

## NOTES AND READINGS

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### Bergelson's *Yordim* and I. B. Singer's

I wouldn't say I feel myself a part of the Yiddish tradition. Somehow I always wanted to write in my own way, and I never felt that I was somebody's disciple . . . I would almost say that I tried to create my own tradition, if one could use such words.

I. B. Singer

Isaac Bashevis Singer launched an open attack on Dovid Bergelson's last major work, *Baym Dnieper* (*At the Dnieper*), in the November 1932 issue of *Globus*, the Warsaw journal in which three months later would appear Singer's now famous *Satan in Goray*. Singer, a young ambitious author, had many bones to pick with Bergelson, the most sophisticated Yiddish writer of the day: his established fame, his admired literary style and composition, his now Marxist engagement with the world, his sense of history, his sense of the old setting—now often repeated in his work—a stony rich Jewish household in the Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> The master had become stale and worse, a hack, “in order, finally, to become a ‘revolutionary’ writer” (*Globus*, 56). Penek, Bergelson's child hero in *Baym Dnieper*, according to Singer, was unconvincing and revealed a Bergelson losing his grip on his masterful ability to draw persuasive characterizations. “Bergelson, as a consistent realist and objective painter, sought, first of all, to capture the personality of the human being” (*Globus*, 58). “His heroes [are] mature, fully ripened, not ones just beginning to grow. A child is not a personality . . .” (*Globus*, 59). Singer's criticism, with fifty years hindsight, goes straight to the mark. Bergelson was attempting by 1932 to create art by the formulae of socialist realism—unsuccessfully—for as Singer aptly observed: “There are no faceless men in Bergelson, therefore, Bergelson has been unable to portray the masses” (*Globus*, 59). Singer could only have written such rewarding criticism of Bergelson after having closely studied his works up to *Baym Dnieper*—and most likely in the 1929 Kletskin edition of Bergelson's collected works. No Yiddish prose writer in 1930 could have avoided Bergelson's oeuvre. Sholem Asch and Opatoshu might have

1. Isaac Bashevis Singer, “On Dovid Bergelson's *Baym Dnieper*” [Yiddish], *Globus* No. 5 (Nov. 1932): 56–65. Subsequent references to this review have been incorporated into the text; translations are my own.

enjoyed greater popularity, but for the critical world, Bergelson in the 1920s served as the yardstick of Yiddish literary accomplishment. His conscious absence from Warsaw based on personal, literary and ideological reasons did not free Tlomatske 13—the Yiddish PEN Club—from his spell. Singer had to test himself against the living Yiddish literary giant. That his critique of 1932 articulates so well Bergelson's aesthetics, its heights and limitations, at the same time that Singer was composing his first major work, the gothic novel, *Satan in Goray*, which is at the polar opposite of Bergelson's impressionist masterpiece, *Nokh alemen* (*When All is Said and Done*, 1913), suggests that Singer had tested himself against the master, had absorbed Bergelson's lessons and was now able to pursue his own resonant voice.

Where did this contest take place? And what were the initial results? It is my hypothesis that the 1931 publication of *Yordim* ("The Newly Impoverished") by Singer in the Warsaw *Literarische bleter* was the gauntlet Singer cast down to his peers, saying, in effect, that he was a serious contender for Bergelson's laurels. By daring to use the title of one of Bergelson's finest short stories, *Yordim*, and the favorite subject matter of early Bergelson, "the same old setting . . . a stingy rich household," Singer challenged Bergelson, his peers and his own literary powers.

Bergelson had begun his short story *Yordim* in 1910 but it was not published until 1919 in Kiev. It appears today as both a preparation and a wonderful distillate of *Nokh alemen*. *Yordim* are those sad people who, like Mme. Ranevskaya in the *Cherry Orchard*, have become impoverished and like parvenus, in the opposite direction of course, do not adjust well or cope with their new objective reality. Bergelson made this subject his very own: Mirl Hurvits and her father Reb Gedalye are the archetypal Bergelsonian characters of this futile condition in Yiddish literature. To challenge Bergelson on his very own territory might be foolhardy but necessary for a young, ambitious and original artist. And Yiddish literature could provide its own precedent: Vaysenberg challenging Asch's *Dos shtetl* with his own *Shtetl!* The *Yordim* of Singer, his fifteenth printed story, pays its compliments to Bergelson's *Yordim* and goes its own way.

