

Comparing *The Mirror* and *Passion for Clothes* Through the Metaphor of Painting  
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Demons, Dybbuks and the Problems of Evil  
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In the article *Concerning Yiddish Literature in Poland* by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Robert Wolf, it is said of I.L. Peretz: “the work Peretz had begun was pathbreaking. It revealed the beginning of the road that Yiddish literature would have to take if it were to exist at all.”<sup>1</sup> The praise is indeed high, and shows that the writers of the article, and in particular Bashevis Singer, were highly aware of the quality of Peretz’ writing and his influence on the direction of Yiddish fiction. In fact, this recognition can be seen in the influence that Peretz’ *Passion for Clothes* had on Bashevis Singer in producing his own work, *The Mirror*. Yiddish literature, like other Europe-based literatures, can be analyzed through the lens of western art more broadly – in particular by examining the borrowings of one artist from another in creating new works of literary art. The Bashevis Singer-Peretz relationship is not the first in which one creative artist has looked to another for influence and inspiration. It is often the case that this kind of emulation of an earlier work allows a later work to develop as a form of response or imaginary dialogue, ultimately pushing the cannon forward.

This essay will analyse Bashevis Singer’s *The Mirror* alongside I.L. Peretz’s *Passion for Clothes*. In particular, it will focus on these stories as male portrayals of young women as objects of seduction, vulnerability and desire. In order to better understand male artists communicate with other male artists by speaking through women as their muses, the essay will then look to another moment in European artistic history when the male gaze on females was used by artists

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<sup>1</sup> Bashevis Singer, Isaac and Robert Wold (1995): “Concerning Yiddish Literature in Poland (1943)”. *Indiana University Press*. Vol. 15. No. 2. p. 119

in dialogue: the call and response of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Manet's *Olympia*. The overall goal of this comparative work will be to show how the birth of new movements can often happen when a young author responds and drives forward the work of an earlier master, pushing the artistic cannon forward not just in linear time but also in intellectual currents. A topic such as this one – male ways of viewing and portraying females as they are seen in society – seems tailor made for exploring the ways in which new forms of expression emerge.

In *Passion for Clothes*, Bashe Gitel is a humble and pious wife of a Hassid. While her husband is away, she becomes convinced by the devil to fall in love with clothes, jewelry and material items and to turn away from her pious following of the Bible. She starts spending all of her housekeeping and holy holiday money on clothes instead of on food preparation and charity. After she loses the ability to use her legs (which is taken as a warning sign from God), she takes in an orphan girl to sew her clothes out of silk and other expensive materials and lays them out around the room for her. When one morning a dress appears covered in dirt and liquor she blames the orphan girl, whose hair is cut off and who is excommunicated from the town. Later in the story, however, it is discovered that the clothes were being used by demons to fete and sin late into the night after the town is asleep. Eventually, as Bashe Gitel lays dying, she asks for repentance on her deathbed. She calls her husband to her deathbed and “made him swear to find [the orphan girl] and have her be a mother to her children.”<sup>2</sup> She is thus revealed as a weak and lowly woman whose despite trying to be pious through trickery ultimately fell to sin, the only way to redeem herself being to ask for forgiveness before her life expires and to tell her husband to carry on by marrying the orphan girl she wronged.<sup>3</sup> Until the end was approaching, Bashe

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<sup>2</sup> “Passion for Clothes”, class handout

<sup>3</sup> “Passion for Clothes”, class handout

Gitel could not see beyond her immediate desires; she was blinded by shiny material items and could not recognize true piety, even if she did read Yiddish translations of the bible throughout her entire life.

