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22 March 1999

Demons and the Women Who Love Them

Seduction Tales by I.B. Singer and Y.L. Peretz

There are so many striking similarities between Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Mirror" and Y.L. Peretz's "A Passion for Clothes" that they virtually demand a more in-depth comparison. After all, both stories feature women as their protagonists—women who are frequently left alone by their husbands; both are tales of lust and seduction; both involve demons and the supernatural; both punish the women who sin. But the differences between the tales, on closer inspection, are at least as prominent as the similarities between them. I will examine not only the divergences between the seduction tales, but also the ways in which even similar elements function to present differing world-views in each story.

The most immediate and salient difference between the two stories is the manner of narration. "The Mirror" announces its form in its subtitle, "*A monolog fun a sheyd,*" while Peretz's story is told by an omniscient narrator. "The Mirror" belongs as much to the imp who narrates it as it does to Zirel, the story's only major human character. The effect of this is twofold: the imp imparts a much broader picture of the workings of the supernatural world than we get in "A Passion for Clothes"; and if we understand his

monologue as not just the narrative of a supernatural being, but at another level as the narrative of Zirel's unconscious, it provides us with a disturbing look at a thoroughly debauched mind. As well, the more intimate form of the monologue is best suited to the sexually-charged story.

"A Passion for Clothes," despite its suggestive title, styles itself more like a traditional parable than an explicitly erotic story, an idea that is reinforced by the slightly distanced, omniscient narrator. We are given only the barest clues about the identity of Peretz's narrator; it may be the author himself. The narrator's tone is highly didactic, and though he remains mostly aloof from the goings-on, he does interject a few pious, editorializing remarks: "God forbid!", "—may God protect and save her!" (112) And he gives us a hint as to his own time frame; when the protagonist's neighbors are in an uproar over the supposed misdeeds of her servant-girl, asking, "What was the world coming to?!," the narrator observes that "Jews wondered that even then, so obviously the world must be getting worse all the time!" (112) So the story is being narrated to some audience in the present, about some long-ago event, and we understand that the narrator hopes to use the event instructively.

Another important difference between the two stories is that they portray very distinct women. Though both female protagonists—anti-heroines might be a better description—fall prey to demons, they are radically different characters, and the ways in which they are seduced reflect their dissimilarity. Like every Singer anti-hero, Zirel exhibits the two major prerequisites for a downfall: isolation and grotesqueness. She is isolated from the communal life of the village, in large part because of her background.

Zirel is a product of an "enlightened" education, and as a result she "had nothing to talk about with her small-town neighbors"[1]—neighbors who, presumable, are steeped in traditional Jewish culture. For Zirel, the whole weight of Jewish tradition has been emptied of religious content and reduced to pretty embroideries of "Moses and Ziporah, David and Bathsheba, Ahasuerus and Queen Esther" (p. 1).

It is not insignificant, either, that the minimal amount of involvement that Zirel has with Jewish themes involves male-female pairings; the couples whose images she embroiders provide a foil for her isolation from her husband, who makes frequent trips to Danzig, leaving her alone. This second isolation, from her husband, meshes with Zirel's abnormal sexuality, which contributes to Singer's description of her as a grotesque. Her particular abnormality is somewhat different from those found in other Singer stories: whereas grotesqueness in other tales takes the form of transsexuality/gender role reversal (Reb Nathan in "The Unseen," Gimpel in "Gimpel the Fool") or asexuality/androgyny (Zeidel in "Zeidel the Pope," Meyer the eunuch in "Three Tales"), here the perversion is auto-sexuality.

Zirel spends her days locked in her attic "boudoir" (1)[2] contemplating herself in a cracked mirror. Zirel is entranced, *seduced*, by herself—by her own naked image in the mirror. And though—as Ken Frieden points out in "I.B. Singer's Monologues of Demons"—Zirel ostensibly "longs to share what she sees with an imaginary hunter, or

[1] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Mirror," (xerox) p. 1. This and all citations to both the Singer and Peretz stories are taken from the xeroxed course-pack, and will be referenced only by page number.
[2] The cosmopolitan, foreign title that Zirel gives the humble attic room in which she isolates herself emphasizes her displacement in her rural environment as well as the strong sexual undertones of her activities there.

