

The Revenge of I. B. Singer

Shosha

by Isaac Bashevis Singer.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 277 pp.,
\$8.95.

Gimpel the Fool

by Isaac Bashevis Singer.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 205 pp.,
\$9.95; \$4.95 (paper)

A Young Man in Search of Love

by Isaac Bashevis Singer.
Doubleday, 192 pp., \$12.95

Leon Wieseltier

"I must only imagine a door, a good old door, like the one in the kitchen of my childhood, with an iron handle and a bolt. There is no walled-in room that could not be opened by such a door, provided one were strong enough to suggest that such a door exists." These words evoke the stifled, timorous, obituary spirit of Isaac Bashevis Singer's new novel, *Shosha*. The words are not Singer's, however; they were written by Bruno Schulz, a writer he admires, in the doomed town of Drohobych, Poland, in 1937. By that time Singer, who, unlike Schulz, "did not have the privilege of going through the Hitler holocaust," was safe in Manhattan, trying to recapture in fiction the universe he had escaped. *Shosha* is another among these mordant retrievals.

It is a stunted novel about stunted lives. The saturnine Aaron Greidinger, a playwright, is chasing wisdom and girls in a Warsaw filled with despair. Hitler has taken hold of Germany and advances unopposed toward Poland. The revolution in Russia has deceived, too much blood has been spilled. Dreams of Palestine seem quixotic, and would anyway abolish the life from which the dreams sprang. And the Jews of Warsaw are genteel and indifferent to spiritual experiment. From all this Greidinger takes refuge in his work. He frequents the Writers' Club, where other Yiddish writers, the dauntless and the defeated, also ache for greatness, and wrestle with metaphysics over cognac, and with Trotsky's revolutionary promise over chess. At the Writers' Club the vexed Greidinger encounters Dr. Morris Feitelzohn, who wears English suits and is penniless, and who peddles Vaihinger and the Kabbala, Schopenhauer and the *rebbe* of Kotzk.

Greidinger—clearly Singer himself—is in the throes of a great and somewhat conventional revolt. He cannot locate God. Raised on the Talmud, he turns early to Spinoza. Spinoza will sponsor his worldliness, and even sanctify it. Worldliness for Greidinger means not politics—he has been forever disabused of the possibility of redemption—but only women. His cupidity is insatiable, virtually ideological. And so we are

again treated to Singer's stable of randy Jewish women, and again to his customary musings on the spiritual rewards of sex. There is Celia, a melancholy older woman whose enlightened (and manifestly homosexual) husband invites Greidinger to find ecstasy in his wife's bed; Dora, a Communist with prodigious breasts; Tekla, the devoted rustic who cleans Greidinger's flat; and, most momentarily, Betty, a lovely actress from America for whom Greidinger is commissioned to write a play. The play,

else.... This is precisely the case with those who commit suicide, I said to myself. They find a hook in the ceiling, fashion a noose, place a chair underneath and until the final second they don't know why they are doing it.

But it is not the imp of the perverse that has seized Greidinger. It is rather that in the chaste and unaccountably arrested Shosha he has come upon a way, in the eleventh hour, to thwart time. Shosha will restore for him the world she still inhabits—the world that still

"Not so quickly."

"Arele, I just remembered a song."