*The Mirror* also plays into ideas of female seduction, promiscuity and interest in sinning, although it reinterprets these themes and comments on seduction and female agency in new ways. The female protagonist, Zerel, does not come from humble beginnings in *The Mirror*, but rather in the very first scene is depicted with her robes undone looking at herself naked in the mirror and admiring herself when the demon appears. “She would sit for hours delighting in her beauty.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, while in *Passion for Clothes* the devil had to disguise himself as a pious and humble individual in order to trick Bashe Gittel, in *The Mirror* the demon has to put on no such pretenses in order to get Zerel’s attention. The demon is described as being “black as tar, long as a shovel, with donkey’s ears, a ram’s horns, a frog’s mouth, and a goat’s beard. [His] eyes were all pupil.”<sup>5</sup> Zerel thus knows that the demon is evil when she summons it to take her to a new place. And while she does not realize how much trouble she will eventually find herself in, she is to a certain extent a willing participant with a sense of agency and self-determination in that she actually summoned the demon after first meeting him in his true and most vile form. Zerel may be overly tempted by curiosity, but she does understand that she is hurting her husband and those around her by leaving; and yet she ultimately chooses to do just that. In addition, while Bashe Gittel is easily replaceable with a new young orphan girl who can both take care of the existing children as well as birth more children, Zerel seems much more irreplaceable and her husband cries after she has disappeared.

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<sup>4</sup> “The Mirror”, class handout p.49

<sup>5</sup> “Passion for Clothes”, class handout

One can see by the way the two authors have portrayed their respective protagonists that Bashevis Singer's Zerel is far more promiscuous and ready for seduction than Peretz' Bashe Gittel. On the surface this would seem to indicate that Zerel is much more vulnerable than Bashe Gittel and therefore less of a positive portrayal of female characters, whose primary trait is that they are not to fall into sin. In fact, however, it tends to convey the opposite feeling when subjected to a feminist reading. Zerel is more in charge of her sexuality and more explicit in her willingness to be seduced, therefore giving a greater sense of agency than Bashe Gittel who is a totally unknowing, passive participant in the seduction process.

In this respect the two novels can be compared to classical Western paintings which were also created by a call and response between old master and young upstart. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* was finished in 1534 and depicts a young woman, naked, having her dowry being prepared in the background as she coyly looks over at the viewer. In order to properly interpret this piece one must answer an important question posed by David Rosand: "Is this 'Venus' in fact a Venus?"<sup>6</sup> A common idea is that this was supposed to be a wealthy woman (namely, Giulia Varano), in celebration of her marriage.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that she is entirely naked and that the painting could therefore be viewed as provocative, its reception was largely uncontroversial as her gaze is unassuming and non-corrupting to the viewer. She looks vulnerable and meek, only looking at the viewer from the corner of her eye and when the

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<sup>6</sup> Rosand, David. "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 45, Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500 (1993), pp. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Shiewetz, K. "Love Me Tender: Figuring Out the Real Meaning Behind Titian's Venus of Urbino" *Lehigh Review*. Vol. 13. (2005) pp. 156. and Rosand, David. "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 45, Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500 (1993), pp. 109.

painting is hung at eye level she would be depicted below a standing audience. As a result of this positioning and portrayal, she was ultimately not seen as threatening to the status quo of women at the time.<sup>8</sup>

Women during Titian's era were largely viewed as commodifiable objects and were not seen to have agency in their own right or any true means of self-determination. The woman in the painting is being married off and tended to by maids; she has nothing to do but sit naked, seemingly in a dreamy haze and wait for the wedding day to come. It is as if in her innocence she does not know the stigma of being naked in the modern age. In what may be a biblical reference, she appears in her own blissful Garden of Eden, entirely ignorant in her innocence and therefore entirely naked and pure. Despite this highly patronizing way of depicting women, Titian is viewed as pathbreaking in that he found so much meaning and gave so much detail and worth to the quotidian life, from the rosy cheeks of the woman depicted to the little dog at the foot of her bed – both signs of healthy domesticity. He was famous for the depiction of people living their everyday lives and showing their stories. The tiny pup, a sign of family and home, became a staple of his paintings.

Three centuries later, Manet, an impressionist, responded to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and in 1865 painted *Olympia*. This painting, in contrast to Titian's, caused a huge uproar and was highly controversial in its reception. In *Olympia*, like in *Venus of Urbino*, a young woman is depicted on a bed with a servant attending to her. Despite the similar framework between the two pieces, however, there are notable differences. In *Olympia*, the woman is brought up and into the

