “I” of *Love and Exile*, and Yasha the *Magician of Lublin* share certain traits and characteristics: the <sup>①</sup> pathological bashfulness of the ex-yeshiva student (though Itchele, just on the verge of discovering women, and Yasha, both less educated and more mature than the other iterations of the Artist, suffer less than does the narrator of *Love and Exile*); the powerful <sup>②</sup> need for rational and logical explanations of the world, coupled with a deep awareness of the presence of the irrational and supernatural; a tendency toward daydreaming, fantasy and megalomania. <sup>③</sup> The three versions of the self are all concerned with certain major themes: philosophical musings on the nature of God and existence, and especially a preoccupation with the ideas of Spinoza and Schopenhauer, among others; tortured attempts to come to terms with the fact of suffering in the world; and the creation of a

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Roskies, “The Demon as Storyteller,” *A Bridge of Longing: the Lost Art of Yiddish*

personal ethical code, a kind of “religion of protest”—not to mention a less lofty but equally prominent concern with relations with the opposite sex.

We learn about the Artist’s mental development, spiritual and moral development, even his sexual development. The only major omission, in fact, is his artistic development. Singer’s autobiographies often seem less the story of how he became an artist than the story of how a Jewish boy became a philosopher and a libertine. Though the art of writing figures very little at all in any of the three works, one thing I find particularly glaring is Singer’s choice not to discuss the quantum leap he makes from naturalism to “fantastical realism.” Singer does acknowledge the leap, but does so obliquely and with virtually no explanation at all, as Roskies points out:

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“From childhood I had been steeped in Chassidism, cabala, miracles, and all kinds of occult beliefs and fantasies,” Singer would write in his fictional autobiography. “After lengthy stumbling and groping I rediscovered what I had been carrying within me the whole time.” But why, and how? That is something he never revealed, for that would make the story too secular, too predictable, and too Yiddish. Born-again kabbalists had to cover their tricks; otherwise who would believe in their magic? (275)

Or worse—who would believe in Isaac Bashevis? His development as a writer, his missteps and miscalculations, his manifestoes and his betrayals of those manifestoes (not to mention other, more embarrassing periods such as the one in which he and Aaron Zeitlin wrote pornographic trash for the Warsaw Yiddish tabloids<sup>2</sup>) are for the most part excised entirely from the autobiographies because they do not fit in with the persona of

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the *fated* genius. Above all there is a sense in Singer's autobiographies that the artist is a person not in control of his own destiny, that forces both within and without conspire to guide him down a path not of his choosing. Whatever happens, happens because he is the plaything of Spinoza's God and his father's demons—or else of that more modern psychological devil, his own nature. In any case, for the persona that Singer has chosen to construct, everything is preordained in one way or another.

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Why should Singer choose to create a persona for himself so lacking in free will? To a certain extent, it is an artistic pose; perhaps, too, there is a sense of romance in being, like Shakespeare's Romeo, "fortune's fool." The absence of free will might genuinely represent Singer's own world view—after all, Spinoza is obviously a strong influence, and Spinoza denies the possibility of free will. Perhaps, too, it is a lingering effect of the influence of literary "naturalism." Roskies notes that in Singer's earliest work his characters are "ruled by hereditary factors and instinctual drives" and that "they usually acted in a self-destructive way" (273). Though Singer himself does not share his characters' low-class origins, he can endow his literary persona with their self-sabotaging instincts.

"I" and Yasha, and to a lesser extent even young Itchele, are dominated by two major forces: shame (with its corollary, fear) and boredom. The creative endeavor is a constant negotiation between these two poles, a balancing act on a tightrope. In his introduction to *Love and Exile*, Singer recalls that "I had often heard my mother and Joshua say that many misfortunes in the world resulted from human boredom. So painful

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. 276.

is boredom that people would risk their lives to escape it.”<sup>3</sup> The various versions of the self that Singer presents to us do not precisely risk their lives to escape boredom—shame and fear provide too powerful a counterbalance. But they do risk a great deal: love, sex, money, career. The nature of the artist (or, as it is often described, the demon or dybbuk inside) dictates that he must struggle against ennui. The result of that struggle, perversely and bizarrely, is that the artist frequently finds himself, to his own astonishment and dismay, in the position of doing things he has no desire to do, or doing things that are precisely the opposite of what is good for him. He constantly manufactures difficulties for himself. He cannot help himself; he is the victim of forces beyond his control.

