

**SCHLEMIEL AS PARADIGM: THE HERO  
IN  
SELECTED FICTION OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER**

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**THESIS**

*SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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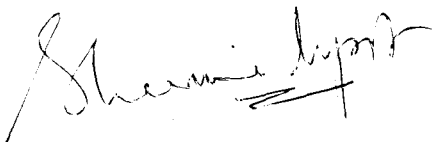
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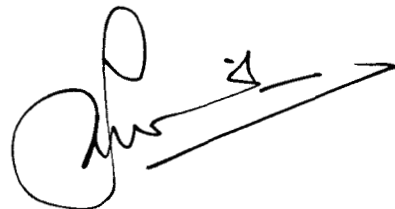
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**I, Lasitha B.V., do hereby declare that this thesis has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar title or recognition.**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'L' followed by a cursive 'asitha' and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Lasitha B.V.**

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## Preface

This study is an extended discourse about the kinds of theoretical possibilities that derive from a critical reading of Isaac Bashevis Singer's employment of the schlemiel as a paradigm in his texts.

I collect the discussions in this thesis into five major chapters. Chapter I "A Recovered Metaphor: Multicultural Implications of the Schlemiel" gathers the various theoretical configurations that articulate the comic resources within literature and culture. My attempts at definition and analysis of the schlemiel beginning in this chapter are prefaced by a survey of the affinities between this Yiddish folk figure and the victim heroes, comic types and tricksters of diverse cultures. Some of the current ways of understanding humour and the comic hero are explored in this section. It is here that I introduce the three frames, comic resilience, suffering and resolution, that organize the relationship between the schlemiel and his community.

Chapter II "Recursive Layers and Historic contexts: The Yiddish Moorings of Schlemiel Ideology" focuses on the literary traditions and the recursive structures in literature and language, literary figurations and

textual language that are crucial to Yiddish fiction. As recursive texts Singer's fiction layers ways of memory, discourse and the folk figure of the schlemiel within language and culture until each is folded into the other.

Chapter III "Literary Figurations of the Schlemiel: The Short Stories" is an exploration of how Singer's short stories incorporate the myth and folklore of the schlemiel as context and fiction.

Chapter IV "Reflective/Reflexive Postures of the Schlemiel: The Novels" demonstrates how the expressive aspect in the voice of the Yiddish mythology of the schlemiel is an intimate facet of the narrative voice within the text. In Chapters III and IV I put to use the kinds of interpretive decisions that come from a consideration of features like fantasy, magic, the grotesque, myth, ritual, humour, religion and the holocaust. These chapters clarify the role of cultural tradition as it emerges in the spiritual region of Singer's fiction.

The subject and method of my final chapter are a commentary on my earlier chapters. It also seeks to demonstrate the emergence of autobiography from the specific experiences offered by the author in his later works.

The characteristic strategy of survival for the schlemiel is humour, the conviction that distress returns to laughter. This sensibility expresses the precious secret of the tree of life, the hope of continuance.

Abbreviations of Isaac Bashevis Singer's works used in text.

<i>Satan in Goray</i>	SG
<i>The Magician of Lublin</i>	ML
<i>The Manor</i>	M
<i>Enemies, A Love Story</i>	EL
<i>The Slave</i>	TS
<i>The Estate</i>	E
<i>The Family Moskat</i>	FM
<i>The Penitent</i>	TP
<i>Love and Exile</i>	LE
<i>The Certificate</i>	C
<i>The Séance and Other Stories</i>	S
<i>Passions and Other Stories</i>	P
<i>A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories</i>	FOK
<i>A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories</i>	CF
<i>Old Love</i>	OL
<i>The Spinoza of Market Street</i>	SPM
<i>Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories</i>	GF
<i>Short Friday and Other Stories</i>	SF
<i>The Image and Other Stories</i>	I

# A Recovered Metaphor: Multicultural Implications of the Schlemiel

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## Chapter I

### A Recovered Metaphor: Multicultural Implications of the Schlemiel

The schlemiel is a character of Yiddish folklore and fiction who epitomizes many of the fundamental ontological assumptions embodied in the essence of comic heroes. The concept of ancestry manifestly implicates a spiritual past, one that is authorized through historicity and that reflects, in the energies invested in orate structures of their texts, the power of the myths. Through an obdurate assertion of the truth of his own invention, the comic hero becomes a contradiction of the terms, perspectives and conventions of heroism (Torrance 1).

Heroism can be regarded as the apex of fulfilment in the individual and the greatest degree of reality a person can achieve. The apparently incomprehensible cosmic phenomena and the chaos of intention that beleaguer man cause him to seek evidence of some explication within a divine power. Deification of nature and the extension of human powers through the creation of anthropomorphic gods and a mythology designed to mediate between the tyranny of mortal limitations and the void of oblivion were some of the traditional gestures of reconciliation with the mysteries of the universe. Hence the consistent quest through centuries for an

incontrovertibly superior man historically real, or imaginary, or a composite of both. Such an entity serves as an ideal embodiment of human potential and impresses his image upon the popular mind in a way that renders him both accessible and phenomenal. Man's hope is invested in the hero because he surmounts the exigencies of existence with greater ease and is consistently "the figure endowed with magical power, who makes the impossible possible" (Jung, *Psychological Types* 333).

There is an essential contradiction in the fact that the comic character who has been disparaged even from Aristotelian times could be considered a hero no less authentic than his counterpart of spiritual superiority and intellectual will (Torrance vii).

Aristotle's empirical observation in the *Poetics* associated the comic with the trivial (*phaulos*) and the tragic with the solemn and good (*spoudaios*), a value judgement predicated upon the social distinctions of aristocratic Greek society (Else 75). Consistent with this assumption, Aristotle traces the roots of comedy in invective, theorizing that the name of the genre is not derived from the festive *kōmos* or revels, in spite of his incidental observations on phallic ritual (Else 118-20). However Aristotle

also concedes that the laughable or ridiculous (*to geloion*) which is apposite to comedy is a great advancement from the element of malice or *schadenfreude* (Else 10; ch.4).<sup>1</sup> These implicit ethical standards became conspicuous in Renaissance and neoclassical theorists whose blatantly moralistic and didactic principles of comedy were evolved from Aristotelian conceptions.

By inference from Aristotle's theory of tragedy, mockery was turned to a therapeutic end and laughter was perceived to be a catharsis purging the spectator of the very vices ridiculed on the comic stage.<sup>2</sup> The fundamental assumption of the Renaissance school of criticism was that comedy was a genre to be defended against some obtrusive social and literary presuppositions. Thus the sixteenth century Italian critic Giovanni Trissino asserts that comedy instructs through ridicule and censure of the base and objectionable (Lauter 42).

Henri Bergson's idea of comedy is only an aspect of his larger philosophy of vitalism. In his view a comic impasse occurs wherever a human being enters into a stage of isolation in his mechanical idiocy. *Something mechanical encrusted on the living* and an automatic

regulation of society are the laughable effects identified by Bergson ("Laughter" 84-90).

The rigid mechanism which we occasionally detect, as a foreign body, in the living continuity of human affairs is of peculiar interest to us as being a kind of *absentmindedness* on the part of life . . . . The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events (117).

Classical European conceptions of comedy whether Aristotelian or Bergsonian were predicated upon established forms of reasonable conduct and socially oriented principles. Any other variety of comedy was believed to be an aberration deserving contempt so that in spite of its range and

effervescent popularity the comic remained "almost beneath the threshold of cultured awareness." The comic hero was viewed as a butt or scapegoat who deviated from the principles of behaviour established by civilized judgement (Torrance 1-2).

Whether knaves or fools, comic types engender an ambiguous response in the reader. The satirical theories of comedy descending from Aristotle which accept aristocratic values such as integrity, etiquette and sagacity are at variance with the vastly disparate conceptions and values of the lower social classes. The latter in alliance with popular tradition posit the ingenious rogue and the fool as objects of irrepressible gratification and favour (Torrance 7). Sigmund Freud who elucidated the opposition of comedy to any imaginative or intellectual activity that pursues serious aims first underscored the insurrectionary nature of popular humor. It follows that "all kinds of intellectual processes which are sufficiently remote from what is perceptual to bring ideational mimetics to a stop" are adverse to the comic (*Jokes* 283).

The popular fantasies and fables in which the knave, fool, buffoon or other such comic paradigms triumph contain an inordinate element of wish gratification, specifically from the vantage point of the lower classes so that

a constitutionally different and obscure theory of comedy gradually emerges. The Establishment with its repressive restraints appears as the Other so that there is opportunity for sympathetic identification and participation with the cause of the comic antagonist. It is when the contest between these two forces occurs as one between the collective organization of society and the underdog who is not invincible or invulnerable to the possibility of defeat, whose victories if any are ambiguous, conditional and inconclusive, that the latter assumes the dimensions of a comic hero (Torrance 8).

The afflictions of modern experience subject the very idea of heroism to an ironic rhetoric so that in fiction the ambiguous rubric "anti-hero" emerges, which subsumes in itself a long conflict with culture. The term includes in its range "the fool, the clown, the hipster, the criminal, the poor sod, the freak, the outsider, the scapegoat, the scrubby opportunist, the rebel without a cause, the 'hero' in the ashcan and 'hero' on the leash" (Hassan 21). The imperatives of solipsism and social consciousness constitute the comic hero's response to his predicament. His ability to organize experience even in self-exile and to mediate between instinct and

the hostilities of modern civilization are seen in his perpetually autoschediastic substance.

The comic convention descends from the immense repository of folk humour which is part of the culture of the market place, a phenomenon which finds scant accommodation in the vast body of mythical, folk and epic literature. The subtle nuances of people's laughter were very often disdained or falsified in the narrow concept of popular character and folklore which emerged in the pre-Romantic period and attained effectuation through the work of the Romantics. Amorphous theories and indeterminate assumptions arising from a materialistic culture and aesthetics of modern times stalled an enquiry into the ingenuities of folk humour (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 4).

The protean, subtle, and transitional nature of comedy is authenticated by the fact that its Shakespearean correlative evades compliance with medieval, traditional, Renaissance and Classical conventions. As a result, humour also refuses to be defined by a particular pattern, structure, mood or typology. The pattern of action very often

becomes a mingling of festive gesture and the social situation in which it is engendered.

As a true feast of time, of becoming, change and renewal, as opposed to immortalization, completion and fossilization, carnival experience which derived from comic ritual finds expression in Shakespearean comedy. The intrinsic features of the carnival emphasized by Mikhail Bakhtin are its categorical and resolute "heterglossia" (*raznogolosost'*) and its multiplicity of styles (*mnogostil'nost'*). Just as the novelistic structure is contingent on dialogization the ultimate structure of life patterned by behaviour and cognition is dependent upon carnivalization (Pomorska x).

Fooling in Elizabethan times which was prevalent in seasonal festivities and wedding celebrations was institutionalized in the figure of the court fool either "natural" or "artificial" (Welsford, *The Fool* 171). Shakespearean fooling is contingent upon a conflicting relationship between "nature" and "grace." Even while these clowns are not true "naturals" or fools, they manifest themselves as children of nature. The close kinship between folly and nature is a traditional one as demonstrated

by Walter Kaiser in his study of the themes in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* (*Praisers* 91-92). The technique of fooling is juxtaposed between the ability of "naturals" to articulate subliminal, recondite and prescient truths, and the limits of the fool's dramatic function which are arbitrated by the dramatist's own predilection for the insoluble, the vatic and the sublime (Berry 132).