Both stories are hardly plotted. Rather they are built on patterning and formally presented in a triptych. Bergelson's story begins with a depiction of the impoverished family whose condition is accented by the tears of the daughters languishing without hope of marriage. The second section introduces some possible hope. The rich brother in the large city invites the younger sister, Tsivye, to his home for a month. Ostensibly he is arranging a marriage. The sister departs and returns a month later, miserable. She had danced at someone else's wedding. In section three, the pattern repeats. The brother sends a telegram inviting the family to see him at the railroad station as he travels on to Europe. Ostensibly he is bringing the bridegroom with him. The delighted family peers into the train which idles a few moments—just enough time to allow the blind father to touch his son's kidskin gloves. The family then returns empty-handed to its misery. The short story makes a perfect circle with its patterned repetition of phrasing and symbolic, precise description. Abstractly, it is a perfect rondo. Its circular lyric structure captures all of Bergelson's social and psychological perceptions depicted through an adroit shifting narrational perspective.

Singer accepts the challenge of creating a tripartite story, with the givens of the family structure and the thin plotting sequences regarding a possible

marriage. Could it be accidental that both fathers are blind, that both sons are rich and live in the city and are barely considerate of the family and that the daughters are quietly longing for husbands? In Singer's story, he constructs the following argument. In part one, the Margolis family, having cancelled a seven-year engagement with the unworthy suitor of their daughter, has fallen on hard times following World War I and has moved to indigent housing in Warsaw. The son, in part two, hardly aids the family and the father must seek work until he becomes, suddenly, completely blind. The daughter, unable to adjust to the city, retreats into the house but makes the acquaintance of her neighbor, Shmontses, a poor writer with slight demonic features. Could Shmontses be her possible bridegroom? Act III begins with a *coup de théâtre*, Shmontses is getting married to an old flame. Reb Margolis, meanwhile, has retreated into his hasidic world, abandoning his sick wife and daughter. Itte, the daughter, takes to wandering the street aimlessly, and encounters her brother by chance, who chides her for being out. She returns exhausted and prepared to die. The final paragraph passes into the fantastic as dowry money, Shmontses, a curtained mirror and screaming women surround poor Itte who recedes into an erotic death. Singer has succeeded in following the external tripart form of Bergelson's story and even the thin marriage plotting sequences of absence, hope, and despair. Where Bergelson intends circular structure to reflect the static inescapable ennui of the *yordim*, who live trapped in muted, dreaded, frustration, Singer uses linear, melodramatic narrative to convey the process of collapse: becoming *yordim*. Bergelson presents a synchronic impression and expects his reader to intuit the implications through repetitive circularity as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Singer prefers the direct sequential storyline structured like a well-made play with a causal exposition, motivic development and dramatic denouement. The two authors agree in their perceptions of the *yordim*; they differ sharply, however, in their compositional methods.

Both authors stress the result of economic disaster: the social, psychological, familial, personal, and general spiritual impoverishment. Both authors are teaching the reader to experience atrophy. Whereas Singer emphasizes the *process of decline* into total atrophy through the enchaining events along a linear grid, Bergelson emphasizes the simultaneity of the various modalities of atrophy. This creates in Eco's term, "over-coding" which effectuates the static stifling atmosphere for which Bergelson is so famous. Chronological time transmogrifies into psychological time. The narrative therefore is related in an unbounded subjective present tense in which past, present and future become fused. "While Tsivye gnaws away at her unfortunate life, she stops eating and drinking."<sup>2</sup> Singer on the other hand, keeps narration in strict historical time. His linear narrative begins in the past tense: "For weeks on end Reb Oyzer Margolis paced back and forth in front of his house, rolled cigarettes and sealed them."<sup>3</sup> Whereas Bergelson makes the endless present a concentrate of atrophy, Singer must fall back upon the looser *flegn* form, the repetitive past.

