

**SATAN IN GORAY: A TEXT OF UTOPIA**

**Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Yiddish Tradition**  
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## SATAN IN GORAY: A TEXT OF UTOPIA

### **INTRODUCTION**

Satan in Goray can be read simultaneously in many layers . Once the reader goes beyond the clear binary oppositions that organize the story, i.e. rationalism/mysticism, order/chaos, the present/the end of the days, Goray/Jerusalem, reality/fiction seem to emerge as the essential pair being addressed by the text. Satan in Goray experiments with these realms which, by adopting a pretentious accurate mimesis, the realistic tradition in fact conceived as absolutely separated.

The text as a political -literary statement refers, on one hand, to historical issues: the Shabbatean and Frankist movements and the Eastern European Jewry of the 30's; on the other, and in a grotesque tone, to realistic literature. In addition, I propose another plausible reading of the text, according to which, Satan in Goray could be read as a reflection on the status of language and fiction.

I read Satan in Goray as a text of Utopia. Even in a first binary approach to the text as both historical novel and metaphysical-psychological narration, it deals with political and secular utopias which, as I show in this paper, function in the same way; according to the same law -or to the same chaos.

In order to come to these assertions, I explore several strands of the textual web, that intertwine the notions of Body and Language.

- I -

With regard to the use of historical parallelisms in the text and their political implications, not much can be added to what critics have already said. One has to agree that the devastation, hope for redemption and final chaos produced both by the Sabbatean and the Frankist movements were felt by the Jewish community in Poland in the 30's as a close and familiar experience. The text clearly expresses a criticism of charismatic salvationist leadership and a pessimistic view of any political solution. Nevertheless, a few other elements are worthy noticing.

The contemporary readers of Satan in Goray could easily recognize allusions to the popular political solutions of their time. For example, they could relate to this narration of messianism as a secular mode of communism. The crossing-out of intellectual, social and economic borders between classes attained by Frankism through a generalized messianic fervor<sup>1</sup>, resounds like the achievement of the communist goal.

breakdown  
of sexual,  
social  
barriers

The idea that salvation would be in another place, not in Goray but in Israel, clearly points to Zionism. The failure of this idea expresses distrust in the Zionist solution.

The historical material of the work is taken from the Shabbatean movement of the 17th. century and the Frankist messianism of the 18th. century, considered the last stage of the former and was, unlike its model, centered in Poland. The characteristics and figures of the movement as narrated in Satan in Goray are a combination and sometimes a free distortion of both. In my reading of the text, one figure takes elements from different historical characters - on purpose. This is part of a strategy used by Bashevis in this work and that is, I believe, one of the reasons of its craft. An element of disorder simultaneously penetrates the story, and Goray, and Rechele, and Yiddish language, and the text; it subverts the order and causes the chaos. This chaotic energy distributes features irrationally.

Thus, Gedalyia could at first be identified as Jacob Frank because of his success in Poland, his despotic nature and his transgression even of sexual precepts in order to uphold a way of Torah higher than the Halakhic one. However, Gedalyia's compulsion to violate the Law, his changing the fasts into holidays and his marriage to an "indecent" woman points out to Shabbetai Zevi himself. Also Nathan of Gaza abolished the 17th of Tammuz; and Gedalyia's Kabbalistic speculations and his mission of announcing the Messiah put him closer to Nathan.

Both Gedalyia and Itche Mattes marry an orphan of doubtful reputation after the model of Shabbetai, who married the Egyptian Sarah. Moreover, Itche Mattes' impotence recall Shabbetai's two non consummated marriages. Put together the impotent patriarch Isaac and the matriarchs, Sarah the Egyptian whore or Rachel the madwoman, and the idea of a chaotic principle subverting the world/town/story/text, is clear.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Frank Jacob, and the Frankists, "The social structure of the sect", Encyclopedia Judaica, Keter, Jerusalem, 1972.

Furthermore, Itche Mattes reveals, strangely enough, certain attitudes generally attributed to the Christian Messiah. Itche is considered "a most holy man" (1:9), and in Chinkele's words to Rechele, "a holy man sent by Heaven to save you" (1:10). He appears as the savior and healer of the already very sick Rechele. After her death, Itche Mattes is the one who said the Kaddish, having forgiven the whore after all. Reb Mordechai Joseph is Jacob Frank. The word *frenk*, the usual Yiddish term for Sephardi, immediately resounds when Mordechai Joseph introduces himself to the people of Goray saying "I am a pure blooded Sephardi" (1:5).

The fact that all these figures share many features (messengers of the truth, fanatics, cabalists, coming from afar) and somehow "look alike", can be read in the historical-political layer (if at this point one could still dissociate it from the textual layer) as Singer's distrust in politicians. In other words, the similarity between characters could be referring to the undifferentiated personality and ineffectiveness of social leaders.