Shakespearean comic resolution rests upon the essential presupposition of final harmony through the restorative power of humour and the emergent affinities that inform it. The varied range of Shakespeare's clowns and fools evades generalization but the comic vitality that unites them and links them to ritual heritage can be appreciated through Susanne Langer's analysis of the buffoon. Citing from a general assortment of clowns such as Harlequin, Pierrot, the Elizabethan jester, the Vidusaka of Sanskrit drama and figures of puppet show Langer postulates that these popular figures reveal the buffoon in all his reality:

[T]he indomitable living creature fending for itself, tumbling and stumbling (as the clown physically illustrates) from one situation into another . . . . He is the personified élan vital; his chance adventures and misadventures . . . often with

bizarre complications, his absurd expectations and disappointments . . . his whole improvised existence has the rhythm of primitive, savage, if not animalian life, coping with a world that is forever taking . . . uncalculated turns . . . . He is . . . genuinely amoral, - now triumphant, now worsted and rueful, but . . . funny, because his energy is . . . unimpaired and each failure prepares the situation for a new fantastic move (*Feeling* 342).

The fools of Shakespeare may be described as the vicarious comic heroes of a class not articulate enough to evolve its own heroes, yet simultaneously self-effacing and contumacious. Literary fooling is integrated with such subtlety into Shakespeare's comic structure that the relationship between the fools and the plays is symbiotic rather than contingent. The existence of the fools and clowns is derived from sources partially extrinsic to the plays. They approximate varied traditions of clowning such as that of the rustic buffoons, the Vice figures of domestic drama, professional jesters of court life, the *zanni* of Italian comedy, the devious servants in the comedy of Plautus and Terence and their analogues in Neo-Classical imitations (Berry 111-2).

The irrevocable commitment of the clown's energies to the archetypal antecedents of his nature is epitomized through his projection of the quality of chaos. His comic potential is contingent on the festive codes of biological life and creative abandon. However the riotous and refractory nature of the fool's festivity invariably appears as a negative attribute in the conflict or *agôn* with the vindicators of social harmony (Torrance vii). The elements of chaos and disproportion that shape the fool's identity are transmitted through his physical appearance such as his natural or artificial deformity, his conventionally bald or shorn head, motley or parti-colored attire, his *marotte* or bauble. The suggestions of animality in his costume such as cockscomb, ass's ears and foxtail also allude to his elementary links with nature and ancient ritual (Willeford 13-22).

Edward Berry points out that an overview of the Elizabethan use of the word "natural" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals some of the stock features of Shakespearean clowning: To be "natural" is to be naturally deficient in intellect, "to be in a state of nature, without spiritual enlightenment," to conform to "the ordinary course of nature," as opposed to the "unusual, marvellous, or miraculous," to be "free from affectation, artificiality, or constraint," to have a "real or physical existence, as

opposed to what is spiritual, intellectual, fictitious," to be the "real thing" or a touchstone. The clown's habitual satiric and parodic functions include the opposition of natural behaviour, physical manhood and vulgarity to courtly demeanour, spiritual and intellectual manhood and dignity. Within this dialectic the inconsonances of fooling such as the comic conjunction of romantic love and sex, selfishness and self-interest operate, generating instability out of apparent cohesion. Two of the conventional playthings of the jester, the mirror and the phallic marotte are self-reflexive in that they return an image of himself. The culmination of the dialectic between opposing value systems is indeterminate in tragic fooling while the possibility of rapprochement remains open in comedies (*Comic Rites* 119-24).

The popular voice in Shakespearean England was projected as a cultural tradition of protest in spite of stringent political suppression. However the terminology "cultural tradition" arouses a certain ambiguity regarding the different paradigms of popular culture in early modern Europe. Peter Burke consciously blurs the distinctions between elite and popular culture as also those between mass culture imposed from above and a folk culture which evolved spontaneously from the lower reaches of

civilization. He contends for a more efficacious paradigm of intercourse between these dualities. Revising upon earlier anthropological prototypes which discriminate between the "great" tradition of the educated and the "little" tradition of the folk, Burke negates symmetrical cultural interpenetration. While the little tradition was informal and accessible to the elite, the common people were estranged from the great tradition mainly because the institutions through which it was transmitted were proscribed to them (*Popular Culture* 195-96). A more variable paradigm for ascertaining the communicative function of texts and artifacts is also proposed by Burke:

Whether one is considering songs or stories, images or rituals, it may be useful to ask: 'who is saying what, to whom, for what purpose and with what effect?' However, in asking this question we must not let ourselves assume that the message transmitted was necessarily the message received (201).

The heuristic benefit of these queries remains inconsequential as long as the "little" culture of folksongs, tales and broadsides continues to be described as the cultural detritus that remains when the "great" tradition is accounted for. Ambivalences persist with regard to the fact that the "little"

culture was paradoxically a mass culture, primarily recreational, or at the convergence of recreation and religion, self-consciously espoused and evolved by the silent majority and not merely a cultural constant. These ambiguities are further compounded by the fact that the printing revolution which generated both a new readership as well as acculturation was committed to recording and disseminating certain selected texts. These texts were complete only through collation from other texts embedded in the dominant culture (A. Patterson 33).

That a popular culture which was simultaneously festive and non-recreational and a popular voice which was a self-conscious articulation from the lower reaches of culture did exist can be accepted as a certainty. The precarious and undefined borderline between art and life, the stage and the world presented unsettled distinctions in the Elizabethan age where comedy was saturnalia rather than mere delineation of saturnalian experience. The holiday license of comedy and *joie de vivre* as centred in the festive celebrant, the "Lord of Misrule" trod the impugnable fringes of aplomb and disruption, of dramatic liberty and Lese-majesty.

Thus as C.L. Barber posits:

. . . the instability of an interregnum is built into the dynamics of misrule: the game at once appropriates and annihilates the mana of authority. In the process, the fear which normally maintains inhibition is temporarily overcome, and the revellers become wanton, swept along on the freed energy normally occupied in holding themselves in check (*Comedy* 36-38).

Elsewhere Barber invokes the scapegoat figures such as Mardi Gras and the Tibetan King of the Year described in James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, who after presiding over village revels were convicted and buried or burned in effigy (*Comedy* 206-9).

The origins of Shakespearean comedy are predicated upon both the occasionalist theories that trace them as courtly entertainments for particularized occasions and the ritualistic theory that is derived from the instinctual behaviour posited by anthropology. Victor Turner's theory of *communitas* is contingent on the individual's feeling that he is a function of a larger, choate, coactive and concinnate social group. It follows that "cognitively, nothing underlines regularity so well as absurdity or paradox.

Emotionally, nothing satisfies as much as extravagant or temporarily permitted illicit behaviour." This determinant of regularity was believed to rationalize the fact that inversion rituals occur most often "at fixed points in the annual cycle . . . for structural regularity is here reflected in temporal order" (*Ritual* 110).

Turner modifies this assumption in the later *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* in which inversion rituals are a function of some natural calamity or "public, overt breach or deliberate non-fulfilment of some crucial norm" postulating remedial intervention rather than regulatory confirmation. *Communitas* is reorientated as running *counter* to the stratified and legitimate conceptions of society in that space defined by Turner as *liminality* in which social hierarchies are temporarily blurred. In liminal states, the lower social strata is privileged and there is a re-appraisal of the somatic elements and biological referents conceived as the source of regenerative energy (55). This accounts for the ritual use of animal disguises, masks and gestures. There is a reciprocity between the normative and conceptual norms of communal signification which prescribes societal attitudes and the physiological actualities of existence which are systematized by these norms. In this interchange "the biological

referents are ennobled and the normative referents are charged with emotional significance" which restores their authenticity (Turner, *Dramas* 55). The ritual interchange between norms and energies precipitated by cataclysms or violations of societal harmony is useful in exploring the ritual components of comedy even when it privileges the idealist theory that festive rituals are predicated upon the hope of reconciliation (A. Patterson 61).

Robert Weimann and Mikhail Bakhtin offer the radically different interpretation that popular festivities and inversion rituals have subversive intentions and functions. Weimann's analysis entrenches the feasibility of a class-conscious evaluation of popular traditions and the implication of Shakespeare's comic figures. Bakhtin's study of Rabelais which was anteceded by a social record of carnival festivities rendered a coherent interpretation of the latter's underscoring of the material grotesque or the "lower bodily stratum." All forms of grotesque realism in reification of their subject, effect an essential decadence and materialization. This is distinct from the sublimation and exaltation of themes pursued in medieval high art and literature. Carnival laughter which is embedded in grotesque realism engages in abasement and degeneration of the lofty. These actions

are not merely formal or relative in character but have an absolute and precise topographical significance in that the degradation connotes a movement downward toward the earth while any upward progression signifies a movement towards heaven.

To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better. To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body . . . . To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving (*Rabelais* 20-21).

Bakhtin also insists that fertilization was inherently a social myth of populist self-exposition and assimilation:

. . . the body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and

its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed . . . . the collective ancestral body of all the people (*Rabelais* 19).

In spite of the marxist ideologies of history adduced in these arguments a radical solution to the ancient ambivalences that afflict the polemics of art remains elusive: "high versus low culture, mind versus body, consciousness versus material practise" (A. Patterson 62).

Weimann's aesthetic posits the festal and ceremonial elements that are germane for a fresh and ritualistic integration of the indigenous with the prevalent, of the primordial with the erudite and the classic. This interpretation with its grounds in the new critical emphasis on aesthetic disinterestedness approves of the Shakespearean oecumenical perception of experience as more catholic and dynamic in its scepticism and unconstraint than the tradition from which it was drawn (*Popular Tradition* 251). Scholarly penetration into the insurrectionary nature of entropy was

deterred by the certitude that class consciousness was not a prevalent ideology in Elizabethan times (Weimann 24-25). Bakhtin is similarly culpable of catholicism in his inadequate particularization of the historical magnitudes of carnivalism. While Rabelais is accommodated in a 'history of laughter' extending from the middle ages to the nineteenth century and underwritten by Marxist historiography, Bakhtin made a conspicuous repudiation of Veselovsky's nineteenth century theory that clowning was a populist resistance against feudal constraints :

No doubt laughter was in part an external defensive form of truth. It was legalized, it enjoyed privileges, it liberated, to a certain extent, from censorship, oppression, and from the stake . . . . Laughter is essentially not an external but an interior form of truth . . . . Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but . . . from the great interior censor . . . . from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power. . . . The seriousness of fear and suffering in their religious, social, political and ideological forms could not but be impressive. The consciousness of freedom, on the other

hand, could be only limited and utopian . . . . Freedom granted by laughter often enough was mere festive luxury.

Bakhtin concludes that it would be a fallacy to presuppose that festal and carnival elements constitute "a critical and clearly defined opposition" (*Rabelais* 93-95). Shakespeare's carnival spirit which posits laughter as an essential mediator of social tensions sees it as removed from the sphere of conventions and binding rules of social hierarchy (A.Patterson 70). Rabelais' work which is in fact a medley of popular folklore and humanistic scholasticism repudiates the constraints of society, exalting the hitherto vilified powers and instincts which burgeoned during the saturnalian age of the Renaissance (Torrance 147). The saturnalian spirit of the carnival is exteriorized by its subjugation through laughter of "divine and human power, of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself." A cleansing of man's consciousness and a fresh if evanescent truth was revealed, only to be circumvented by the disquietudes and persecutions of quotidian existence. In the midst of all these trials however, an unofficial truth about the world and man emerged, which primed the new Renaissance consciousness (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 90-91).