poet, or swordsman"[3] who would burst through her bolted door, in fact it is clear even from the description of the mirror itself that *it*, not a man, would be her real seducer. The mirror is framed with "snakes, knobs, roses, and adders" (1). The classic symbols of woman's seduction and downfall—snakes (and not just snakes, but poisonous snakes)—are twined about the mirror. And the fact that these snakes and adders are camouflaged with beautiful, romantic roses only renders them more dangerous. The connection of snake and seduction is emphasized later by the demon, who asks rhetorically: "But what is Eve without a serpent?" (3)

Frieden, seizing on that demonic utterance, part of a set of paired rhymes, argues that it demonstrates the dangerous solipsism of the monologue as a literary form, noting that

> Tsirl falls into the demon's trap, as if by a linguistic reflex, and begins to utter doggerels of her own....Tsirl exemplifies the fate of monologists, in an extreme form. The sin of consorting with evil spirits appears as the sin of encouraging narcissistic and auto-erotic impulses. But the temptation by Singer's demonic monologists take on an added dimension when associated with a decaying tradition which, by referring endlessly to itself, isolates itself from the surrounding world.[4]

I have to disagree with Frieden on this last point. It seems to me that what is at issue is not a "decaying tradition...referring endlessly to itself" but rather a dangerous new movement that threatens the stability of centuries of traditional life. If the demon plays with narcissism, self-reflexiveness and doggerel verse, it should be recalled that he—like all of Singer's demons—is dealing with his victim on the *victim's own terms*. The great

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[3] Ken Frieden, "I.B. Singer's Monologues of Demons," *Prooftexts* 5 (1985), p. 265.
[4] *Ibid*, p. 265.

brilliance of each demon tormentor is that he adjusts his approach precisely to fit the mental curriculum of the tormentee.

It is Zirel who, albeit unknowingly, sets the terms for her own seduction and downfall. It is important to note that the demon does not *cause* Zirel's narcissism/solipsism—what Frieden calls her "mortal sin"[5]—but, rather, merely exploits it. The demon chooses the tactic of entering the mirror not only because it is a tried-and-true tactic, but because Zirel already spends her days gazing into it! The work of seduction is already more than half-done. The demonic monologue (and its attendant self-referentiality) is thus associated with Zirel, who does not embody tradition at all, but rather its opposite and enemy, "Enlightenment." It is not Yiddishkeit that is isolated from the surrounding world: in the context of this story, Yiddishkeit *is* the surrounding world. It is Zirel who is the aberration, the solipsistic freak of modernity.

Zirel is so far disconnected from Jewish tradition that upon first seeing the demon as a hideous apparition in the mirror, it does not even occur to her to cry out the *Shema* (1). And when she caves in to what the demon is offering, it happens quite suddenly and virtually without a fight. She has no moral strength, no grounding in Jewish learning or tradition on which she can draw. She has no faith to sustain her (except in herself, as is typical of secular humanism); already several steps removed from her roots, it is easy to take the final plunge and commit the ultimate betrayals demanded by the demon. In Zirel we see the seeds of the idea that reaches full realization in "The Last Demon"—the idea that there is almost nothing for demons to do, now that people (that is, sophisticated,

"enlightened" people) have themselves become demons. Still, Zirel's seduction by the demon is so swift (even accounting for the fact that she didn't have very far to go) and is accomplished in such a bizarre, even surreal, manner, that we cannot help being somewhat taken aback. The acts to which the demon urges her, and to which, apparently, she agrees, are groteqsue and hard to comprehend. Why isn't it enough for the demon to seduce her physically? Why must Zirel desecrate all three pillars of Jewish life—*kashrut*, Sabbath, and family purity? Once again, we can look to "The Last Demon" for illumination: Zirel is certainly the forerunner of those Jews who "want to sin beyond their capacities" (123). Her sins—the sins of enlightened, modern Jewry—are necessarily, then, the most egregious imaginable. They are a total perversion and rejection of everything that Judaism stands for, and only when Zirel has done everything up to and including spitting on the name of God is her journey into enlightened modernity complete.