2. Dovid Bergelson, *Yordim*, in *Ale verk*, II (Buenos Aires, 1961): 169. Subsequent references have been incorporated into the text; translations are my own.

3. Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Yordim*, *Literarische bleter* 8, No. 36 (4 Sept. 1931): 697; the story concludes in No. 37 (11 Sept. 1931). Subsequent references have been incorporated into the text; translations are my own.

"Before Reb Oyzer used to (*flegn*) show signs of opening his mouth, Ely used to (*flegn*) be well on the other side of the door" (698). Bergelson, therefore, seeks a static present to express implicitly the atrophied condition of the personage. Singer, less subtly, makes explicit the chronological process of atrophy.

The creation of the psychological present serves as the basis of Bergelson's narrational strategy. Repetition becomes Bergelson's major structural device to arrest the flow of time. Use of the repeated word, sentence, monologue, dialogue or event creates circularity, the inescapable present, and translates aesthetically the psychology of atrophy. The present becomes a weight pulling down the characters into quiescence. Unanswered questions are raised, sentences are cut off. Every character turns to the formulaic distress call, *Reboynesheloylem*, (169, 170, 172, 174, 178) and silence. Nothing can change: "In the following summer Tsivye will again wander about . . . and old Fuzis will then once again rest . . . (178). The self deteriorates in the suspended present. "Tsivye, do you know what you are doing, Tsivye? Not that she's thinking about these words, she is only remembering them" (170). The use of the third person in place of the first person singular in monologues and dialogues—a unique Bergelsonian stylistic device—reveals the self alienation and atrophy.

Bergelson's narrator prefers to slip into the narrated monologue (*style indirect libre*) in order to maximize the subjective perspectives of the character upon the reader. By assimilating the competing perspectives the reader penetrates the character and comprehends directly the ennui, alienation and atrophy of the characters trapped in limited space and endless time. The stylistic collusion of reader, narrator and character goes to the heart of Bergelson's aesthetic methodology.

A letter arrives from Shmuel, the rich son, that Tsivye must come . . .

It's clear as day: it's about a possible marriage; the bridegroom isn't just anybody if he pleases Shmuel . . . (172).

In the quotation, the narrated monologue fuses narrator and old man Fuzis. The reader at first accepts the given facts and perspective. But later it becomes evident that all is not "clear as day"; but to the contrary, a misinterpretation has occurred. The reader has been duped by accepting the subjective perspective of Fuzis as objective. Such is an example of Bergelson's narrational manipulation of collusion.

Singer's narrator in *Yordim* maintains an omniscient and slightly ironic distance from his creations. The narrator uses the past tense as if he were presenting a case history. He pauses at the end of each narrational sequence with a piquant, characteristic phrase of direct discourse to convince the reader of the reliability of his character portrayal and thereby hopes to seduce the reader into accepting the narrator's omniscience. One declarative sentence follows the next.

His wife, Menukhe, . . . became from day to day more shriveled and more jaundiced. She laid in bed in her curled wig . . . and did not stop taking bitter medicines and complained in a harsh voice and with thin flattened lips: —Sodom! I have always said that we're in the midst of Sodom. (698)

The narrator is interested only in relating, not in showing. By maintaining a detached tone and single perspective, the narrator restricts the main characters

from dominating his narration. The ironic ending of Singer's story, I hope to show, will support this thesis. Singer's narrational strategies, in *Yordim* are basically unsophisticated and simplistic.