In medieval fool humour, "the humorist by his gift of long ears to the long-robed dignitaries," and procession of fools in courtly dress burlesques the pageant of perfection, thereby debunking the idealization of the human. Shakespeare's poetic essence was not medieval but his clown and fool comedy was an antithetical and counter movement, an antiphon to artistic idealization just as medieval burlesque was an answer to the innate idealism of the culture (Barber 229).

Aristotle's comments regarding the evolution of comedy from invective to the dramatization of the ridiculous maybe cryptic but it is obvious that the origins of drama are traced to some kind of fertility rite, Dionysiac or phallic. The presumption that art is born of rites is predicated also on the belief that comic and tragic masks are themselves archetypal symbols for characters in tribal "semantics of ritual" (Sypher, "Meanings" 216).

This historical interplay between society and artistic form has an interest of its own: it can be seen how art develops underlying configurations in the social life of a culture. As Barber informs, the saturnalian pattern came to Shakespeare from many sources, both in social

and artistic tradition. It appeared in the theatrical institution of clowning: the clown or vice when Shakespeare started to write, was a recognized anarchist who made the deviation from the norm obvious by carrying the saturnalian pattern of release to absurd extremes. The latter appeared in many variations, all of which involved inversion, statement and counter-statement, and a basic movement which can be summarized in the formula, through release to clarification. The cult of fools and folly, half-social and half-literary objectified a similar polarization of experience (*Comedy 4-5*).

The Renaissance conception of laughter embodies a deep philosophical significance as one of the essential forms of truth, as discerned through its holistic approach to the world, history and man. Seventeenth century attitude towards laughter and the attitude of the age that followed pursued a different pattern: Laughter was no longer regarded as a universal, philosophical form and could refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which was important and essential, including history and persons representing it could not be perceived as comical, for the sphere of the comic was considered narrow and specific, confining itself to private and social vices. The language of

laughter, in line with this mode of thought, does not suffice to embody the basic truths about the world and man so that in literature laughter properly belongs to the low genres, showing the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels. Laughter is a light amusement and a form of salutary social punishment of the corrupt and low (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 66-67).

The justification of laughter as an universal and powerful form appears in literary creation, appreciation and theory. Such literature was derived from antique sources, and evolved into the Hippocratic novel, an addendum to Hippocrates' aphorisms regarding the therapeutic value of laughter. These sources lay down laughter as a universal philosophical convention, assigning to it curative and regenerative properties. It is also approximated to the ultimate philosophical issues relating to the "regulation of life" interpreted by French humourists. Other antique conceptions of laughter were entrenched in the works of the ancients such as Athenaeus, Macrobius as also in Homer's pronouncement about the indestructible, eternal laughter of the Gods. Yet another tradition was the Roman one of the freedom of laughter during the Saturnalia, the triumphant marches and the funeral rites of notables. The positive, renewing and creative meaning embedded in these antique sources distinguishes them

from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter, including the Bergsonian which focus on its negative potential (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 67-71).

The rites of comedy are closely allied with impiety for comedy operates simultaneously as profanation and release of negative emotions. The comic character appeases the urge towards archaic chaos, iconoclasm and sacrilege and the impulse for release from the pressures of personal identity and "differentiation" (Sypher, "Meanings" 223-24). Through his transgressive festivity the fool becomes the consciousness of a fissured society as much as of divided man. The convention of the allowed Fool who expresses his truth perceived not through ratiocination but through enlightened instinct is employed by Shakespeare to posit the "punctum indifferens," the nonpartisan commentator (Welsford, "The Fool" 147).

The comic conception of literature, as a mode of truth-saying, undercuts all ancient and new debates about the role of aesthetic motive. In the context of profound commitment to the creative word and fidelity to human experience, the term "aesthetic" with its concomitant disjointure of human instincts appears extraneous to comic literature. Satire is a

conventional exploration of the basal parameters of human potential in its uneasy alliance with the limitations of society, custom or selfhood. The dichotomy between an ideal past and a dissolute present provides the schematic structure for the dialectic of satire (Paulson 8-10). Whereas the contumely directed against the outsider from within the immunity of a conventional and conformist society is one of the conventions of satire, early Roman satirists such as Horace and Juvenal differ in their approaches to this convention. The former's satire is fundamentally introspective and contemplative, manifesting an identification of the author with the subject, the "I" with the cautionary "you." Juvenalian satire which is predicated upon the fool-knave relationship is actually an extension of his employment of the unvarying constant of the ideal and its debasement. This satire is a reversal of the situation inasmuch as chaos and vice are the norm, while the satirist who is the advocate of value systems becomes in fact, a deviation. Unlike Horatian satire which focuses on the ideal relationship between the patron and the dependent, Juvenal's writing revolves around the mutuality and debasement of this relationship. The latter's work represents also a reciprocity of perversion rooted in the folly and corruptibility of the dependent and the corruption and knavery of the patron. While the

self-involved and autodidactic satire of Horace tends to impose folly on the author, Juvenalian satire foists culpability on the persecuted fool as well as the knave, both authors staking claim to the assumption that normative humanity is extraneous to satire (Paulson 24).

In order to realize his motives in a divided world, the satiric persona must resolutely reprobate values alien to himself. An ineludible consequence is the undermining of his living impulses. In the process the vulnerability of unreflective instinct to irreversible erosion is revealed. Inasmuch as this persona lives in an apperential world he lives a negative existence. As a character in comic satire the "humor" is intimately related to the theme of absurd or irrational law that governs the society initially, which is replaced by a sort of moral norm or an unidealistic, liberated society (Frye 169).

Fundamentally the narrative structure of the satire leads to the portrayal of the self-reflexivity of folly or evil, or of the morally susceptible individual experiencing these phenomena or identifying with the deviant. In Juvenalian satiric persuasion the transition from comic to tragic satire or melodrama occurs when the deluded fool acquires the power to urge his

insight on others (Paulson 30-31). This may also become a deflection from the ridiculed object toward the lone and distressed satirist-observer. The subject-object relationship that is the crux of satire either integrates the reader and fool into a single character or differentiates them into observer, agent or victim vis-à-vis a fool or knave (Paulson 42). However the consistency demanded by prose fiction and the conventions of narrative forms more often reduce these diverse alternatives into an amenable few.

In both the tragic and the comic hero, inexorable utopianism in the face of the relentless exigencies of reality is transformed into reckless alienation and derangement or at least a facsimile of these states of consciousness. These postures are responses to an age "in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem . . . yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (Lukács, *Novel* 56).

Picaresque fiction incorporates diverse paradigms such as the "aberrant hidalgo," the "unscrupulous trickster" or the insouciant "mountebank" (Torrance 144-45). This variety of fiction propounds its own coherent antidote to the perils of nihilism. The tradition of picaresque has "to do with the underdog, the little man, the fellow a bit worse off than the average, who has his adventures and troubles and somehow just

survives" (Tillyard 14). In his satiric persona the picaro represents an ironic fabric reified in a character wherein a circumspect and politic consciousness mingles with a moral imperceptivity. In Juvenalian satire the relationship between the fool and the knave, or a servant and his master is based upon the servitude of the one and the benevolence of the other. This relationship informs the structure of the picaresque narrative. The assumption of the norm of benevolence and submission however fails to be observed and the concomitant deviation forms the theme of the satiric picaresque. Conventionalization of the servant-master relation in later picaresque fiction and the inclusion of wider ranges of experience lead to the portrayal of satiric punishment which exposes the relation between the punished/knave and the punished/fool. The picaresque is at its most natural when the exposition of knavery or folly occurs simultaneously (Paulson 58-65).

Inasmuch as picaresque fiction conceives of society and man's place in it in quasi-naturalistic terms it cannot be construed as social criticism. Attendant upon this social disaffiliation, which follows from the assumption that society is naturalistic, is a sort of moral disaffiliation, founded on the conviction that morals are social, relative, and at worst

irrational, or invalid. There is the perception of an objective truth in terms of one's own experiential activity rather than the deterministic veracity of orthodox persuasion. This appears to inform the new themes in picaresque fiction such as the individual's alienation within a subversive social order (Blackburn 9).

George Lukács observes that "the contingent world" as much as the "problematic individual" are in fact actualities that mutually establish each other. The assumption of ideas as infeasible and empirically chimerical, or their transformation into irrealizable ideals discreates "the immediate problem-free organic nature of the individual" (*Novel* 78).

The basic situation of travesty is represented in the Quixote fiction of Cervantes where the idealist has to contend with an antipodean and empirical world. The romantically insane Quixote figure is a hypostatic typification of radical contradictions, at once self-deluded and "God's fool." He is a transcendental archetype of the honourable, ingenuous and unaffected personality against which the real world is appraised and discovered to be inadequate. The radical ambiguity of Erasmus' folly is directly and rhetorically aimed at removing the dregs of

scholasticism. A similar ambiguity is embodied in the spiritual and imaginative hoboism of Don Quixote (Paulson 99-101). The picaro is acquiescent in all social situations. By contrast the comic hero sets the world of festal liberation in opposition to the pragmatic actualities that circumscribe his instincts.

The absence of heroic grandeur in society, disillusionment and scepticism for the pragmatic attitudes of the community called into being the picaro who is at once deceiver, swindler, trickster and confidence man. *Picarismo* thus is never voluntary but the inevitable result of the pressures of physical survival in a hostile world (Monteser 6).

As a reification of the immutable, typical, natural being within every individual the picaro becomes one of the many metonymic transformations of the trickster myth, one of the most prevalent and primordial of cultural archetypes. When picarism is viewed symbolically, easy collective characterization of the picaro is obviated. Fictional language undergoes a radical shift in order to more significantly accommodate the ambivalences of such characters. R.W.B Lewis regards the modern, solipsistic and cultless figure of the comic-picaresque saint as man not in "private

communion with God, but in an urgent communion with his fellow men”

(*Saint* 159 - 60)

When the aspects of archaic ontology or the conceptions of being and reality rooted in human behaviour of primordial cultures are registered it becomes evident that such metaphysical concepts eschew theoretical language in favour of symbol, myth and rite. On different planes and through the vehicles of expression appropriate to them, these myths, symbols and rites evolve an intricate modus of systematic assertions about the ultimate reality of the world, which can be considered as constituting a metaphysics. A survey of the authentic significance of an archaic myth or symbol reveals that this signification evinces the recognition of a certain situation in the cosmos and consequently it suggests a metaphysical position. The general demeanour of archaic man reveals that neither the objects of the outer world nor human deeds possess autonomous and connate value. All human behaviour that does not arise from pure automatism is disjoined in its significance and value from crude physical datum and is associated with the power of replicating a primordial act or iterating a mythical paradigm. The archaic man is an acknowledgment of

actions already posited and lived, so that his life becomes an unending iteration of gestures initiated by others (Eliade, *Myth* 3-4).

The conscious iteration of given paradigmatic gestures unveils an original ontology. Thus while the possibility of a self-conscious transmission of the trickster myth of primordial cultures into various paradigms of the comic hero including the picaro appears ambiguous, it is evident that it accounts in large measure for the endurance of picarism as a literary cult over many centuries. The immutable framework of picarism is easily accessible to consciousness and comes into play whenever the modern sensibility seeks escape from norms and conventions in the quest for a significant reality.