## II.

Of the three variations on the Artist, young Itchele is the least tormented by the battle against ennui, but its seeds are visible even in him. In “A Day of Pleasures,” having somehow or other acquired the princely sum of a ruble, Itchele treats himself to a day of candies and droshkies. When he is through eating chocolates and playing in the park, he knows it would be prudent to return home. But his nature has something else to say on the matter. “When I sat in the second droshky and the driver asked where I wanted to go, I really wanted to say, ‘To Krochmalna Street.’ But someone inside me, an invisible glutton, answered instead, ‘To Marszalkowska Street.’”<sup>4</sup> Itchele has no business in Marszalkowska Street; he knows no one at the address he gives the driver; and to top it

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<sup>3</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: an Autobiographical Trilogy*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1984, p. xxviii.

<sup>4</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father's Court*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1966, p. 112.

off he invents a story about being a consumptive orphan going to visit a doctor. There is no rational reason for Itchele's behavior; it is rather our first glimpse of the "Satan" inside the artist, the force that will demand ever more complications and suspense to ward off ennui.

As with all first sins, this one is followed by an attack of conscience. Itchele suffers pangs of fear because of his lies: "Perhaps I had not been lying when I told the coachman I was an orphan, but at the very moment when I said it I was in truth orphaned. Perhaps I had no father, no mother, no home" (114). He knows quite well that he has behaved badly. But this is the start of a trend that appears several more times in the portrait of the artist as a boy, and becomes a dominant characteristic in the two later portraits: he knows something, and then behaves in a way completely contrary to what he knows. After admitting his knowledge that lying was wrong, for instance, Itchele immediately does it again: "'I was in Praga—I rode on a trolley,' I said, telling lies now just for the sake of lying" (114).

Itchele's tendency toward self-sabotaging behavior takes other forms as well. In "Reb Asher the Dairyman" he recollects Asher's compassion: "Often he met me when I was running about the streets with a gang of boys or playing with those who were not 'my kind,' but he never threatened to tell my father, nor did he try to lecture me" (164). It can be inferred that Itchele knows perfectly well that his behavior is inappropriate; he is fully aware of his "superior" position as the son of a rabbi, and yet he is attracted to the "lower element." In another instance, a member of that lower element, the orphaned Boruch-Dovid, takes the citified Itchele to the fields beyond Warsaw and then hides from

him. Itchele knows that there is no reason to be terrified, and is terrified in spite of that knowledge. "I know that he is only playing a joke on me. He wants to frighten me. But though I know it, I am afraid. My voice is breaking with sobs." Despite (or even because of) the pathos of the situation, one gets the feeling that Itchele is enjoying the little melodrama.

Itchele's growing need for excitement becomes more apparent when his mother decides to move him and his younger brother to her family's home in Bilgoray during World War I. Itchele, who has scarcely been anywhere at all since moving to Warsaw at the age of three, is mad with impatience. "The urge to go was so great in me that I could think of nothing else but sitting in a train and looking out the window." The adult Singer adds, "It is an urge that still remains with me" (265).

In Bilgoray, the forces within the budding artist—the demons that crave complications—again get to work. Now that Itchele is an adolescent, the demons can tempt him with lust. He knows instinctively—with his inborn sense of fear and shame—that his desires are sinful, but he cannot help himself. "I suddenly became aware of the female sex. My own cousins stirred in me a shameful curiosity....My dreams became frightening and pleasurable. I thought I was going crazy, or was possessed by a dibbuk....I resolved to fast. But fasting had no effect..." (294-295).

Bilgoray is also the setting for Itchele's first major step away from the world of tradition. He is asked to teach a Hebrew class to a group of modern, worldly boys and girls. "I hardly dared accept the position, knowing it would embarrass my mother and cause consternation in the town. But something made me accept" (306). His decision is

not thought-out or considered, but rather an impulsive one. "Something" inside him made him accept a job that he knew perfectly well would (and did) cause an uproar in the town. "Something" needed, and created, the most exciting complication yet in young Itchele's life.

### III.

Complications become perhaps the most important driving force in the life and work of the artist as a young man. The dividing line between life and art, already blurred in *In My Father's Court*, erodes completely in the fictional autobiography *Love and Exile*, when the narrator, in a moment of lovely self-referentiality, declares that "What was needed was tangled situations and genuine dilemmas and crises. A work of fiction had to draw in its readers. In later years 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."<sup>5</sup> Art imitates life imitates art, indeed. This second variation on Singer's literary persona, the incarnation of the artist as a young man, deliberately creates complications and difficulties both in writing and in life. He raises self-sabotage, quite literally, to an art form.

Not that the young artist is able to admit, fully, that he is deliberately sabotaging himself just to ward off boredom. He suggests that he has a "split personality," but then immediately describes the problem in the manner of a demonic possession. "Some kind of enemy roosted within me or a dybbuk who spited me in every way and played cat-and-mouse with me" (94). This stylization of the neurosis or neuroses both absolves the



artist of responsibility for it and dovetails perfectly with the persona Singer is constructing—that of an artist for whom the forces of darkness and destruction are totally real.