In both of these short stories, space and place function to draw the reader to the social psychological collapse of the *yordim*. The authors, however, use setting differently. Singer continuously shrinks the living space of his characters: From owning a nice house and dry goods store in the shtetl they descend to a few dirty rooms in Warsaw and finally are limited to their bed. Their physical space mimics their continuous impoverishment. The vacant dry goods store with its mice, spiders, and eerie red light in which we met Ite, the daughter, presages the Warsaw rooms and the fantastic conclusion. This *Lower Depths* setting increases with demonic presence as the atrophy grows greater. Singer, evidently, also used place for melodramatic effect. Bergelson rarely describes place and avoids place name for greater generalization. He uses space symbolically. The three rooms of the characters are all the living space they have left. The traditional function of each room has been turned against them: The salon must remain empty with its decayed fig tree, the dining room and its table is for eating one's heart out, the bedroom with its bed is not for love but for sobs, tears and death. Space is sepulchral here and the characters are cut off from pregnant life observed through the glass window which tempts, torments and incarcerates. Even the walls are not innocent; they smell with the memory of their old wealth and distillery "in which they had once been immured" (170). Confined with no exit they are entrapped in timeless hell. The city where the rich brothers live in both stories, beckons like Moscow to the three sisters of Chekhov—and with knowledge of the city comes despair. The narrowing space reflects their atrophy. If place is imprisonment for both authors then Singer shrinks it more to capture the process of impoverishment whereas Bergelson activates confined space to gnaw at the flesh forever.

*Yordim* are also families collapsing into individual isolation. The sons in both stories are successful businessmen already matriculated from shtetl life. Their last pieties are the rubles sent home each month. Singer has roughened the subtext brother, Shmuel, considerably to capture the Warsaw vulgarian, Elye. Bergelson prefers irony to open moral scorn. As the train stops for a bare moment at the backwater station, the blind father who has not seen his son for twelve years can only finger his rich son's kid gloves. The patriarchs look to their sons in vain. The city sons have broken away. The inversion of wealth has diminished the male of the family. "Once, he, Kalmen Fuzis, was the bright one. Now his children take him, Kalmen, to be a fool" (171). The fullest bitterness emerges when he complains to the visiting parasite "they're worthless, his two daughters" (170).

Blindness is not only hubris, the sin of pride, but an excision from the world and family he can no longer face. Bergelson captures with exquisite humor the multiple impoverishment to the head of the family. When Kalmen asks his hanger-on about life, answers Yekusiel:

"What's there to say? It's tough . . . to be a pauper."

And the old man loses all at once his honor, he doesn't know whom Yekusiel means, himself or the impoverished Fuzis." (171),

Such sensibility, nuance, wit and pathos were not yet in Singer's repertoire. Reb Oyzer Margolis is too much a pearl of a man with a Jobean descent. Singer catalogues the process of his fall through his progressive blindness. Reb Oyzer appears first with golden glasses and near-sighted lenses. After moving to Warsaw as a formerly wealthy man, his eyes begin to fail. Teaching in the Talmud Torah, he has to bring the text up to his glasses. That night he goes blind. From this point on, Reb Oyzer abandons his beloved bedridden wife—a comic relief figure—and gives himself only to Hasidism. The family is abandoned. Blindness as spiritual death here is hardly subtle. (Nor the near-sightedness of cleaving to Hasidism!) Singer paces the narrative too briskly in order to focus on the process of family decline. He was trying to press a novella into a short story. Bergelson maintains an *andante* with minimum incident. At the two prospects of marriage in Bergelson's tale, the family perks up each time then falls back into silence marred by isolated sobbings.

The central victims, the real *yordim*, in this study are the daughters. They will never marry. Tsivye, Kalmen's daughter, articulates her reality and the theme of both works. "We're rotting here . . . without shrouds on. We are putrifying alive" (169). The daughters are already in their thirties. The atrophy which begins with financial reverses affects their fulfillment as women. Bergelson tortures these helpless women with false hopes. By the desperate clutching twice, once at a letter and once at a telegram out of the ordinary from the brother, Tsivye hopes against hope to escape her void. Yet nowhere in any message does her brother talk of marriage. Bergelson's narration cleverly invites the reader to lend an ear to the subjective foolishness of blind Reb Kalmen—twice, once after each message. First: "Didn't one know earlier that he [Samuel] would seek out a bridegroom for her?" (173). And the second time: "Isn't he bringing the bridegroom with him right here into the house? He's probably not traveling alone" (175). After two defeats, Tsivye can only fall back into inescapable total atrophy. But Bergelson does not conclude his short story on Tsivye. Her victimization is the cruelist because she is fully conscious of her condition. Bergelson, we will see, has even more to say about atrophy.