The trickster is notoriously protean in nature and may be an innocuous mountebank or a rollicking rascalion who may metamorphose into arch-fiend, a divine deceiver or Vice or an inveterate liar. When he appears in picaresque fiction it is as a subverter of harmony and meaning, as a potential "threat to . . . that totality of significant humanity, that commedia of awareness that would, above all, include love" (Blackburn 13-14). The compulsive pursuit for meaning in life is actually

a token of the picaro's alienation, for "he is an eternal *buscón*, both seeker and swindler." All experience leads to disintegration of the picaro's personality so that he is compelled to forge a delusive identity that will bring him into an enigmatic relation with society. *"Creating a self that his will supports but that he knows for an illusion, the picaro evolves into a symbolic being, a confidence man, outwardly one who shares faith in existence, inwardly one reduced to spiritual nothingness"* (Blackburn 20).

In world mythology the trickster figure is one of the most pervasive, subtle and complex of characters. The trickster appears in the Winnebago (Wisconsin) Indian myth cycle, tales of the Algonquin and Sauntre of Eastern North America and in tribal tales of the plains area, the Pacific coast and the Southwest region. In Africa trickster tales abound in tribes such as the Ashanti, the Dahomey, Yoruba, Nganasan and so on. Hindu, Polynesian, Australian and other native cultures as well as Germanic and Greek myths contain figures analogous to the tricksters of preliterate cultures. To cite only a limited assortment, extensions of these figures can be seen in folk characters such as Till Eulenspiegel, Reynard the Fox, and literary characters such as Panurge, Falstaff, Sut Lovingood and personae in black American fiction (Test 37).

As a reification of an ancient archetype the trickster "is a hero who is always wandering, who is always hungry, who is not guided by normal conceptions of good or evil, who is either playing tricks on people or having them played on him and who is highly sexed" (Radin, *Trickster* 159). While there are shared elements in the trickster tales of different cultures there are varying emphases on the aspects of his character such as gluttony, sexual appetite, his hunting and fighting prowess (Test 38). Tricksters in European mythology such as Hermes and Loki, the Norse trickster of audacious will and unconformable self, are also imbued with contradictions. The trickster in the multifariousness of his identity subsumes radical ambiguities; he is at once deceitful and foolish, selfish and heroic, implicated in desecration as well as consecration. The enactment of his cultural role is not entirely antithetical to his conscious or inadvertent marginalization (Test 39). Trickster tales are impenetrated by satiric ingredients. This implies that the trickster is a mythical source of satire, or an unintentional archetype used as a vehicle by primordial people and cultures for transmission of their contempt for any demeanour that subverts the social order (Test 42).

The contradictions embodied in the ambiguous and bizarre figure of the trickster are believed by Carl Jung to be "a faithful reflection of an absolutely undifferentiated human consciousness, corresponding to a psyche . . . that has hardly left the animal level" (Jung, "Psychology" 200). Jung also identifies a link between the trickster and the saturnalian rites celebrated in the medieval Feast of Fools and its protean forms in picaresque fiction, Italian low comedy and Rabelaisian humour (*Archetypes* 199).

The trickster functioned very often as a catalytic satiric vehicle for the expression of socially undesirable attitudes (Wescott 345). According to the argument developed by Robert C. Elliott, in his role as an archetypal satirist, the trickster like the satirist-magician arouses ambivalent responses such as adulation, awe, reverence, dread and abomination (*Satire* 259). These diverse functions culminate in the projection of an antithetical and protean image, character being determined by heterogeneous material and functions rather than a predetermined character extending his ipseity through receptivity towards discrepant and unacceptable material.

In spite of his identity as a vehicle for satiric expression, the complexity of the trickster figure is such that synthesis rather than

anatomization of his particularities is easier (Test 43). Suggestions about the chaotic and invidious nature of this mythological figure are embodied in his very name. A violator of taboos, frondeur, masochist, epicurean, zany and fool, he refuses to be redeemed and yet is not acquiescent in his wickedness. He has been limned as "the spirit of disorder, the enemy of boundaries" (Kerenyi 185). He is also hell-raiser, anarchist, iconoclast, the inveterate enemy of tyrannical reason and the oracle of undesirable truths. Trickster tales portray the community in its most adverse state, undermined by self-gratification and a total disdain for social convention. The trickster is an unalloyed embodiment of riotousness, disorder and personal excess. Through his vanity, discontent and self-obsession the trickster-protagonist like the satirist engages in an absolute assertion of the human will against the confines of communal constraint (La Pin 327-30).

In the Wakdjunkaga cycle of the Winnebago analyzed and transcribed by Paul Radin, the trickster like the clowns of folklore, the Shakespearean fool or the picaro is physically and mentally amorphous, revealing a glimpse of fooling at its most elemental. As an archetype he is a device conceived by the human imagination to criticize through laughter

and indirection, socially undesirable behaviour. Very often explicit links can be located between the mythical tricksters and clowns and fools<sup>3</sup>.

In Greek mythology, Hermes, of protean shapes, embodying falsehood and laughter was recognized as a trickster figure. He was the subject of cult worship, his sacred object the phallus. This is a sexual association prevalent in trickster mythology. Hermes identified with cursing tablets, Loki the vituperative trickster, Elegba the linguistic wizard and the forked-tongued comicality of Coyote and Rabbit testify to the satiric and magical powers that these figures are endowed with (Test 50-51).

The trickster cannot be claimed to embody a static symbolism, but one which accommodates the possibility of differentiation of the human and divine. Different generations had to include the trickster in all their theologies and cosmogonies in spite of his elusory and insubstantial nature, "for he represents not only the undifferentiated and distant past, but likewise the undifferentiated present within every individual". The trickster survived as "everything to every man-god, animal, human being, hero, buffoon, he was before good and evil, denier, affirmer, destroyer and

creator" (Radin, *Trickster* 168-69). In addition to imaginary or specified links with mythical and supernatural powers, the ritual fool/clown and trickster shared many traits:

Excentricity [*sic*] in dress and demeanor; systematic trampling over rules and norms; full license to ignore prohibitions and break them; ambivalence; magical power; . . . individualism; asocial characteristics, insolence, buffoonery, phallicism, vulgarity, a sort of madness (Makarius 66).

The issue of the affiliation and reciprocity between myth and character in literary texts is at once a more problematic one than the one involving structure and theme. In the latter instance, the function of myth may be manifested in diverse modes and guises, as a sort of subterrestrial archetype of narrative and imagistic sequences, as an enduring metaphor of a putative order, or as a reflexive animadversion, ultimately ironic in nature, on itself. However with the question of character one confronts not as much speculative or conceptual matters as concrete themes of actual existence and plausibility. The assumption that a character bearing the

traits of and powers of a mythical personage is merely being given a verbal or linguistic reference leads to the realm of allusion (Vickery 102).

The figure of the rebel-victim or the fool incarnates the eternal dialectic between affiliation and disaffiliation in culture. Yiddish folk repertoire offers an inexhaustible variety of both individual and typological fools, such as the *tipesh*, *bulvan*, *tam*, *nar*, *shoyte*, *peysi*, *shmendrik*, *yold*, *kunilemel*, *lekish*, *lekish ber* and *shmenge* to cite only a limited assortment. However the *schlemiel* belongs to the distinctive company of the hapless and infelicitous such as the *golem*, the *lemekh*, the *schlimazl* and more specifically the *yored* (who loses his fortune) the *nisrof* (who is burned out), the *onverer* (who becomes bankrupt), the *farshpiler* (who gambles away his fortune), and finally the *loy yutslakh* or the wastrel (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 13). The degrees of pervasiveness of folly and victimization in these diverse figures preclude attempts at generalization.

Ritual fools in primitive societies have their counterparts in folklore, myth and modern literature. The function and power of these protagonists, their invisible and collective motivations inspired societies to evolve means to accommodate and manipulate their behaviour. Inasmuch as the

fool/clown was believed to be a thaumaturge, the community was justified in finding ways to channel his maligned, obscure yet indispensable powers. While modern analogues of these figures no longer evince such apotropaic proclivities, a strong experiential rapport always exists between the audience and the comedian who renders anti-establishment humour. Thus the fool appears in a various guises such as the dwarf, buffoon, clown, juggler, court jester, acrobat, wise fool, country bumpkin, fool of the Tarots, sot, mountebank, *zanni*, 'holy fool,' Merry-Andrew, knave, joke teller, merrymaker, wit, innocent, Punch, Harlequin, newspaper columnist, comic actor, night club or cabaret comedian, cartoonist, vaudeville joker, radio, film or television comic. Humour may be aroused through grotesqueness, facial or bodily distortions or nescient behaviour (Test 52-53). The Jewish schlemiel is a cognate of the fool, "a man who falls below the average human standard, but whose defects have been transformed into a source of delight" (Welsford, *The Fool* xi).

The significance of schlemiel weltanschauung consists largely in its overview of the dynamic relationship between the inwardness of the individual and his perseity in a social environment. It is reasonable to assume that the schlemiel's reification of an underdog's peripatetic and

equivocal existence constitutes a significant travesty of the heroic and romantic codes. However the schlemiel is a persona in his own right and not merely a parodistic antihero. In spite of his ancient comic affinities with the pranksters and wits of the middle ages, he is most felicitous as a convenient metaphor for European Jewry, as evident from his folk and formal realizations. In his vulnerable status of victim, and through his ineffective and abortive attempts at self-assertion and self-reservation, he materialized as the archetypal Jew. The contradictions within the Jewish psyche accounted for the ambivalent responses towards the schlemiel, as manifested in the contempt for his insubstantiality and apotheosis of his inner moral strength. To the reformers of Jewish social conditions and precepts the schlemiel's world-view appeared retrograde. Inasmuch as Jewry regarded their adversities as imposed from without, the schlemiel was used as a touchstone of sufferance, "his innocence a shield against corruption, his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing potential of might" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 4-5).

The fact that Yiddish humour is appended to a specific cultural framework and that it attitudinizes certain aspects of the community

precludes its easy transmission into other cultures. Saul Bellow points out that in Jewish fiction

laughter and trembling are so curiously intermingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two. At times the laughter seems simply to restore the equilibrium of sanity; at times the figures of the story or parable, appear to invite or encourage trembling with the secret aim of overcoming it by means of laughter (*Stories* vii).

While positing that any attempt to define black humour is doomed to failure, Jan Boyer proposes that the latter has some of its deepest roots not in the American literary tradition but in the East European one. Designating the idea of the peculiarly modern American protagonist as the *schlemiezel*, a composite of the *schlemiel* and the *schlimazl* of the shtetl tradition, Boyer points out that the *schlemiezel* emerges in his most pristine form in the works of pronouncedly Jewish-American writers such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth. The *schlemiezel* who enacts the tradition of the fool-as-protagonist, reifies the conviction of black humour that the traditional literary postures of accommodation and/or

rebellion are no longer viable. The spirit of helplessness is embedded in the belief that the protagonist is compelled to live out his life without any alternatives, by divine ordinance or by an act of cultural destiny and his own lack of perception about his true position. This feeling of powerlessness which generates the black humour is of European origin ("The Schlemiezel" 166-67). Boyer continues that the schlemiel with his oversimplified beliefs and antirational posturo is incapable of the kind of accommodation required by an upwardly mobile culture. He stands in opposition to the beau ideal of manhood upheld by his culture. In spite of the similarities in the narrative functions served by the schlimazl and the schlemiel, the former differs from the schlemiel in that he espouses and accommodates his culture, accepting its norms and compromising his own desires and dreams (168-69). The schlemiezel treads the tenuous borderline between grace and transgression in keeping with the tradition of black humour:

This is a new notion of American manhood, American man as *homo incapacitus* . . . where man is defined by his incapacities - a notion offering us in place of *the fool* and his goodness only the sense of man's loss. At one moment

rebelling, at another trying to accommodate, at one moment trying to fit the information to a closed set of beliefs, at the next moment furiously trying to rearrange these beliefs to fit the latest information, they are hybrids, one and all classic *fools*, and then again not: *schlemiezels* (175).