There is, in fact, a strong sense of the supernatural in the life of the artist in this iteration. His writing is threatened by supernatural forces: “I often had the feeling that someone had bewitched me. I wanted to write one thing, but what emerged was something else altogether” (58). His inability to be neat and graceful—much less suave!—around women is the fault of demons. On his way to meet Stefa Janovsky, a potential match, the forces of evil almost strip him naked.

I had knotted my shoelaces but after each few steps they came untied as if by some unseen hand. As usual whenever I grew embarrassed, the imps began to toy with me. I sneezed and my collar button fell off....A button popped off my overcoat. I suddenly noticed that my trousers were hanging loosely and trailing. I tried to hitch up my suspenders but the loop holding up the trousers had snapped. (111)

Satan works on the young artist not only from the outside, but from the inside as well. The narrator, contemplating renting a room from an amorous older woman, resolves not to get involved with her. “I abhorred dissolute females. I longed for a woman who would be pure and chaste and would learn about love only from me” (59). Nonetheless, in accordance with the dictates of the devil inside, the narrator not only rents a room from

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<sup>5</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: an Autobiographical Trilogy*, New York: The Noonday Press, 1984, p. 131.

Gina—the prototype, apparently, for both Gina Genendele in *The Family Moskat* and Masha in *Enemies, A Love Story*—but promptly becomes her lover.

The sexual urges that were just beginning to make themselves known at the end of *In My Father's Court* are in full blossom here, and cause the narrator all sorts of difficulties. Gina has begun to stifle him; though the rational, shameful, fearful side of him knows it is madness, ennui makes him consider engaging the services <sup>of</sup> one of the prostitutes he passes on the street. “Certainly it would be crazy, having Gina, to go with one of them and risk venereal disease. I barely had enough in my pocket to pay for a meal if I decided to eat out. But somehow, my pace slowed” (102). He chooses a prostitute and follows her into a building.

This is one of those moments when Singer's artistry is truly apparent. The young narrator follows the prostitute down through a narrow, dark passageway that cannot be mistaken for anything but what it is: a descent into hell. He encounters a real, flesh-and-blood demon, stinking of death—“a huge individual with a black patch instead of a nose, a face pocked as a crater, and dressed in rags” (103). The young artist turns and flees for his life. All this is absolutely realistic—naturalistic, in fact—and yet it is simultaneously fantastical. On one level the scene is grossly ordinary: a youth about to commit an indiscretion is scared out of it. But Singer casts it in terms of a supernatural struggle with Satan. “It was all like a nightmare or one of those trials by Satan described in holy volumes or storybooks” (104). Singer uses a vulgar incident to help flesh out his construction of his literary persona as an artist genuinely in touch with the supernatural. ✓

The incident with the prostitute, however, seems to be the only one in which fear or shame is more powerful than the need to fight off ennui. The young artist watches in astonishment as the devil inside leads him into countless romantic entanglements and complications, which he—the artist—does not want.

He becomes involved with Sabina, a young woman from the Writers' Club even though his intentions are not honorable. He knows that it is wrong to do so, and yet "I lacked the character and the strength to heed the voice of my conscience" (178)—or to wrestle with Satan. In this case he admits that it is his own weakness that makes him behave as he does; but in other cases he disavows responsibility altogether: "I became a riddle even to myself. I did things of which I was ashamed. I waged love affairs on several fronts. They all began casually and they all quickly turned serious and led me into countless deceptions and complications. I stole love, but I was always caught in the act...." (188).

Worst of all, he fathers a child he does not want with a woman he does not love. He does not even try to understand the reasons for his own behavior, but simply accepts that it is in his nature to do things that he does not wish to do and that are not good for him. "I had already accustomed myself to my queer behavior," the narrator explains resignedly (191).

Escaping Europe for a new life in America does not change the artist's lot or his behavior. On the contrary, he becomes even more likely to sabotage himself. His demons, he notes, are accompanying him to America; when they play games with him, even though he knows it's all a farce, he has no choice but to play along (231). On board

the ship to America he knows he ought to get sunlight and fresh air in order to avoid being detained at Ellis Island for poor health, and yet “some force kept me from doing what was best for me” (238).

Once in America his self-sabotage infects his work as well as his romantic life. He sells an unfinished novel to the *Forward* and then finds he cannot complete it. “A strange force within me, a literary dybbuk, was sabotaging my efforts. I tried to overcome my inner enemy, but he outwitted me with his tricks” (270-271). The artist’s nature, or dybbuk, or whatever the inner force is, has gone beyond creating complications and suspenseful situations that relieve ennui and make life more interesting, if more stressful. The dybbuk has ceased to be a creative force and become simply destructive: this is a pointless, terrible complication that threatens the artist’s very existence *as* an artist. What begins as writer’s block develops into a full-fledged midlife crisis. Even after the serialized novel is somehow dragged out of him, the artist continues to suffer its effects. The artist’s own nature has turned against him, run amok, and it will be seven long years before he is able to write again.