## II -

The text deals obsessively with the issue of the Body. First, Satan in Goray is filled with sick and defective bodies to the extent that it becomes hard to find even one healthy person. Rechele "had a lame foot", "had a deformity" (1:1), "was sickly (...) had her period every three months" (1:7). Her father, Reb Eleazar Babad, was supposed to be out of his mind. Mordechai Joseph was a cripple (1:5). His only daughter was "a monstrosity with a water-swollen head and calf's eyes". (1:6). In the second part, all the people of Goray are getting sick from hunger, fervor, desperation and desolation. Damaged and dead bodies are the beginning scene of the story and the ending ones. The *pinkes* ends with Rechele's madness and the mayse noyre, with her death. There is no clear redemption from sickness.

The effect of marginality is built by adding many other traits to sickness, like madness, orphanage and sexual licentiousness. Rechele "aroused sinful thoughts in men" (1:1), had two husbands at the same time and finally copulated with Satan. Nechele "received men in her house" and Ozer son of Reb Benish forced his niece to lie with him (2:6). Finally, sexual misconduct became popular in Goray as Gedalyia abolished Rabbi Gershom's ban on polygamy (2:4).

The text connects the bodies with the notion of descendance. The feminine characters, Rechele and Nechele are or become orphans during the narration. Mordechai Joseph fathers a monster; Reb Eleazar's only son had disappeared and Rabbi Benish's sons are worthless men, the eldest is an idler and the youngest, an apostate. The text seems to be saying that parents give birth to "dead" children and children are born from dead parents. Perhaps this explains why the story begins with the account of Chmelnicki's killings. Even if it might not be historically true that the Shabbatean movement resulted directly and mainly from the massacres of '48-'49, the body of the text and its narration "are born" from the massacre (referred to in the first paragraph). The core of the drama has to do with descendance and continuity. No wonder Rechele is sterile, Itche Mattes is impotent and the only one who can fecundate Rechele is Satan, from whom only another monster could come out. While the rumors interpreted the suffering of Polish Jewry as the birth-pangs of the Messiah, Bashevis inverts the image portraying the community as giving birth to monsters or as lacking biological and spiritual continuity.

The image of the marginal is thickened in Rechele: woman, orphan, deformed, too well-read, sick, sexually insatisfied, sterile, whore. Rechele, as the marginal par excellence, can be read as the sick and sterile body of the shtetl, penetrated and possessed by unstoppable forces; repressed vitality from inside and actual violence from the outside. For the dead end of the shtetl, the text has no solutions to offer. The **double ambiguous ending** of Satan in Goray might be a hint of its reluctance to provide solutions.

- III -

Satan in Goray deals with the issue of Language. The topic of the status of Language is relevant in a text that is chosen to be written in a minor language<sup>2</sup> and that is offering itself as a non realistic fiction..

The topic is treated with irony. Goray changes from an outward calmness to a complete disorder. The changes in enthusiasm or desperation only result from some kind of discourse, in the form of speech or letter, rather than from factual events. Words have extreme power in Goray. Messianism begins to

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<sup>2</sup> I use the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986.

penetrate Goray in the form of rumors, and "in almost every town one person ran about testifying". Whether or not it is historically true that messianic movements became widespread in this manner, is irrelevant to our purpose. The relevant point is that the text assigns a privileged role to words, presenting realities as moving with the rhythm of words.

Reb Itche Mattes arrives in Goray with "a letter written on parchment in Aramaic, in a scribe's script, and with crownlets on the letters like a Torah scroll. (...) Hundreds of Rabbis had put their signatures on the letter, most of them Sephardim..." (1:9). The letter was followed by Itches' "speech abounded in homilies and parables from the Torah and the Midrash." It is again a letter, this time from Lublin and in the holy tongue (footn: the same gesture of facilitating the access to the audience: role of writer as mediator and /elevating/ the audience in importance), that announces the proximity of salvation to Reb Benish (1:11).

The character of Reb Gedalya also appears as a bearer of news and after his speeches on Shabbatai Zevi, "Life seemed to have become more pleasant in Goray..." (2:3)

A main example of the emphasis upon the power of words is that the definitive proof of Shabbatai's truth was not the performance of miracles but the pronounciation of God's name ("For witnesses do testify that Shabbatai Zevi doth pronounce the holy name of God, sounding every letter in it...", 1:11)

In another brilliant irony, during the story Rechele passes from silence ("In the beginning Rechele could not speak at all", 1:8) to prophecy ! (2:5) And from being the prophetess, she then becomes the channel for Satan to speak!

The degeneration of Rechele's voice denotes an obvious parallelism with Israel's speech perverted either by superstitious mysticism, dealing with the forbidden or perhaps by violating the Law. What else does the degeneration of her voice mean?

Rechele's language deteriorates simultaneously with the deterioration of the Jewish language in which the text is written. Throughout the *pinkes* and in the epistle, Yiddish is protected and preserved in its role by authoritarian figures that translate the original letters in Hebrew into Yiddish. However, in the *mayse noyre* Yiddish is already "penetrated" (just as Rechele is raped by Satan) in two ways. In chapter 2:13, the narrator keeps Hebrew words in the Yiddish translation of the tale, placing these words in the very beginning of each paragraph. In chapter 14 and as the only case in the whole text, the Yiddish discourse is

corroded by German words hurled by the Evil ("he called the pious with bynames in the German tongue").