In Jewish culture Purim holiday plays, pantomimes and revelries with the Purim fool as a stock character were a revelry sanctioned by rabbinical authority<sup>4</sup>. Intemperate festivity was justified as a glorification of the victory of Mordecai, the Jewish statesman over Haman, a notorious anti-Semite. The Purim clowns of the fifteenth century were countertypes of German fools such as the *narr*, especially in their cynicism and broad non-verbal humour. Homogenization of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe caused Purim drollery to acquire intellectual, Talmudic and rabbinic dimensions. The exigencies of reality, especially in its anti-Semitic configurations dictated a tempering of the ideational potential of the Mordecai in line with pragmatism, so that he was modified in later plays into the hunch-backed *schlepper*, the ineffectual bungler. The modern Yiddish poet Itzik Manger in his literary Purim work *Megile Lider*, a

composite of folk leitmotifs and zany conventions supplants the Mordecai with Fastrigossa, a genuine schlemiel (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 6-8).

Schlemiel literature is contingent on an essential intertextual relationship with biblical texts.<sup>5</sup> Max Zeldner in his exegesis of the Hebrew Bible posits linguistic evidence to link the schlemiel with a character cited in Numbers (9;19) Shelumiel ben Zurishaddai ("Note on 'Schlemiel,' "115-17). Theorizing about schlemiel literature necessarily requires acknowledging the intimate relationship between the cultural and ethnic implications of this work. The area of this singularity lies between the spoken text and expressive text or between voice and vision. There are varied responses regarding the biblical Shelumiel's accreditation as the first schlemiel. Nathan Ausubel believes that there is no justification in associating Shelumiel with the schlemiel (*Treasury* 343). The tale of Zimri/Shelumiel has been regarded as one of castration anxiety involving "unbridled sexuality and rebellion against authority figures" (Rubenstein 73). While the biblical plot evades Freudian interpretation the rabbinical commentaries of the Talmud are layered with anachronistic fantasies engendered by sexual repressions and inherent guilts. The *Halakha* (law) in line with this theory is the superego, the *agada*

(homiletic exegesis) the id and the integrated reader the ego (Rubenstein 48). Herschel Revel itemizes the schlemiel as one who handles a situation in the worst possible manner or is dogged by an ill luck that is more or less due to his own ineptness ("The Schlemiel").

An allegory of the cultural predicament of Jewry is to be discovered in the stories about the fictional fools' town Chelm where *narishkeit* (folly) is a generic attribute of the citizenry. The Hasidic movement rejected the institutionalized Talmudic erudition of the literature of *responsa* (correspondence that set legal precedents) and *pilpul* (scholastic hairsplitting) utilized by medieval Jewish literature to advance inadmissible propositions (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 5). Similarly they rejected bromidic or cerebral wisdom in favour of symbolic Judaism. Chelm jests derided casuistry and cerebration which are discrete from mundane realities. The orientation of Jewish culture towards intellectualism and the latter's inadequate accommodation of the exigencies of history are satirized in these tales about a community of fools (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 10-11). The Motke Khabad stories unlike the chelm stories subsume the comic potentials of an entire shtetl Jewish populace into the differentia of a

singular protagonist, Motke Khabad, "the archetypal schlemiel and the mock-pathetic hero of countless anecdotes" (Browne 625).<sup>6</sup>

Satiric intent can be discerned in the debunking witticism of local quipsters such as Shmerl Snitkever and Yosl Marshelik (area of Old Constantine), Froim Graydinger (Poland), Motke Khabad and Shayke Fayfer (Lithuania) and the itinerant Hershel Ostropolier (Ukraine) whose feats were narrated and improvized for almost two centuries. An anti-rational interpretation of the hostile environment can be seen in these philosophic fool tales where the reader has to accept that rationalism can lead only to despondency (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 11-13).

With the poetry of Ibn Ezra (1092-1167) the schlemiel's ineffaceably self-conscious postures such as self-deprecation and sapience emerge in terms of a conflict between covenant and history. However the term 'schlemiel' was introduced to Western literature by a German writer, Adelbert von Chamisso through his work *Peter Schlemihl* (1813). The ancient trope of the schlemiel's ineptness is conflated with a romanticized adaptation of the Faustian motif of mercenary self-victimization, the peripatetic hero yielding to identification with the legendary Wandering

Jew. The obvious disaffiliations of this existentially isolate protagonist from the Yiddish schlemiel who was firmly entrenched in the cultural context of ghetto Jewry precluded any facile reading of the text as an apologue of schlemielhood. The schlemiel was transformed into a metaphor for the artistic quest itself in *Hebrew Melodies* composed by the German poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). The essence of the character is dissipated for Heine's artistic creed collides and to some degree synthesizes with his pragmatic and anti-schlemiel solutions to social inequities. This provides a texture of social documentation which is manifested in a realistic aesthetic (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 6-7).

The literary schlemiel originates within the context of Yiddish literature with the tale of Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav entitled "A Story about a Clever Man and a Simple Man" (Simhah 71-94). The hitherto invulnerable status of Talmudic scholasticism with its speculative intelligence and empirical investigation, regarded as the highest *mitsvoth* (commandment), as much as European rationalism are disputed in the framework of Hasidic rebellion against cerebration, in this parabolic tale (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 17-18).

The concept of a unifying element in modern times centres around the phenomenon of consanguinity. Contrariwise to modern ethnological points of view, the semitic bond was forged upon the idea of divine election and chosenness braced by the Jewish theological concept of cause and effect. The Destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the adherence to a denationalized religion long after the Babylonian Exile and through the Diaspora when sustaining structures had collapsed, served as touchstones of misfortune for the Jewry ("Judaism"). The distinct prototypes of Jewish humour such as the "*schlemihls* and *schlimazls* sprang into being with the first dramatic economic discriminations against Jews by the Byzantine emperors beginning with Justinian (530-56 C.E.)" (Ausubel 344).

Schlemielhood both in its folk and literary configurations cathartically recasts the entire experience of suffering in playful, ironic and allusive terms. Comic ambiguity becomes a version of the primal language through its positing of survival as a balancing act, and its eschewal of all facile recourses to patterned response. According to Sigmund Freud:

The occurrence of self criticism as a determinant may explain how it is that a number of the most apt jokes . . . have grown

up in the soil of the Jewish popular life. They are stories created by Jews and directed against Jewish characteristics . . . I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character (*Jokes* 111).

Empirical inquiry into Jewish experience of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries circumvented faith and optimism as revealed even in the Yiddish fiction of the secularists such as Y.L. Peretz and Chaim Nachman. The former's famous story "Bontshe Shvayg" far from being a chronicle of sainthood is in fact "a socialist's exposure of the grotesquerie of suffering silence." When Mendele Mocher Sforim published *The Little Man* (1864) he conceived of his protagonist as a parasitizing dependent. The schlemiel is a little man realized in terms of consonance and his inconsequentiality if any is only by sociological and not moral norms. However the impulse of schlemiel literature being to subvert all sane and normal inferences the insignificance of the schlemiel paradoxically enthuses the reader with its magnitude (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 122-24).

In any society where a premium is placed on public opinion ridicule functions as a powerful interdiction against deviant behaviour. These ratifications acquire the status of a fixture through diverse ways. The ambiguous sway of fools and clowns in many societies may originate in part from such a social composite. As Clement Greenberg points out, the institutionalized faith sanctified traditional religious movements like exile, covenant and transcendence. However the traumatic and intractable truths of Jewish experience called for a comic strain that served as an escape mechanism for menacing stresses (qtd. in Howe and Greenberg, *Yiddish Stories* 26).

The schlemiel is a hero not of intellect but of emotion and yet he makes an ingenuous effort to fabricate a texture of empirical truth out of his experiential relationship with the world. As a victim-hero he reifies the concept "of man as a transient compromise in the universe" who seeks identity and freedom "under the aspects of violence or alienation" (Hassan 28-29). The schlemiel offers a diagnostically modern view of the Jew as archetype, and whether atheist, believer, agnostic or freethinker, he represents Jewry at large. At times the schlemiel may appear to be symbolically Jewish. At others he emerges as the suprarreligious man, a

figure who appears to be post-Enlightenment or are at least post-traditional and who is aporetic about the efficacy of religious faith. The schlemiel's moral posture represents a mode of response to existence which accepts the validity of incompatible means of apprehension. It is the quest for self-transcendence that underlies the struggle of the schlemiel who suffers and understands that accommodation of the contradictions of existence can only be achieved in terms of moral commitment. The fictions of the schlemiel represent self-discovery as moral epiphany in the knowledge that the limitations of a necessarily egocentric existence are to be transcended in order to discover synonymity in personal destiny and the community's historical circumstance.

# Recursive Layers and Historic Contexts: The Yiddish Moorings of Schlemiel Ideology

Lasitha B.V “Schlemiel as paradigm: The hero in selected fiction of Isaac Bashevis singer” Thesis. Department of English , University of Calicut, 2000

## Chapter II

### Recursive Layers and Historic Contexts: The Yiddish Moorings of Schlemiel Ideology

The conflation of tradition and cultural memory which is a persistent figurative praxis in the texts of Isaac Bashevis Singer affirms the author's symbiotic relationship with the multiple presences within Yiddish historiography. In his survey of the relationship between tradition and the individual talent T.S.Eliot makes the paradoxical assertion that contrary to all presumptions arising from conventional notions concerning unicity the most conspicuous and individualized parts of the work of the mature artist are those in which the presence of his literary ancestors and a historical sense of his past which conjoin eternity and temporality are most dynamically asserted. In Eliot's words: "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" to the "mind of Europe," defined as "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer." This great tradition is composed of a timeless, simultaneous order, whose "existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves." Romantic self-expression is eschewed in the progression of the artist who is no

longer personality but a neutral catalytic medium that integrates emotions and experience ("Talent" 14).

Harold Bloom posits that Eliot's idea of tradition as a simultaneous order through which one realizes freedom by virtue of sacramental communion and self-abnegation is a mere fiction. According to Bloom this simultaneity is a "noble idealization, and as a lie against time will go the way of every noble idealization." Bloomian tradition is predicated upon an agony of conflict and dialectical struggle. Thus "creative emulation of literary tradition leads to images of inversion, incest, sado-masochistic parody . . . ." Bloom continues that the Latin *traditio* which is etymologically a handing over, surrender, or betrayal in fact derives from the Hebraic *Mishnah*, or bequeathing of oral precedents (*Map* 30-32). Yiddish tradition operates as a conscious influencing agency in Isaac Bashevis Singer's works while his relationship with his precursors, the classicists of the nineteenth century Yiddish literature rests in the impersonal field of crossing texts. Literary tradition can be said to commence when a new author is coinstantaneously apprehensive about not merely "his own struggle against the forms and presence of a precursor,

but is compelled also to a sense of the Precursor's place in regard to what came before *him*" (Bloom, *Map* 32).

The insistence of Yiddish writers on making the worlds of the past and the present exist simultaneously in the text creates a literary history that can be properly analyzed only within the framework of Jewish cultural ethos of the nineteenth century. The cultural history that links Singer with his literary ancestors calls for an acknowledgment of the East European sources of that history. An interpretation of the collective structures of repetition, signification and cultural figuration, troping, formal textures, literary style and substance of Singer's work reveals its intertextual relationship with earlier Yiddish texts.