Singer must have become aware that the circular structure with the letter and telegram episodes in Bergelson was a most economical means to depict the total socio-psychological reality. Bergelson's formal artistry and psychological genius for specificity in character must have appeared too formidable. To outflank Bergelson, Singer added to the victimization of Ite on the socio-psychological plane the moral erotic plane in which Ite became the plaything caught between the forces of good and evil. She is an innocent to be tested.

Once embarked on this course, Singer found his *metier*. The process of testing her permitted his demonic fantasy to break out of the realistic entrapment imposed by Bergelsonian aesthetics. Ite is a *yoiref* who has discovered the chaos of this world. She is aware that she has become in Sartrian terms *de trop*. Desperate for security in a world that has robbed her and her family, she is all alone. Marriage is the only solution and seems elusive. Elye, the brother, doesn't help but taunts. She has resisted and rejected the modern material world he represents with his cheap free-love salon parties to which he invites her. At this point a demonic figure is introduced: Shmontses, the nickname given to him by Ite. He is an unpublished author seeking to seduce her—if not the reader—through words, through his manuscripts which "smelled of disinfectant and

death" (719). Language becomes the flowers of evil to test her virtue and morality. The words have erotic intent but her dreams warn her unconsciously of their latent meaning.

Her innocence or virtue ultimately shames the devilish writer to break his unresolved sexual conquest when she repeatedly complains to him in direct discourse: "Yes, Shmontses, we are not fit for this world! From the likes of us today, they make sport" (719).

But the devil never gives up. Shmontses' sudden marriage must rob her of even friendship which he offered. He has acted cruelly like her brother and the original fiancé. She retreats to her window and desperately stares out upon the world. In Bergelson's *Yordim*, Rokhl, too, "stands with her face pressed to the window pane and stares" (170). This is clearly a parody for, as Singer wrote a year later, "This standing by the window is a Bergelson mannerism. Almost all his protagonists stand by a window" (*Globus*, 56). At last tempted by the world, her virtue still intact, *Ite* wanders in the streets (chaos) to watch the prestidigitators—the entertainers (displacements of Shmontses) who turn chaos to harmony—a sweet seduction. But she cannot abide life crushing in upon her.

The final paragraph of Singer's story is also his finest moment in the narration. The heroine exhausted by this floating world retreats to her bed and delusions. She is approaching stasis. Her erotic frustrations, the economic, social, familial and personal impoverishment she has borne are still held in check by her moral self-respect which can hardly resist any longer. In her fantasmagoria she demands justice from her former bridegroom as Shmontses appears in a room surrounded by covered mirrors and the presence of women wailing from a prayer book. *Ite* seems to resist him while apparently floating off, bed and all, in some erotic death to a better world. By positing the hasidic saw that the descent contains the rise, the author turns her into a woman of moral valor. Singer, as a traditional story teller, eschews open endings. His closure completes plot and character development.

Bergelson ends his story on a repeated dialogue between Reb Kalmen and his hanger-on. The repetition completes the formal pattern of circular structure and concludes the work in a pessimistic vision of endless atrophy—but with a wry smile.

"Once upon a time, right, Yekusiel?"

"Once, Reb Kalmen."

"And gone, Yekusiel, right? Gone with the wind."

"Day dreams, Reb Kalmen."

Bergelson's closure based on circular pattern is modernist, open-ended. The suspended narrative permits the reader to complete the obvious: so shall the characters live until death. The daring, witty and telling ending, a play-on-words, *nekhtike teg* (yesterdays)—actually the Yiddish idiom, "nothing of the kind" or "nonsense"—breaches the last stronghold of the impoverished *gvir*: his glorious past! Only atrophy ensues.