The text is hereby foreshadowing **the eventual collapse of Yiddish.**

Chaotic forces affect the language and the body of Satan in Goray and its fictional discourse as well. Irrationality conquers the story and by the end, causality is inexistent in the plot. The *pinkes* is suddenly displaced by the *mayse noyre*, which introduces a different narration of the events. The double ending narrated by different voices and setting different types of textual order (or textual chaos) shows the inconsistency of the realistic claim of objectivity. The grotesque, in the level of language and body of the text, desecrates the presumed objective mimesis of reality. Moreover, it reveals the fictional status of any discourse including the realistic historical novel.

- IV -

More interesting than the eventual historical parallelisms is how Bashevis makes particular use of some historical material, "as if" it could be transmissible in a fictional discourse without mediation. What makes Satan in Goray a wonderful novel is precisely the grotesque of that realistic view and the production of a text that creates a new means of reality lacking mimesis.

Satan in Goray becomes an irrational body in which energy is flowing while violating the legal borders of a realistic work. The ambiguity of the double ending (madness in the *pinkes*, and the expulsion of the Dybbuk and an uncertain possibility of redemption) is the final irony to the cause-and-effect law of realism. As an historical novel, the text does not dare to provide perfectly defined consequences. The consequences could be those of the *pinkes* or those of the *mayse noyre*, depending upon the voice of the narrator.

The choice of the historical novel format serves to destroy the illusion of realistic perfect objectivity, by unmasking its fictional character and, at the same time, to create an illusion of historicity in a different mode. The text is showing that realism is as utopian as the popular political solutions for the Polish Jewry. Both are condemned to fail because of their pretension of accuracy and objective truth. Realistic literature and political solutions present themselves as the perfect order. Satan in Goray is telling that the vital

energy of history, people and words cannot be restrained successfully by any Law. No matter what any kind of political or literary messianisms claim.

Satan in Goray is telling that realistic literature and political messianism are utopian and inevitably fail. Nevertheless, does it leave room for other utopias? Is there any other possible utopia ?

- V -

As I mentioned above, Satan in Goray is talking also about Language. In the light of the holocaust of the Eastern European Jewry, the fact that this fictionalized history is written in Yiddish is significant. Yiddish is the language of the victims that are alluded to. The Yiddish text allows an immediate identification of that public with the plot, a non-mediated (in terms of language) identification. This deliberate choice of the author could be seen as recognition of the victims, assigning to them the place of the privileged first audience.

While appreciating the Yiddish audience, Satan in Goray also vindicates Yiddish as a language in which the consecrated genres can be written. The Yiddish "jargon" is not only appropriate in "such a respectful genre" as the historical novel, but it can even make a mockery of it !

From a pessimistic point of view, the text is at the same time revealing the weakness of a body of language destined to be possessed by chaotic and foreign discourses. Does Satan in Goray foreshadow the future of Yiddish as death, madness, redemption ? The answer is left open in ambiguous endings.

Yiddish as a marginal language is the natural choice to talk about a marginal place, inhabited by the most marginal people, going through the most marginal events. A minor language ironically used in the apparently traditional format contains a subverted, grotesque, antirealist historical novel. By giving a space to the marginal, the fictional discourse succeeds in doing what any other utopia achieved. In reality, the shtetl and Yiddish culture were destroyed; in literature, the utopia of Yiddish is possible. Fictional non realistic discourse, laughing at its inevitable irrationality and enjoying its uncontrollable chaos, has the power to create the only real place for the marginal: a space of utopia, an empty blank to be filled with words flowing freely.



## CONCLUSION

In my reading, putting together both the historical and the atemporal layers, Satan in Goray is talking simultaneously about the historical and the fictional. One could read it as making a painful grotesque of the isolated shtetl (in utopia, impermeable to corrosive forces) and an ironic grotesque of realistic literature (in utopia, accurate and objective).

Satan in Goray is also a text of restoration. It rescues the deformed marginal bodies of Eastern European Jewry, of Yiddish language and the body of fiction in all their vitality: sexual impulses, intellectual thirst, need for experimentation, chaotic forces, inexplicable instincts. It provides freedom from ineffective laws, thereby unmasking them in their own fictional status. Satan in Goray creates the only successful utopia, the only real utopia, the only reality. What fails in political reality and in literary realism, gets a real body in fiction. This ability to build a reality of fiction is precisely what makes this text a great novel.

I read in Satan in Goray that Language is the only means which is able to construct utopias, as long as vitality is not repressed but rather tolerated and enhanced.

Language constructs utopias that persist in time, because the textual body cannot be dissolved. Utopia can disintegrate in historical means, but it is preserved in the privileged space of the text. The realistic utopia of perfection is replaced by a non-realistic literature as the space of utopia.

Satan in Goray is a text of utopia, because it is the irrational made real, not the real made rational.