Inasmuch as the postmodernist tenor in literature is signaled by vehement self-reflexivity Singer's fiction is simultaneously metafictional and historical in its reprise of the texts and contexts of the past (Hutcheon 3). Jewish tradition is an excogitation about exile, catastrophe, lamentation, and ceaseless exegesis of the Sacred Texts. Religion alone gave Jewry the faith to endure the exigencies of history. In tracing the etymology of the word *meaning*, Bloom discovers that it "goes back to a root that signifies 'opinion' or 'intention,' and is closely related to the

word meaning." He concludes that "a poem's meaning is a poem's complaint . . ." ("Breaking" 1).

The intimate relationship between the cultural and ethnic components of nineteenth century Jewish culture can be seen in the two streams through which it flowed, the *Haskalah* (awakening or rebirth) and Western Jewish Enlightenment (Dimont 352). The *Haskalah*, a way of life identified with Jewish values and humanistic philosophies and literature was fostered by the unemancipated Jews of the shtetls<sup>7</sup> of Eastern Europe and acted as their spiritual mainstay during the Diaspora.<sup>8</sup> Their constantly mediative presence between spiritual intimacy and the shared martyrdom inherent in their sense of destiny synthesized them into a cohesive community without an acknowledged nationhood or sense of history, humanistic but deprived and endangered. Western Jewish Enlightenment gradually merged with Eastern Humanism, making the *Haskalah* a byword for the cultural nationalism of the middle classes. The movement pervaded East European Jewry, creating in Hebrew and Yiddish a new literature, fostering in Jewish religion, Jewish Existentialism and in politics, Zionism (Dimont 352). This renewal and fusion took origin from an encounter between the Talmudists who were the pioneers of the

early *Haskalah* and the Hasidists who advocated primitivism as a mode of salvation. The encounter between the intellectual, secular values championed by the *Maskilim* (Enlighteners) of the *Haskalah* and the emotional, mystical experience espoused by the Hasidists aroused intellectual activity on both sides. *Maskilim* writers such as Israel Aksenfeld (1787-1866) and Isaac Meir Doel (1813-1893) created a literature of social criticism, humaneness, Jewish folklore, legend and a liberal incorporation of the folk tales popularized by the *Tzadiks* of Hasidism (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 20).

Hasidism, a popular Jewish Revivalistic-Pietistic movement patronized by the plebeian Jews of Eastern Europe sought literary articulation through tales and anecdotes affirming the movement's allegiance towards folk and orate tradition. The first collection of Hasidic tales, *Shivhei-ha Besht (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov 1814)* consisted of anecdotes about the founder of the movement. In the first few decades of the movement Elimelekh of Lyzhansk and Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev discussed psychological, religious and historical issues in their stories within the framework of religion and the stark realities of the environment (Eliach xx). In 1815, *Seyfer Sippuri Maasiyyot*, a collection of thirteen

allegorical stories by Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav was published posthumously (Eliach xvi).

These tales are restorative acts because they recall the orate voice of the schlemiel to the literary structure. Isaac Bashevis Singer's repetition of the motifs in these tales as in many schlemiel tales is a revision, a signification accomplished by indirection. The religious and psychological dangers of European rationalism, empirical enquiry and abstract reasoning form the identifiable message of Nachman's tales (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 20-21). These densely textured ideas are concretized in Singer's tales through patterns of recursion. As experiments in the integration of legend with modern fiction, Singer's fiction assimilates and adapts elements of structures as well as the motifs and perspectives of Hasidic folklore, his narratives being more synthetic than their paradigms. Inasmuch as tradition layers the inner forms of Yiddish literature its use by the nineteenth century classicists implicates an intrinsic preservationist, organic vision on their part. The problematic status of being "engaged" or chosen, involving the inseparable link between a vision of God and a vision of peoplehood denied Yiddish writers of all periods the security of a dignified aesthetic neutrality. This historical covenant with Jewry is

evident in Yiddish poetry where figurative masks and tropes are intentionally inverted in the quarrel with God (*Krign Zich nutgot*). This theme is conveyed in the famous poem of Rabbi Levi Yitzkhok of Berditchev, in which the poet in a tone of reproach, intimacy and love arraigns and indicts God for the afflictions visited upon Jewry (Howe and Greenberg, *Poetry* 15-16).

Sholom Aleichem established a genealogy of modern Yiddish letters when he designated Mendele Mocher Sforim as the *Zeyde* or grandfather, a radical literary precursor. Though they were contemporaries the title with its implied kinship was acceded to by both Mendele and the public (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 41). Mendele's satires *The Little Man* (1863), *The Meat Tax* (1869), *The Dobbie* (1873) and *Fishke the Lame* (1868-1888) depict the whole of Jewry as the world's scapegoat/schlemiel. This is partly due to his disillusionment in the *Haskalah*. The *Haskalah* ideals of an ethical progressive community which relied on greater interaction with the European environment, educational and economic advancement were subverted by the irrational and unpredictable forces of anti-Semitism. The social alternative that remained, the status quo of the non-Jewish Russian bourgeoisie necessarily stipulated a rejection of Jewish tradition. These

social conditions can be traced in the evolution of Mendele's work from subjectivist renderings of the victimization of East European Jewry to assertions of the schlemiels' incredible resilience in the midst of a disintegrating world. Rendered in the mock Kheder style, the Yiddish equivalent of the mock epic, *The Travels of Benjamin III* traces the shift of the author's perception through the activation of the myth of Don Quixote which is contextually shifted and internalized to the universe represented by the text. The basic situation becomes a reification of parody in that the schlemiel Benjamin III and his companion Senderl the Housewife, are represented as dangerously deluded romantics, radically ambiguous satiric paradigms in an antithetical idealized world, much like Don Quixote of La Mancha who was himself a burlesque of the romantic code (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 29-34). The heroic potential of the schlemiel is represented through his strategies of survival even in the midst of all the *tsoris* (trouble) which surrounds him. Since Mendele's affinities with the folkmentsch had always been well-defined his movement from frontal attacks on social inequities and the *Kahal* (ghetto officials) towards folk humour can be identified as a narrative strategy to bring his work in line with the new *takhlis* (purpose) of Yiddish fiction (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 22).

In *Fishke the lame* Mendele's narrow concerns of social satire are replaced by a pervasive comic spirit. The schlemiel protagonist's apparently phlegmatic passivity and relinquishment of all aspirations permits him to maintain a precarious *modus vivendi*, a substantive if meagre victory. The frame story recounts the life of Mendele the Book Peddler who is a projection of the author. It envelops the inner tale of Fishke, the steam-bath attendant turned lover. The author commits a part of his own personality to his fiction in the form of the itinerant Book Peddler who recounts his impressions as he passes through the mythical shtetlach of Kabtzansk, Glupsk and Tuneyadevke (Greenspan 10). The stock types of Yiddish humour are assembled in this work, the comic possibilities engendered by the distortions of reality that afflict these figures, such as the *nudnik* (simpleton) and the *schnorrer*<sup>9</sup> whom Fishke is forced to marry. A true schlemiel, Fishke is the possessor of the archetypal "old, familiar Jewish beggar basket" which the author mentions in the novel's dedication (qtd. in Greenspan 11).

The very nature of the ideological situation, the lack of a frame of reference between the world of Jewish intelligentsia and the world of the Yiddish language and masses, "an abstract, collective, monolithic entity,"

precluded any conscientious artistic effort on the part of Yiddish classicists. The writer, in order to achieve self-definition in the midst of these absolute antitheses more often than not had to adopt the simulated voice of "the Jew," an ironic persona who had to appear plausible even when articulating ideas alien to him (Miron 77-78). The disclosure of the meaning of literary texts, meaning being synchronous with authorial intention, is a major preoccupation of modern critical exegesis. The ultimate object becomes the "revelation of the true character or self of the author . . . ." Inasmuch as language is an ineffectual yet cardinal vehicle for thought, truth forms only a minutae of the "universal design . . . which presupposes the existence of a primary and originary Intention" (Lang 2).

The work of many Yiddish writers is replete with "inner dialogues" where dual selves engage dialectically. Linguistic exigencies necessitated the employment of Yiddish, a language of public discourse as a dramatic language. The aesthetic employment of Yiddish by writers such as X.Y. Linetzki, Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem and Y.L. Peretz is a hazardous balance between the historical proclivity of the language towards the unique Jewish character and the authors' own intellectual bent towards European concepts and ideologies (Miron 79-83).

The revelation of authorial intent is predicated on regarding "irony primarily as a rhetorical device, specifically as a *trope* which consists of saying the opposite of, or something other than, what one really means" (Lang 37). Mastery of the techniques of self-effacement, self-alienation and histrionic disguise as also an awareness of the limitations of camouflage are indispensable elements of the aesthetics of Yiddish classicists. Dan Miron suggests that the "aesthetics of ugliness" in which Yiddish as a language is rooted caused many Yiddish artists to regard themselves and be regarded as self-deprecating but talented comedians, while the art of writing became a theatrical gesture (*Traveler* 80). Linetzki projected himself as a *beyzer marshelik* (a sharp-tongued wedding jester), a wandering minstrel, a beggar with a lyre. The schlemiel Eli Kotsin Hatskhakueli, the comic persona of his works, bears affinity with the schlemiel figure in Mendele's works. Thus Levinzon, a *maskil* writer while underlining the inadequacies of Yiddish as a language suitable only for comic mimesis demarcated spheres such as comedy and dramatized speech unconsciously defining areas where it could achieve excellence. The suggestion that the mimetic Yiddish writer had to camouflage his private personality and engage in literary ventriloquism had tremendous

liberating influences in a literature that was until then solely regarded for its efficacy in communication (Miron 80-84). While the reader might rightly expect "obscenity, muteness, syntactic failure, neologism, and autistic repetition" as a validation of historical exigencies, in their place appears a language of antinomies and paradoxes countenanced within a normative metaphysical framework which constitutes the essence of Yiddish literature (Roskies 163).

Sholom Rabinovitz (1859-1916) who wrote under the pseudonym of Sholom Aleichem founded in 1888 a seminal Yiddish literary annual, *The Popular Jewish Library* of great revisionary zeal. The venture attracted the best Yiddish writers such as Mendele, Peretz, Linetzky, Frischman, Dineson, Gottlober, Zunser and Y.L. Gordon. Sholom Aleichem's efforts removed from Yiddish the despised opprobrium of *zhargon*.<sup>10</sup> He endowed it with cultural patterns embracing text, tradition, predecessors, genres, an awareness of historical evolution and scrupulous critical aims, "a conscious patrimony" unperceived till then. This writer manipulated critical inquiry to focus on a textual tradition that unequivocally addressed literary aesthetics, sources, significance, issue of precedence and continuity, and the histories within the textual language. By invoking

Gogol and Turgenev as models and designating Mendele as antecessor Aleichem created a hypocorism that involved a radical process of historical mythmaking whereby a distinguished intellectual lineage was forged ( Ozick 175-76). In Aleichem's endings to his stories, his evolution of the concept of the schlemiel, his narrative art and the formal and linguistic textures of his work, the influence of his artistic progenitor, Mendele can be discerned. The latter's finest works, also embedded in oral referentiality are inconclusive in their endings. However unlike his precursor, Aleichem actively subverts all preconceived notions regarding denouement or solution, avoiding the verdict or finality of an unhappy fate (Wisse, *Aleichem* xxiv - xxv).