Singer would not be outshined at the coda. He, too, could spin a linguistic web and challenge Bergelson. In the last scene, a fantasmagoria, Shmontses (whose nickname means "foolish talk") appears demonically at *Ite*'s deathbed with a ladle in his hand, "in his deadly reddish hand quivered a copper ladle"

(720). In her delirium his writings have become hypostatized by the ladle. Singer plays with the Yiddish idiom, *Er makht fun a vort a kvort*—literally, “he makes a ladle from a word” or, in idiomatic English, “He can spin a yarn.” Mr. “Foolish talk” is seducer/deceiver. But Singer enriches the linguistic field with a further allusion and delusion. A wailing woman intones prayers from the book, *Mayne-loshn* (720), which is Hebrew for “answer of the tongue.” The title proffers Shmontses’ response to Ite’s earlier comment, “we are not fit for this world”: He brings death. The *Mayne-loshn*, a traditional collection of prayers, is recited over the dead, particularly at the grave site. The *Mayne-loshn* is also an old slang term in Yiddish meaning “glib tongue”—or its Yiddish personification, Shmontses. Not only is the devil, Shmontses the writer, a *Mayne-loshn* for seduction, but implicated by extension, is narration, the text. If Bergelson has his play-words, Singer has it triplefold. The naive reader may be taken in by the melodramatic ending of Ite’s gothic death, but Singer invites his knowledgeable reader to partake, as well, of the text as verbal game.

Singer insists upon the fictiveness of the work. He rejects the “consistent realist and objective painter” Bergelson and his impressionistic aesthetics. For Singer, art should not be mere mimesis. The conscious introduction of fantasy represents a break with the almost pure naturalist school of prose writers in Warsaw between the World Wars. Singer was adhering to the other tradition in Yiddish prose from Nahman of Braslav continuing through Peretz’s hasidic tales to Der Nister: fantasies which are ethical parables in disguise.

The Ite-Shmontses aborted relationship may be drawn on the Tsivye-unknown *khosn* model but Singer also uses his two characters as wry allegories of good and evil. Bergelson places Tsivye and her sister as personality types trapped in social quicksand. Singer, by turning social psychological portraiture into a moral test, a teasing Gretchen-Faust replay with fantasmagoria, argues for his literary aesthetic: *invention not imitation*. Singer failed, therefore, to write successful parody of Bergelson’s *Yordim*. He could not “spooof” characteristics of Bergelson’s theme, structure, settings, characters, situations and language and at the same time construct an original story using these givens. By introducing the *yene-velt* (otherworldly) element, and reorienting the subject matter to a moral erotic encounter, Singer established his own “characteristics.” Singer, furthermore, could not make use of the varied techniques for effective mimesis under Bergelson’s command if only because he wished to show Bergelson’s aesthetics were limited to description whereas his own were freer and loftier. Bergelson’s aesthetics based ultimately on verisimilitude, in short, were rejected. The youthful Singer, with his single, lean and linear narration, his fantasy and erotic allusions used the challenge of Bergelson’s literary armature as the means to free himself of the “anxiety of influence.”

Unlike the *Barber of Seville* by Paisiello being superseded by Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*, Bergelson’s original *Yordim* remains the masterpiece. Singer’s *Yordim* is charming juvenalia. He did spin a new text out of Bergelson’s model but it is formally inferior and different in resolution and tone. Singer emerges basically as a *dertseyler*, (a storyteller); Bergelson appears as a sophisticated novelist at heart. Singer learned in the contest two important facts: (1) that Bergelson’s aesthetics were surely not his, and (2) that Bergelson’s range of narrative techniques were beyond him.



Bergelson was a full-fledged modernist whereas Bashevis Singer was a young artist groping towards neo-conservatism. In 1931, who could have predicted Bergelson would die before a firing squad of Bolsheviks and Singer would gain a Nobel Prize?

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