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<sup>8</sup> Elderfield, John. "Titian and Manet: Possession and Ownership in Painting the Female Nude." *Artsy*, 16 July 2013,

foreground, meeting the viewer at eye level. In addition, instead of gazing coyly to the side, she meets the viewer with a straight, self-confident gaze. She does not appear to be shy in the face of her sexuality, but rather looks as though she is in charge of her own body and has command over the fact that it is a commodity. She is self-aware of what it means to be naked and nevertheless is unashamed; in fact, her expression and posture evoke shame in the viewer for looking. In *Venus of Urbino*, the maids are preparing a gift, a dowry, for the man who is going to take the woman's body. By contrast, in *Olympia* the woman pictured is the one receiving flowers from a male suitor. The maid is giving her the gift, making it clear that the naked woman is aware that she is not alone and still unabashed in her nudity. Instead of a little dog at the end of the bed there is instead a black cat, a sign of sin, seduction and lude behavior. The role reversal of a male giving a gift to the woman in some sort of assumed exchange for sexual favors, as well as the take-charge nature and agency of the woman in *Olympia*, made the piece at once both a reimagining of Titian's piece as well as a counterpoised response. As Rosan describes it in his article: "Against the provocation of a tableau of a French courtesan, a brazen pictorial gesture calculated to épater le bourgeois, Titian's nude was recognized as a model of domestic virtue."<sup>9</sup>

The same is true for the way in which Peretz's *Passion for Clothes* and Bashevis Singer's *The Mirror* read and respond to one another. Bashe Gitel is not self-aware; indeed, she is the very opposite. She cannot grasp what is happening as she is being seduced, but instead coyly looks towards the small sins of clothes and nice things as creature comforts until she becomes wholly engulfed by the devil and his indulgences. By contrast, Zerel channels *Olympia*. She looks seduction straight in the face and agrees to it out of curiosity. Just as *Olympia* owns her

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<sup>9</sup> Rosand, David. "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" *Studies in the History of Art*, Vol. 45, Symposium Papers XXV: Titian 500 (1993), pp. 104.

sexuality and has an understanding of the sexual acts her posture and expression represent, Zerel has more self-awareness and therefore more agency in her seduction. While in the end Zerel does find herself in over her head, she did decide to trust a demon who had no nicely packaged trappings.

In this way, Peretz paved a lot of the initial road for later Yiddish writers to follow. If *Passion for Clothes* is similar to *Venus of Urbino*, then one can extrapolate that I.L. Peretz is akin to Titian. I.L. Peretz, like Titian, created beautiful and groundbreaking stories in his celebration of the quotidian. Peretz' stories show life in the shtetl in a way which was profound in their understanding and attention to detail. Titian was famous for his portraits which depicted people in domestic spaces performing daily chores as well as Biblical stories and other pious and traditional paintings. Both Peretz and Titian pioneered the rules which later artists could break and to which they could respond; as has been seen, Manet and Bashevis Singer do just that with *Olympia* and *The Mirror*. These pieces take the original terrain and mold them into a new landscape. Manet did so with the impressionists, making provocative art which commented on the changing times prompted by increased urbanization and the arrival of the industrial revolution. Bashevis Singer responded to the interwar period, the new Yiddish literature scene in Poland with the Writers' Union in Warsaw, and then later to the upheaval of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Once the rules of the game were fully established by early greats such as Peretz and Titian, new artists such as Bashevis Singer and Manet could take these rules and mold them to changing times and changing attitudes.

Bashevis Singer has the devil say to Zerel in *The Mirror*, likely in a somewhat tongue and cheek manner: “The writers of books have the brains of a flea; they merely parrot each other”<sup>10</sup>. It is a funny line imbued with a self aware irony, but actually writers parroting on another is ultimately not the case here. Bashevis Singer took the works of I.L. Peretz and done much more than just parrot the material. Rather, Bashevis Singer further expands upon the ideas and the presentations of women but forward in *Passion for Clothes*, implementing the tale with additional meaning, greater levels of insight and more updated imaginings of women. The same is true for Manet when he turned Titian’s gentle presentation of a naked women into a painting charged with sexual prowess and higher levels of self awareness attributed to the female depicted. Writers of books, as well as painters of fine art both therefore do not just copy one another but rather speak to one another just as their pieces speak to their respective audiences. Art is dynamic and thus needs prior work to propel it forward.