What seems less clear is how the demon tempts her into an absolute break with Yiddishkeit. Frieden suggests that "The mortal sin occurs when she kisses the demon in the mirror; that is, of course, she kisses her own image"[6]—that, in other words, she is unable to resist her own auto-erotic impulses. At one level this is certainly true, but Frieden fails to address the specific promises and temptations that lead Zirel to her fatal kiss. What is it, precisely, that this horrifically ugly creature can offer the lovely and sophisticated Zirel? He offers her the one thing she wants more than anything: a way out of Krashnik. An escape from what we can only infer is an unfulfilling sex life with her husband, to a world of demonic excitement. And more than that—an escape from the

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[5] *Ibid*, p. 265.

stifling existence imposed on her by provincial, traditional Jewish culture and mores. And after all, isn't that the whole point of "Enlightenment"? The demon offers Zirel the fulfillment of secular humanism, taken to its logical extreme.

Bashe Gitel, the flawed heroine of Peretz's tale, would not be interested in that kind of temptation, but then Bashe Gitel is a very different sort of woman from Zirel. She comes from "a very fine family" (111) and is married to a deeply religious man. She is even educated, after a fashion—but her education is far from that of Zirel. No German song-books for Bashe Gitel! Rather, "she was truly a pure soul, well-versed in the holy books, which she read in Yiddish translation. And she meticulously observed all the duties required of a woman" (111). In short, Bashe Gitel is all that a daughter of Israel ought to be. She doesn't give Satan any obvious opening; unlike Zirel, she doesn't rush to meet him halfway (or more).

Satan picks on Bashe Gitel primarily because her husband is frequently away on business trips and on pilgrimages to his rebbe, the Tzaddik of Lublin. It seems strange that this is the condition that sets Bashe Gitel up for a fall from grace. After all, having one's husband away on business is hardly a sin; and Bashe Gitel, despite her isolation from her husband, is a well-integrated part of her community. She doesn't share the absolute isolation that makes Zirel such a prime target. Perhaps the problem is merely that, for Peretz, a woman unprotected, without her husband's stabilizing influence, is vulnerable to all sorts of mischief and foolishness.

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[6] *Ibid*, p. 265.

In any case, once the Baal-Dover (an appropriately materialistic name for this particular demon) has settled on Bashe Gitel for his victim, he zeroes in at once on a means of seduction: "he decided to kindle within her a lust for clothes and jewelry" (111). As did Zirel's imp, this demon focuses on the woman's vanity. But the Baal-Dover must take a more circuitous route, for the pious Bashe Gitel is not the type to sit naked before a mirror, admiring herself! Satan understands that "he could never persuade her to commit a *gross* sin" (111), and so he hits upon a temptation that appeals to a more "modest," decorous sort of vanity. Bashe Gitel's monomania, though just as selfish as Zirel's, is less inwardly-directed.

Indeed, the narrator makes it clear that Bashe Gitel's lust for clothing could even be understood as part and parcel of a natural and healthy desire for her husband: "And when her husband was expected home, it was certainly a good deed dressing to beat the band. A decent woman, a daughter of Israel, has to find grace in her husband's eyes..." (111) Although this is Satan's justification for buying even more clothing, the fact that it is persuasive points to an outwardly-directed sexuality on Bashe Gitel's part; her overriding passion might be for self-adornment, but Bashe Gitel lacks Zirel's auto-erotic impulses.

The persuasiveness of Peretz's Baal-Dover indicates a major trait he shares with Singer's minor devil, in terms of the methods they use. Just as Singer's imp approaches his narcissistic, Enlightened young victim through a mirror, with self-reflexive verse and the promise of escape, so too the Baal-Dover approaches Bashe Gitel on her own terms. She is a pious woman, so he cloaks his temptation in terms of piety. It is a mitzvah to

dress well for the holidays, for the Sabbath, for one's husband. Bashe Gitel is educated (for a woman) so he reminds her of Biblical precedents condoning lavish adornment (111). Bashe Gitel, unlike Zirel, is not naturally drawn to sin, so for her, sin is disguised as merit.

In fact, Bashe Gitel's lust for clothing—rooted in a commendable desire to honor the holy days and her husband—does lead her to real sins, but her sins are quotidian. "She was stingy with alms, chary with food for herself and the children, sent the boys to inferior teachers, did everything she could to pinch pennies, and spent all she had on clothes and jewelry" (112). Unlike Zirel, who must "sin beyond her capacity" in order to make an impact, Bashe Gitel only needs to do garden-variety sins in order to call down a punishment upon herself.