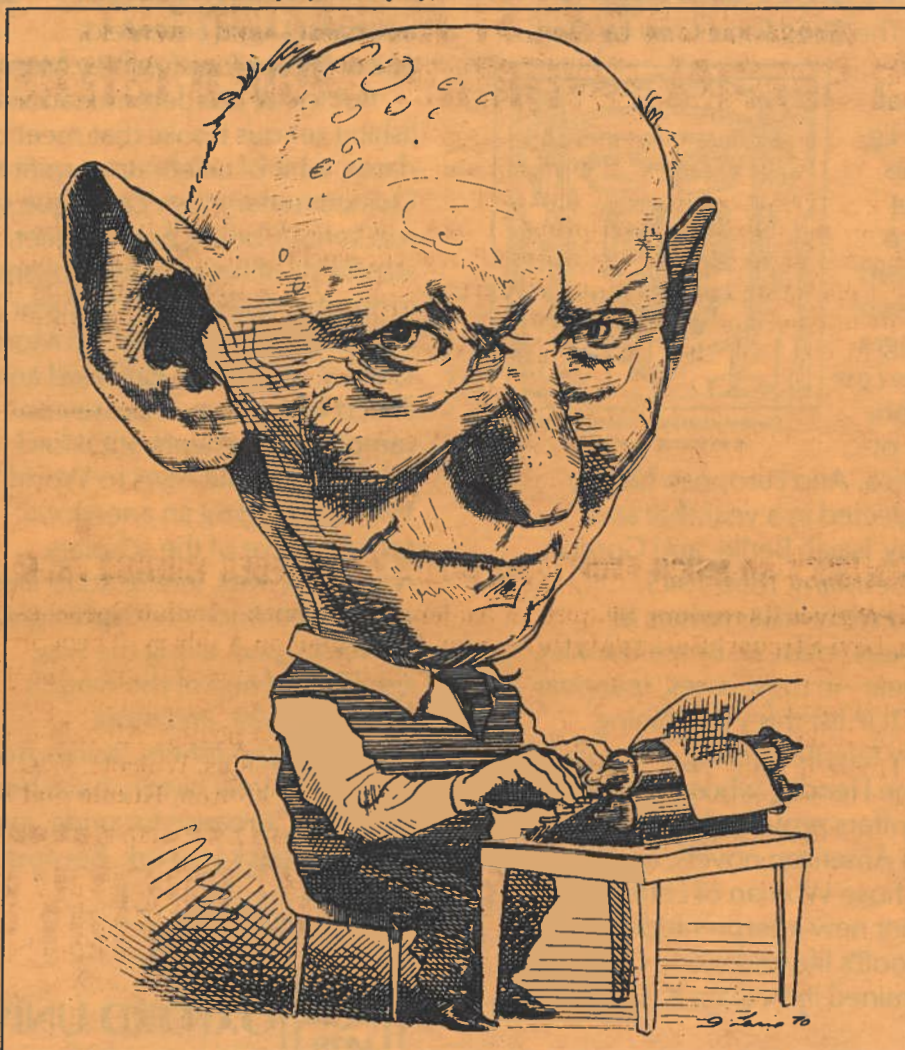
Soon Hitler's troops are upon them. Greidinger and his frail bride leave Warsaw on foot for Bialystok. Shosha dies "on the way, like Mother Rachel." Greidinger makes it eventually to New York and at last achieves fame as a Yiddish writer of stories of the supernatural.

Singer the novelist has always seemed much less accomplished than Singer the writer of short stories. The novels have been shapeless, even slovenly, and *Shosha* is no exception. Not the stories, however. These are uncommonly vigorous and carefully fashioned. It is especially good, therefore, to have *Gimpel the Fool* back in print, because it contains Singer's best work, his boldest and liveliest inventions. And it belies at once his familiar disclaimer that he is only a storyteller. He is not. His tales are thick with speculation and prejudice, and both are damaging.

Singer's fiction sets out always from the experience of suffering. Theodicy is its plot. His people seek reasons for their pain, and—save for the somewhat inscrutable Rabbi Bainish of Komarov in "Joy"—they usually do not find them. What they find instead are ideas, a vast profusion of dangerous doctrines to do the work of the faith that has gone unrewarded. Singer's people are what they believe, or do not believe. They do not all, of course, possess the amazing resilience of Gimpel, who is so credulous he is sublime. Many turn dramatically to heresy, which they do not always quite understand.

There is, indeed, a great measure of human truth in the ordinariness of these adopted heterodoxies, in the poignant banality of Greidinger's grasp of Spinoza, in the awkwardness of Rabbi Bainish's inchoate nihilism. There is, unfortunately, also a certain philosophical insouciance about them. Singer plays too fast and too carelessly with his warring world views. There are too many imponderables, too much sheer, lingering mystery. All this obsessive heaven-storming comes to seem mannered, and even mischievous: it can seem as exercised by the slaughter of chickens as it is by the slaughter of Jews. What delights Singer most is the very spectacle of the struggle; he is sardonically amused by the inadequacy of his addled Jews' resources. He hobbles the devout and then laughs.

He discredits even their defections. For Singer's wronged believers demand not illumination so much as license. They yearn to sin. And it is in his rapt fascination with sin that Singer's sly modernism is disclosed. The sacrilegious practices of the Sabbatians and the abominations of the eighteenth-century false messiah Jacob Frank join here



about a woman rabbi and her Hasidic lovers, along with whores and fiddlers and dybbuks, eventually fails, but not before Greidinger seduces its leading lady.

All this Greidinger renounces to marry Shosha, whom he loved as a child. But Shosha—the only really intriguing figure in his story—has miraculously remained a child: she has "neither grown nor aged." She wears pigtails and eats candy and has never been with a man. And for this "sweet soul" Greidinger will not follow Betty to a haven in America. With Shosha, on the same Krochmalna Street where they both grew up, he chooses instead to await the ruin that impends for them all.