Looking back on Peretz’ *Passion for Clothes* and Bashevis Singer’s *The Mirror* with historical perspective, the two works now appear to exist in a form of symbiosis. It is therefore not possible for me to say which one I prefer. Just as with Titian and Manet, the viewer has come to reflect on and learn so much more about *Venus of Urbino* now that Manet has counterposed his *Olympia* . Likewise, after reading *The Mirror* one inevitably has a greater appreciation for *Passion for Clothes*; in fact, for the contemporary reader, each of these works feeds off the other in order to convey its full significance. While as a modern person I might prefer Zerel’s self-confidence and Olympia’s pronounced sexuality to Bashe Gitel’s naivety and Venus of Urbino’s coyness, each portrayal is deconstructed by, and therefore further informed by, the other. It is no longer possible to consider Peretz’ depiction of female shtetl characters without seeing their

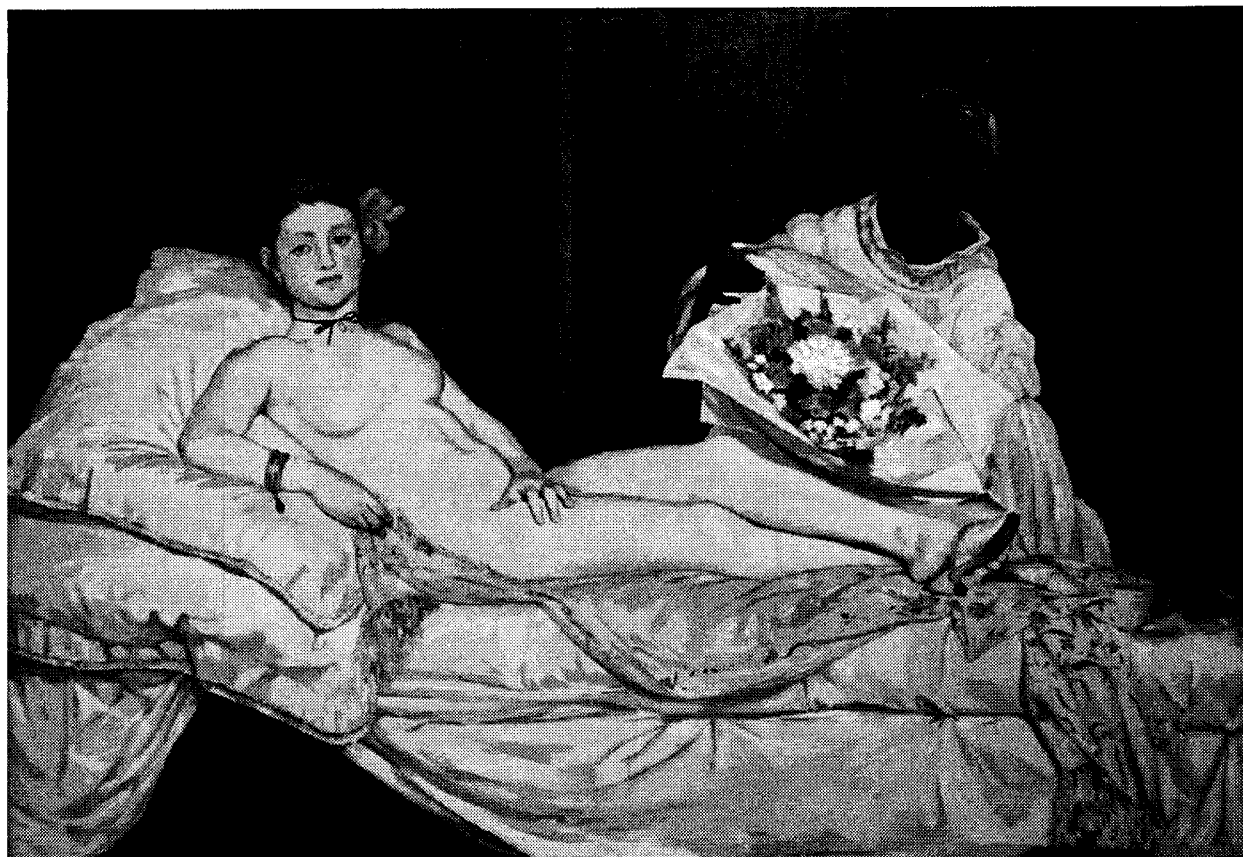
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<sup>10</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Mirror* p.50