Aleichem's postulation and dissemination of the concept of "zhargonishe literatur" (vernacular literature) with a history and qualitative authorial hierarchy were predicated upon the apriorism that the invention of the fiction of a Yiddish literary tradition was necessary to fill the lacunae of normative models (D.N. Miller 2). Cynthia Ozick argues that Yiddish is a *sine qua non* for the existence of Aleichem as a writer. She elucidates that he was confronted with the strange phenomenon of internal bilingualism, the existence of both Hebrew and Yiddish, a cultural

redundancy that prevailed nowhere else in Europe. The revolutionary act of Aleichem's opting for Yiddish as his literary vehicle was in fact a recursion to the principles of the Hasidic movement articulated in its "romantic, Populist, anti-Establishment" ethos augmented by an opposition to rational intellectual elitism. Aleichem's radically ironic tactics in Yiddish literature were guided by two divergent sources: Hasidism's impulses towards the folk tradition and the Haskalah's emphasis on high literary seriousness and the "strategies of the text" (*Memory* 81-82). His ambivalent relation to Zionism was typified by the belief that Zionism (*tsionism*) was in fact cynicism (*tsinism*) (*Wisse, Schlemiel* 42). However Aleichem's texts are contingent on his readers' response to the interplay of diverse European languages articulated "in an orchestrated cacophony of voices" (*Roskies* 162). The traumatic historical realities of the tsarist pogroms of 1881-82 are confronted in Aleichem's works by the resilience of language which is used as a protective shield. The textures of language question the supremacy of either Yiddish or Hebrew as exclusive agents of truth (*Roskies* 163-65).

Alfred Kazin points out that the only possessions that Aleichem's schlemiels can lay claim to are the Holy Word, Hebrew, and the word of

mundane existence, Yiddish. They are "little" people not in the sense that they are the casualties of everyday actuality, but in the sense that they are defenceless, dispossessed and exiled in their experiential encounter with the outer world. In their own world, these poor schlemiels who possess Yiddish, the language of exile and the Diaspora, identify it with their attenuated situation, with their exile and isolation. They hypostatize in it a historical moment, the exigencies of the present rather than the world of eternity incarnated in Hebrew. "Yiddish is the poor Jew's everyday clothes rather than his Sabbath garment, Hebrew" (*Contemporaries* 274-75).

According to David G. Roskies:

Taking Hebrew in all its nineteenth-century polyphony (its biblical, rabbinic, medieval, and maskilic layers) as the mythic vehicle and Yiddish as the concurrent mythic commentary, Sholom Aleichem shows that the daily life of Eastern European Jews stood as commentary on biblical life . . . . Yiddish in the works of Sholom Aleichem does not allude to the original Hebrew but informs it. Moreover, as Hebrew lost its prophetic or redemptive character (except for the orthodox and the Zionists), Yiddish too was in

danger of losing its mythic base; in response to this secularization process, Sholom Aleichem attempts through Yiddish to create a separate myth, a perfect linguistic medium that would shield the community from all the forces of history (*Apocalypse* 164).

Like Mendele, Aleichem identified writing as a histrionic act and his art with the romantic image of the circus-clown whose set expression of hilarity conceals his bruised self (Miron 85). Aleichem's premise was that Yiddish is primarily a vehicle for comic caricature, with potential for revealing a sub-verbal culture. This came into conflict with the identity of the language as an exclusively oral, conversational language of communal discourse deriving its social existence from its usage by an abstract collectivity of people. The language derives its comic possibilities if any, not from representing a separate consciousness but by digression from normative patterns. It follows that in literature, Yiddish must be treated as a given reality rather than as a medium of consciousness within the writer. More than any other language, literary articulation in Yiddish is an act of departure from the self towards an external audience (Miron 68-70).

Yiddish like any language has historical and cultural idiosyncrasies that are not exclusive or esoteric.

The *Haskalah* having been discredited by the 1880s the newly enlightened Jews lacked a cultural or philosophical mainstay. This was compounded by pogroms, hostile edicts, emigration, severe dislocation and insecurity. Aleichem believed that a critique of Jewish life had to be replaced by an idealization of its commendable aspects through the therapeutic employment of humour. The Jews of Aleichem's works are ineffectual and luckless schlemiels who achieve psychological and spiritual victory even in defeat. The laughter in these works is more than a sensitive resistance to the annihilative disappointments and degradations of the exile. Maurice Samuel points out that the laughter in these works is dependent upon

the application of a fantastic technique . . . developed over the ages . . . of avoidance and sublimation: also a technique of theoretical reversal. They had found the trick of converting disaster into a verbal triumph, applying a sort of Talmudic ingenuity of interpretation to events they could not handle in their reality. They turned the tables on their

adversaries dialectically, and though their physical disadvantages were not diminished thereby, nor the external situation changed one whit, they emerged with a feeling of victory ("Tribune" 54).

Aleichem provided the groundwork for his literary successors, invoking an ambience, a situation and monologic voice originating from a deep sense of intimacy with God and the reader as also from "verbal ingenuity, comedy, theatricality . . . the sweep of aria" (Ozick 186). He translated the grim facts of the intransigence of contemporary history into the resilience of fable, through the creation of three dominating schlemiel-narrators, Tevye, Motl and Menahem Mendl. Each member of this triumvirate articulated a distinct kind of synthetic language to evade the impingements of history. Motl, the son of Peyse the Cantor is the epitome of adaptability, freedom and optimism, whose main linguistic feature is the literalism of the child (Oskies 176). He is an archetype of sadly abbreviated Jewish childhood.

Dan Miron describes the homiletic-sentimental streak in Yiddish fiction as "definitely antiartistic, inimical to irony, to conscious structural artistry, to the idea of literary technique, to stylistic perfection, and

favorable to moralistic sermonizing, to unbridled emotionalism, and to stylistic sloppiness" (*Traveler* 84-85). Tevye the schlemiel is the antithesis of this catalogue for he achieves a just poise between all the extremes of language, whether pure and otherworldly or corrupt and low. His ironic language of faith blends biblical and liturgical sources with the language of mundane reality. The language of tradition, grounded in the Torah, folk wisdom and pragmatism finds its full realization in Tevye. As Cynthia Ozick posits:

These virtuoso dartings of language-the prestidigitator's flash from biblical eloquence to its mundane applicability-have a cavorting brilliance reminiscent of . . . Harold Bloom's thesis of 'misprision,' whereby an influential resource is usurped for purposeful 'misinterpretation,' engendering new life in a new text (*Memory* 189).

Tevye's language is also the ultimate recourse and reference of the Jewish people in their crisis, other Jewish dialects being only a cryptic derivation of it (Oskies 177). The hero of *Tevye the Dairyman*, a lighthearted schlemiel in search of a bare pittance traverses the roads between Kasrilevke and Yehupitz, equivalents of Gotham and Chelm. In this as in

all of his fiction, Aleichem like other Yiddish classicists manipulated the resources of folklore for articulating a complex and individual view of life. Tevye emerges from the Jewish folk experience of Eastern Europe. "A shtetl Everyman, he is also a particularized Jew for in the author's perspective there is only a fine balance between collectivity and the individual, between Jewish tradition and personal sensibility. The tragicomic spirit of the Diaspora is embodied in Tevye's statements: "With God's help I starved to death . . ." (*Tevye Stories* 127). The author himself becomes a culture hero for he epitomizes the cultural mediation of the tremors of history by East European Jews, "at a high point of consciousness . . . before dissolution . . ." (Howe, *Aleichem* xii). The stylistic contrivance of a self-conscious verbal artist, Tevye's manner originates from the author's intellect while his matter is purely folk. His sufferings are both political and individual, as experienced by all Jews in the Russian pale of settlement, depicted especially in the Railroad stories.

In most of Aleichem's stories he posits the narrative figure of a clever Jew, a worldly but pious persona, complex, quizzical and problematic who straddles both old and new worlds. This persona materializes in many stories such as "A Yom Kippur Scandal,"

"Eternal Life," "Dreyfus in Kasrilevke," "The Haunted Tailor," and "Station Baranovitch." In 1902 Sholom Aleichem wrote "Dreyfus in Kasrilevke," an account of the second trial from the perspective of a Ukrainian shtetl.<sup>11</sup> Kasrilevke, the town of jolly paupers is also the author's "collective hero" (Howe, *Aleichem* xxvi). Unlike Mendele who considers Jewish far-sightedness as folly Aleichem equates it with faith. Mendele aimed his satire at his fictional towns believing that tough confrontation with reality would lead to emancipation. Aleichem on the other hand "humoured" his fictional town believing that reality was the ultimate enemy to be conquered. The schlemiels of Kasrilevke live by the prophetic law, whereby the "ought" is more real than the "is," so that their truth though not validated by immediate evidence is invulnerable. The reader's pragmatism and belief in earthly judgements are controverted by the shtetl's irrational faith in divine justice (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 46). Aleichem's treatment of his schlemiels is ironic for the author interests his readers in the discrepancy between actual and ideal in the primary statement of scepticism and the counterstatement of faith. The story contains a double irony; the ideal pits itself against reality but is finally

authenticated by that same reality. Dreyfus's acquittal in the human courts of law validates the schlemiels' faith in divine providence.

*Menahem Mendl*, an epistolary novel written between 1892 and 1913, consists of a contrapuntal exchange of letters between Menahem Mendl, the supreme economic loser and errant schlemiel and Sheyne Sheyndl his steady wife of Kasrilevke. This is Aleichem's most exhaustive study of the schlemiel. The forces of faith and scepticism are expanded in these antithetical characters. The author's own perspectives, based on his personal experience of loss of fortune in the Kiev stock exchange and subsequent hustling for bread which became a typical Jewish experience merge with the schlemiel's point of view. The familial pattern of subjugation and humiliation is a miniature of the sociopolitical reality, of Menahem Mendl's actual confinement in the Pale of Settlement. His vulnerability makes him susceptible to very subtle social pressures. Like all heroes of Aleichem Menahem Mendel never confuses his ethos with that of the environment, remaining within a universe of meaning even when confronted by horror (*Wisse Schlemiel* 49-53). That writers visualize themselves and are apprehended as "elegists of an entire culture" etching their imprint in the history of Israel's martyrdom is evident from the fact

that Sholom Aleichem's characters re-emerge as literary artifacts of culture in a post-Holocaust poem entitled "A Letter from Menahem Mendel" by the Hebrew poet Natan Alterman. There is a conflation of the macabre fates of the reader, the narrator and the characters, reflecting a collective disquietude about issues of historical and moral continuity (Ezrahi 112). Through the manipulative device of monologue of which the epistolary form is but a variation, the schlemiel reinterprets events and shapes them to his vision (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 54). I.L. Trunk believes that Menahem Mendel is pure instinct for unlike Tevye he experiences neither ironic resignation nor ironic faith. He "expresses the elemental life instinct which does not see its tragic perspectives" (qtd. in Wisse, *Schlemiel* 56).

Mendele and Sholem Aleichem committed their names and reputations to the cause of Yiddish literature even under the strain of considerable exigencies and ambivalences. They discovered and created in Yiddish a rich resonance "or a kind of consciousness in verbal form, call it historical paranoia or call it truly mystical," which explains the whole of "creation in terms of a people's deepest experience and intuition" (Rosenfeld 77). Orthodox, secular, conservative and radical Jews were

attuned to Sholom Aleichem's fiction because of the aria of a common *shprakh* or a binding language (Howe, *Aleichem* xiii).