#### IV.

The third and most obviously fictional of the three autobiographical works finds the artist at the height of his mature powers. One might quibble that *The Magician of Lublin* is not rightly an autobiography since here the “art” has been transformed from writing to magic, but that is more a matter of semantics than anything else; Yasha’s connection to the Singer’s autobiographical persona is so obvious as to require little

justification. In fact, one of the interesting things that arises from this particular fictional autobiography is that it is in some ways the most honest of the three. ✓

Yasha, like the narrator of *Love and Exile*, continues to practice elaborate strategies for self-sabotage. But unlike his earlier incarnations, he is perfectly aware of what he is doing and exactly why he is doing it: “‘It’s all because I’m so bored,’ he said to himself.”<sup>6</sup> This is the reason he engages in such debauched behavior as openly sleeping with Magda in front of her mother. He involves himself, too, with the deserted wife of a thief, with the widow of a professor, and lusts after the widow’s young daughter, while retaining some feeling for his own wife back in Lublin. Like his younger incarnation, he knows what is good for him and what is bad for him, and chooses the bad, but unlike the artist as a young man, he understands his own motivations. “Yasha was well aware that his worst enemy was his ennui. To escape it, he had committed all his follies....Because of it, he had loaded himself down with all sorts of burdens” (58).

For both the artist as a young man and for Yasha, sex is a means for forgetting. But whereas the young artist hopes to use sex as a way of temporarily forgetting his very real misery, artistic sterility and the horrors of the war (345), Yasha has no such grand designs, nor does he pretend to. Sex for the mature artist, who is past his midlife crisis, is merely a way of temporarily staving off boredom. “It’s only because I’m so bored and I want to forget for a little while...” (21)

But what really differentiates the mature artist from the young man is an ability to recognize and repent his hypocrisies—something that I doubt Singer could ever do

outside a strictly fictional milieu. The artist as a boy and as a young man professes intense sympathy and sensitivity for the suffering of others, but apparently never thinks twice about the way he himself treats his fellow human beings—especially women. Yasha slowly comes to the realization that he is not as wonderful and kind a person as he has always assumed:

He had plumbed the very depths of iniquity. How had this come about? And when? He was by nature good-hearted. In the winter he scattered crumbs outside to feed the birds. He seldom passed a beggar without offering alms. He bore eternal hate against swindlers, bankrupts, charlatans. He had always prided himself on being honest and ethical. (67)

The revelation is not yet complete—he has yet to understand that cheating on his loyal wife and deceiving and misusing dozens of women does not constitute ethical behavior—but it is a start. And it is a start that Singer, who delighted in humiliating others, probably never made anywhere else, much less completed as Yasha completes his epiphany and repentance. So: why here?

It is interesting to note that Wolsky, Yasha's impresario, considers self-sabotage to be an artistic trait (73). Emilia, the widow, insists that character determines fate and that Yasha sees a pit and is set on falling into it anyway (83). In this polyphonous pseudo-autobiography, their voices too can speak for the author; the implication of their statements seems to be that the artist himself believes that the climax of an artist's life

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<sup>6</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Magician of Lublin*, trans. Elaine Gottlieb and Joseph Singer, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (xeroxed copy), p. 18.

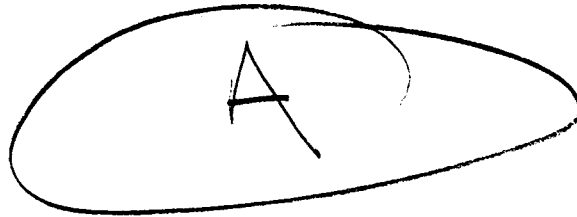
and an artistic personality is self-destruction—going out in an inevitable blaze of glory.

For Singer, it seems, self-destruction is equated with self-denunciation.

In Yasha's case the ultimate self-sabotage—and the event that leads to his repentance—is the abortive burglary, in which he is betrayed by his own writing. Here, likewise, Singer betrays himself with his own writing; he denounces himself through the means of a fictional persona, admitting that he is a criminal who needs to give up his art and his women and repent. Doing this through Yasha is a safe and “unfinalizable” way—really, a brilliant way—for the “real” artist to self-destruct, and yet still remain the artist.

yes!

... and, as Julian pointed out in class, to become a saintly figure in the bargain!



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