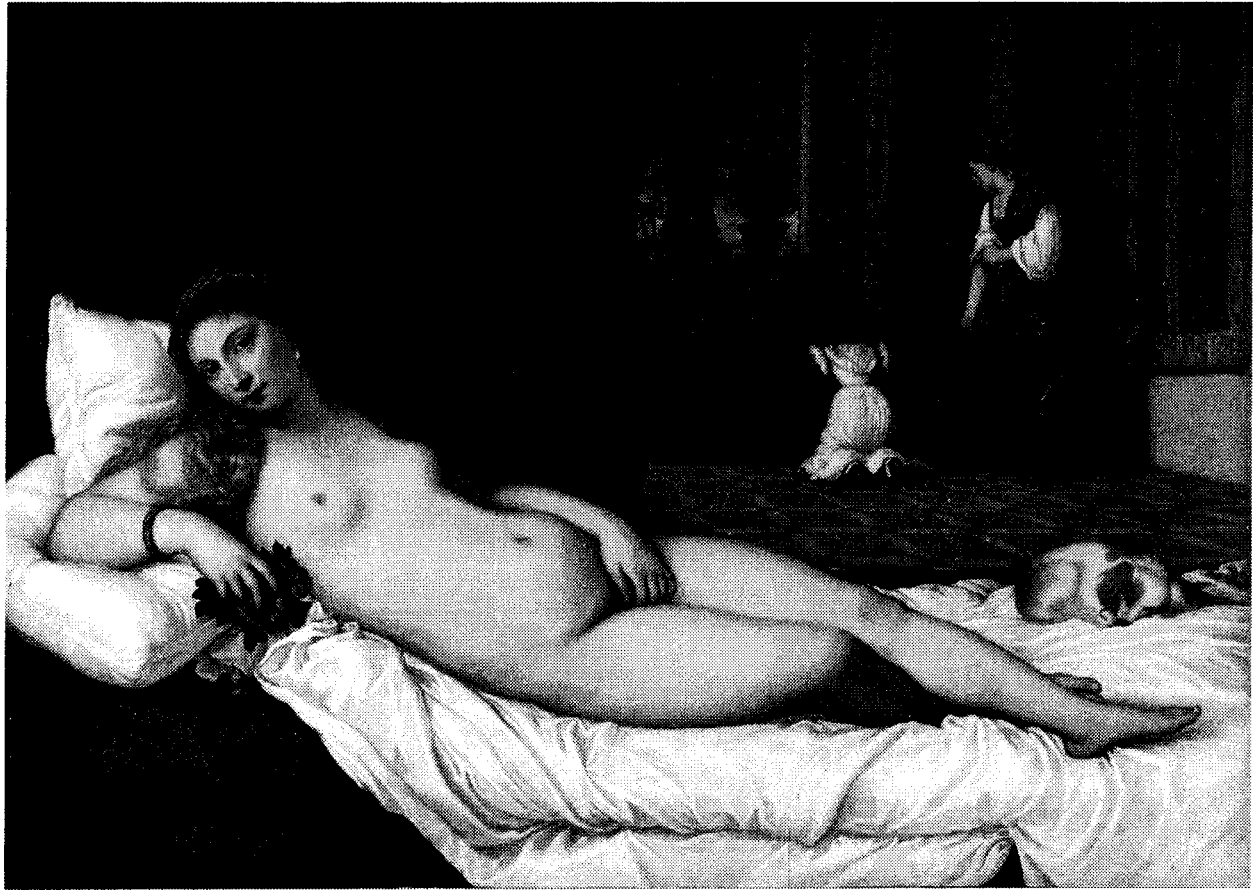


counterposed shadow in Bashevis Singer. Accordingly, no expression of preference for one over the other can factor out the fact that one might now be preferred *because* of the other. Unlike Bashevis Singer's observation mentioned in the last paragraph, these writers do not "merely parrot each other" when they deconstruct and create anew; rather, they provide a thematic mirror image of each other such that one provides the necessary completion of the other. In doing so, they together provide insights into the Yiddish-speaking society portrayed in the respective works, and, again together, provide a reflection on the course taken by Yiddish writing itself.

#### Image Index:



Manet, E. *Olympia*. 1856.



Titian. *Venus of Urbino*. 1534.