I had made a decision and knew that I would keep it, but why I had made it was something I couldn't explain to myself or to anyone

tolerated hope, in which the search for truth had not yet degenerated into an ideological bazaar, in which there were no Nazis. Their union is mad, but it is Greidinger's sole avenue through despair, his only triumph. And Singer's as well: implausible Shosha is the genuinely affecting image of an immobility as delusive as it is fearless. Singer writes beautifully of the wedding night, tenderly mingling love with fatality:

"Arele, I'm afraid."

"I'm afraid too, but Hitler won't come tonight. Move over to me. So...."

"Oy, Arele, it is good to be with you. What will we do when the Nazis come?"

"We will die."

"Together?"

"Yes, Shoshele."

"The Messiah isn't coming?"

with the Satanism of Baudelaire and the criminality of Dostoevsky to produce a central vision of numinous vice; it is as if inspired depravity is the only religious expression that remains. And the most numinous vice, the outrage that will best engage the angry, hidden God, is fornication. "Wisdom extends no further than the first heaven," an apprentice devil advises the nubile Zirel in "The Mirror." "From there on everything is lust." Singer's eroticism is a matter of principle and it is vivid and inexhaustible. He revels in his voluptuaries in their caftans, taunting the Lord of the Universe in the fleshpots of Galicia.

Writing ardently in celebration of Singer years ago, the poet Ted Hughes—whose own bleak, nocturnal imagination was likely to be drawn to Singer's—observed that "Singer implies ... that there is an occult equivalence between a man's relationship to the women in his life and his relationship to his own soul—and so to God." There is, to be sure, an ancient tradition of such an "occult equivalence" within Judaism. It is with that largely esoteric tradition, elaborated most extravagantly by the Kabbalists, that Singer often associates himself. "For me, religion and love, even sex, are attributes of the same substance, as they were for the Kabbalists of all generations." But his passion is not theirs; it is in truth a much more paltry and capricious passion than Hughes observed, for the simple reason that Singer seems to detest women. There is a shocking passage in one of his memoirs in which he admiringly recalls the impact on his thinking of Otto Weininger, the Austrian convert who wrote fanatically in praise of male superiority. And so, not surprisingly, the women in his narratives are always less than characters; they are only mere sites of iniquity—no more than creation's most savory forms of pork. It is not a mysticism of love that Singer expounds, but rather a kind of vulgar theological prurience. He has mistaken manhood for grace.

Misogyny is not all that confounds Singer's grand vision of salvation by sin. In *A Young Man in Search of Love*, a rather casual chronicle of the obstreperous desires of his youth, Singer alludes to "the great adventures inherent in Jewish history—the false Messiahs, the expulsions, the forcible conversions, the Emancipation, and the assimilations...." Illusion, disorder, transgression, apostasy: in these are to

be found the florid romances of Jewish experience. Not a word, however, of what was surely the most unlikely and daring Jewish adventure of all—the adventure of a life in *halakha*, of allegiance to the law in even the direst adversity, of individuals and communities fired by tradition's discipline and willing to remain steadfast unto death. Of those Jews who would seek release from the rabbinical way Singer writes with asperity, even scorn. He is not alive to their special strength. They appear in his works caricatured, as blind, bumbling, craven votaries of a bizarre and frozen culture. And it is this proud and bilious indifference to the character of piety that further vitiates Singer's thirst for its collapse. A comparison is instructive, and not far afield. *Yoshe Kalb*, by his brother I.J. Singer, is a novel also about the mutiny of the passions at the courts of the *rebbe*s, but the elder Singer, who died in 1944, is throughout as attentive to the mentality of the orthodox as he is to that of the miscreants. Hence the strange authority, the almost eerie coolness of his account. Its author appears to have unburdened himself not only of faith, but also of its opposite.

Not so Isaac Bashevis Singer. His retrievals are, in the end, no solace at all, because he still chafes as he did on Krochmalna Street. He cannot forgive Jewish tradition its fetters, but neither can he entirely free himself of them. And he has taken an extraordinary vengeance in literature: a joyless, acid portrait of Jewish life surrendered to demons and doubt, a grotesque congeries of the uncanny and the perverse. Singer moves straight from the disappointments of reason to the raising of tables. His comedy is often brilliant, and just as often cruel. And it agrees nicely with that facile infatuation with the demonic that currently prevails in American culture, not least among American Jews.

Singer's is certainly among the richest and most enchanting seditious talents in Jewish literature. "One must belong to a tradition," said Adorno, "to hate it properly." Singer still belongs and so his hatred is proper. His hatred is proper and so he still belongs. It is a supremely Jewish irony—as is the award of the Nobel Prize to a Yiddish writer most of whose audience no longer exists. It will be thrilling to hear Yiddish for the first time at Stockholm. And more saddening still, because it will be the last time. □