Even the punishment that befalls Bashe Gitel is fairly unexceptional in nature—she falls ill and loses the use of her legs. To the villagers, "it looked as if the sickness were heaven's doing" (112), which dovetails with the moral the narrator is trying to impart. But the paralysis might just as easily be explained pathologically, or—better still—psychologically, in terms of displaced lust and the loss of real sexual function. Bashe Gitel's punishment also illustrates a major point of departure between this story and Singer's tale of demonic seduction: the degree of actual involvement of the supernatural. In Peretz's story the supernatural is minimized. Once the Baal-Dover has awakened a lust for clothes in Bashe Gitel and taught her how to justify her extravagances, his work is done: "Satan saw he had gotten the best of her, she was like a well-hurled stone plunging downhill with the force of the initial throw, he simply stayed

aloof now, and she went of her own accord" (112). Compare this to the case of Zirel, who starts out at such a low level that a mere shove from a demon cannot suffice to debauch her further; the demon must physically kidnap her and take her to the demons' realm! Furthermore, Satan's temptation of Bashe Gitel can be read as no more than her own "*yetzer hara*," while the demon narrator of "The Mirror," who has a lively existence independent of Zirel, and who provides us with such a rich description of a demonic world entirely separate from our own, resists such simple allegorization.

Really, the only unqualified appearance of the supernatural in "A Passion for Clothes" is the scene in the forest, when Bashe Gitel, her husband Elimelech and their driver stumble upon a demon wedding, where the female carousers are wearing Bashe Gitel's precious, unworn dresses and jewels. Since the appearance of the demons is verified by both the men, it cannot be dismissed as a figment of Bashe Gitel's psyche; as well, the supernatural occurrence provides the only "logical" explanation for the wear and tear of Bashe Gitel's otherwise unworn gowns—wear and tear that had been blamed on the orphaned servant-girl.

The means by which Bashe Gitel's sinful obsession is revealed is clearly supernatural, but the punishment she suffers—like her descent into sinfulness itself—can be read, if we choose, as entirely natural. The description of her collapse—"she kept fainting, and her mouth was all twisted up...She was more dead than alive" (114)—sounds much like the description of a stroke. Whether natural or supernatural, the end she meets fits with traditional Jewish notions of justice, particularly since she has the opportunity, before expiring, to make amends for the sin she committed against the

orphan servant-girl. Bashe Gitel is forgiven, all wrongs are righted, and Elimelech and the orphan are blessed with children and a happy life. Like his longer story "Devotion without End," "A Passion for Clothes" expresses some of the dominant values in Peretz's world-view—"the love of Torah, the ineradicable possibility of forgiveness, the necessity for moral resurrection…"[7] Everything is wrapped up in a neat (too neat?) and uplifting moral lesson, as the narrator exhorts his listeners, "May the same be said of all Jews!" (114)

There is nothing natural, on the other hand, with the fate meted out to Zirel. She manages to get through the looking-glass, but instead of landing in Wonderland, finds herself in a demonic dimension of eternal torment. The ending serves as both a ringing indictment of the modern Jew and a cautionary tale about where, quite literally, the modern Jew is heading.

But unlike the Peretz story, which ends once it achieves its moral effect, Singer's less didactic demon narrator disposes of Zirel and then continues on for another two dozen lines in a melancholy meditation—most of which has been excised from the English translation—on the nature of the world and of truth. The imp, obviously disillusioned by the modern world, begins to question everything. "Is there a God? Is He really a gracious and merciful God? Did He create the world? Did He create the world? Did He give the Torah? Will the Messiah come? Will Eliahu blow the shofar on the Mount of Olives and announce the tidings, that the Resurrection has come?…" (114, my translation)

[7] Irving Howe and Elizabeth Greenberg, *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, New York: Penguin Books, 1989, p. 76.

The demon goes on in this vein and finally reaches something of a conclusion: "God is a stalemate and of doubtful existence. The *Sitra Ahra* is feeble, but it's real. Between a sure thing and a maybe, better the sure thing. I studied in *heder* and I know Gemara…" (114, my translation) In the terribly uncertain modern environment, the Jewish demon turns to the familiar traditional texts of his childhood, but the certainty he finds is that evil, not good, is the only sure thing. Forty-some years and six million deaths after Peretz offered his tale of downfall, redemption and hope, this is the best that Singer can find to say about the world.

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