Sholom Aleichem came at a major turning point in the history of East European Jews, between the inflexible supremacy of scriptural authority and the emergence of modern ideologies, between the past of traditional Judaism and the future of Jewish politics, between a totally integrated culture and a culture poised for a leap into disintegration and chaos (Howe, *World* 211). Unlike his fellow classicists of the Yiddish triumvirate, Mendele and Peretz, Aleichem through his works created stability even when he perceived the fissures developing in the "golden chain" of Jewish tradition. The former's works evince a strong dialectic tendency displaying the pressure of their divided existence and social ambiguity as writer and persona. Aleichem's moral poise is evident even when he delineates "the psychic costs of traditional Jewish life . . . in denial, repression, narrowness" (Howe, *Aleichem* xiv-xvii). Unlike the ordinary novel constructed on a single architectonic structure evolving from introduction to the apex of conclusion, Aleichem's works are inconclusive, a plotless trajectory. The author's admiration for the extraordinary resilience and vitality of the Jewish people is transmuted into

the "recuperative *shape*" of his works (Wisse, *Aleichem* xxvi-xxvii). The polyphonic nature of these texts is essential not only to their internal figurations, but is definitive of the tradition that identifies them.

As the most time-worn structure of troping and the most enduring textual (con)figuration, intertextuality has an ambiguous identity as both established idea and a post-structural critical concept. As "language answering language" it is an invariable linguistic actuality, an illustration of language's continuing relationship with itself, its postulated objects and network of references. However identifying and defining this concept as a dimension of writing leaves questions such as individuality, reference and reflexivity unanswered. On the other hand intertextuality connotes an *anxiety* and uncertainty with relation to the identity of author, reader or text, the affiliations of present culture with the past, and the provinces of writing within the structures of history and politics (O' Donnell and Davis xiii). As a dimension of writing, intertextuality even in relation to empirical Jewish experience must be confined to its own embodiments particularized within a series of histories, namely literary, cultural, authorial and intratextual.

In 1888, Sholom Aleichem preparing the first Folksbibliyotek for publication, received from Yitskok Leibush Peretz, then known only as a Hebrew poet, a bundle of Yiddish poems. This was accompanied by a letter which began Peretz's campaign for the modernizing of Yiddish literature. Peretz asserted here the concept of a literature which is a synthesis of abstract ideas of a maskilic nature and realistic social milieu, of ideational content and a simulation of external reality. He formulated a historical consciousness by juxtaposing this with the idea of an "esemplastic literature" which is inclusive of all realms, internal and external, which interpenetrate each other and is subordinated to the writer's urge for self-expression. These distinctions made by Peretz can also be categorized as "classic" or "mimetic" in opposition to "romantic" and "expressionistic" (Miron 71-72). Peretz's own fiction delved into Jewish folklore of all ages and effected a happy union of Realism and Romanticism.

Secular dominance over Yiddish literature did not preclude the conflict between rationalism and faith which became a popular theme, especially when confronted by the empirical data of Jewish experience of this time. Peretz protested against a dumb trust in passivity, and his

socialist exposure of the grotesquerie of the schlemiel's suffering silence is embodied in "Bontshe Shvayg" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 21-22). Bontshe is evocative of the experiences and aspirations of the Yiddish *folkmentsch*, a register of their mute acquiescence even in the midst of misery and persecution. While Sholom Aleichem's ironic humour was focused on the transgressions of this world, Peretz's cautionary tale "endorses versions of holiness beyond even those sponsored by the official religion" (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 58). The angels of the other world are remorseful for the "unending meekness they have created on earth" ("Bontsha the Silent" 136-37). To many of the Yiddish writers of the next generation such as Sholem Asch and Joseph Opatushu, the schlemiel's quiescence, altruism and vulnerable adhesion to faith were untenable moral responses, and a dialectical shift of faith, a conviction shared by the Zionists who propounded activism and heroism as antidotes to the inequities endured by Jews (Greenspan 21). However in defiance of all rigorous sentences and fundamental taboos of social compact, the schlemiel continued as a resilient figure in Yiddish fiction up to Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Peretz dissociated himself from the literary ideology of nineteenth century Yiddish writers on many grounds. He believed that their credo circumscribed the thematic content of Yiddish literature limiting it to rational causality and abstractions, evading the realms of the individual consciousness, imaginative and social reality, fantasy, legend and dreams. Peretz accused Aleichem and other contemporaries of "indifference to the legitimate poetic experience and expression" (Miron 72-73). The breakdown of coherent traditions and social norms brought about by immigration from Eastern Europe to America engendered a disjunctivity in Jewish and Gentile perceptions about Yiddish literature. Accommodation and cultural assimilation within American society induced an "amnesia of the central motifs and texts of Yiddish civilization." The breakthrough to psychic freedom on the part of Jewish American writers did not preclude a certain text orientation while the conscious gestures of rejection of traditional Judaism and the past allowed only vestigial understanding of Jewish conceptual life (Ozick 184). The implications of the pressures of American society enter Jewish American literature through oblique modes so that the content of the works themselves is the literary expression of the acculturation process, the fashioning of the texture of social life in the

context of the particular historic situation of mass immigration and its aftermath (Harap xi).

Forty five years after Sholom Aleichem's conscious mythmaking of a Yiddish tradition, the avante-gardists were proclaiming autoemanicipation from a tradition identified as regressive and onerous. Singer's self-conscious deviation from this agenda of creation *ex nihilo* was sustained by his conviction that literary tradition and the convenances generated by it were inestimable as points of comparison against his corpus of texts which subvert that tradition (D.N. Miller 2). In the 1950s a conscious effort to restore the peculiar ambience of Yiddish culture was made through the pioneering efforts of translators and editors, which exposed the particularities of shtetl existence, the Diaspora and the historic consciousness embedded in Yiddish literature. These literary activities fostered a cultural context for writers such as Singer who were discovered to be fully credentialed in the illustrious tradition of Yiddish literature (Ozick 184-86). Singer's literary career began in the heyday of Yiddish literature in the 1920s at its unquestionable geographic centre, Warsaw. With World War I the classical period of Yiddish literature came to a putative end, Peretz, Aleichem and Mendele having died in rapid

succession between 1915 and 1917. Singer's reading included most major writers of the Classical and post-Classical generations such as X.Y. Linetzki, Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem, Y.L. Peretz, David Frishman, H.D.Nomberg, Avrom Reyzen, Dovid Bergelson, Pinkhes Kaganovitsh and others (D.N. Miller 1). In fact Singer's fiction can be described as a mediation between the polarities of estrangement and return. New levels of meaning are offered by Singer's conscious integration of the tropes of Yiddish and Classical rabbinic literature such as the Midrash.

Inasmuch as "texts echo, interact, and interpenetrate" the rabbinic world is one dominated by the phenomenon of intertextuality. Rigorous distinctions of temporality, spatiality and physicality as well as breaks in continuity between these elements are overcome by the unity of the text. Withal, the cohesiveness of the text was the binding force of the Jewry during the adversities of the Diaspora (Handelman 47). The relationship between texts has a patriarchal history in Judaism: "Whenever the Bible was not explicit or specific, the early interpreters of the postbiblical world . . . sought to provide new insights as to what might be meant in a given text . . . . The generic term for this exegesis or interpenetration is *Midrash* . . ." (Zucker 7).

The shared texts that have had significance for Yiddish writers certainly include those that specify the emphases of tropes within the Yiddish tradition. Such accents are to be discerned in Singer's movement between the extremes of the covenant and experiential reality, faith and temporality, futurism and history, tradition and modernism. Shared modes of figuration result only when writers peruse each other's texts and identify tropes to be revised in their own texts. This is a process of grounding that has served to create formal lines of continuity between the texts that together comprise the shared text of Jewishness.

When the interpretable spaces of the Yiddish text are culturally specified a tangential accomplishment of such specification and articulation is the revelation of the milieu of the shtetl as a criterion of subjectivity and objectivity on the part of Yiddish writers. The shtetl of the classicists as well as that of Singer yields to the reader's perception as a source of ethnographic data. However the former with its montage-like effects in representation and its specific cultural matrix appears as an exploration of the relationship between narrative and community. By contrast, the shtetl in Singer's fiction functions only as inadvertent context and metaphor for the apocalyptic and metaphysical combat between good

and evil, which precludes all recourse to rationalism. The physical and cultural mis-en-scène functions as a reflective strategem through which the pervasive conflict becomes palpable in temporal and spatial dimensions. Far from being a cohesive, social community as in the work of the classicists, "Singer's shtetl is the *locus in nuce* of the *anomie* which he sees as endemic to the condition of the world" (Katz 20).

As Singer himself explicates, the Jewish shtetl of Poland experienced the Enlightenment much later and more precipitately than did similar communities in Russia and Lithuania which were the domiciles of many Jewish writers ("Concerning Yiddish," qtd. in Alexander, *Short Fiction* 115). The concept of literary milieu or sentimental conceptualization of the Yiddish shtetl is disputed by Singer himself who believes that a genuine writer "creates his own tradition" (interview with Rosenblatt and Koppel 25-26). Elsewhere Singer disclaims intimacy with the Yiddish tradition of sentimentality and of social justice. Singer disavows being a "Yiddishist" of committed social ideology in spite of his devotion toward the Yiddish language per se (interview with Pondrom 25). Conversely Sanford Pinsker suggests that Singer is a Yiddish writer lacking a Yiddish mission, especially in relation to the classicists who

identified with the values and aspirations of the *folkmentsch*. A sustainment of the ghetto and belief in chosenness were endemic to their literary conviction. These determinants became invalid in the face of the Holocaust realities which tore asunder the living faith of Judaism ("Fictive Worlds" 26-27). As a consciously restructured and resurrected myth, Singer's shtetl is retrieved from extinguishment, affirming a texture of historical continuity that resisted assimilation and transforming the author into "the fictional historian of the whole Jewish experience in Eastern Europe" (Kazin, *Bright Book* 157-62). Singer's acquaintance with the pre-Enlightenment Polish shtetl and his traditional and pious upbringing fostered an intimacy with Jewish folk culture and literary sources from which even his precursors felt estranged (Wisse, *Short Fiction* 115). The affiliations and disaffiliations with culture function on the cosmic and textual level implying that Singer believes in the essential arbitrariness and relativity of all organized faith and metaphysics. It has been rightly observed that as a modern writer Singer is by definition "not quite trustworthy in relation to his culture," especially in relation to the compacted prototypicality and cultural spokesmanship of writers such as Y.L.Peretz, Abraham Reisen and H. Levick (Howe, *Critical* iii).

Singer's imaginative reach beyond the boundaries of naturalistic and dogmatic experience portrayed in the works of the Yiddish classicists is predicated upon his conviction that archetypal Jewish memory extends through the collective experience of Jewry to its origins at Sinai. Thus a recurrent motif in his fiction is the night of *Tisha B'Av*, when according to the Talmud the disasters frequently visited upon Jewry are to be mourned (Alexander, *Short Fiction* 28). The East European Jewish hamlet's anachronistic emergence in the fiction of Singer is a function of memory and fantasy :

. . . superstitious, disenfranchised, impoverished, totally saturated with its religion, isolated, ignorant of all save the holy scriptures, poised between the timeless round of custom and ritual and the eternal law, swept by mass hysteria, terrorized and living in the memory of terror and the hope of deliverance, divided by fierce sectarian quarrels, distrustful, narrow in its purview, grandiose in its expectations, forgotten . . . [by] the Enlightenment . . . (Feldman 173).

"The freedom to have a meaning of one's own," argues Harold Bloom, "is wholly illusory unless it is achieved against a prior plenitude of meaning

which is tradition" ("Breaking" 3-4). Singer's allegiance towards tradition is complex, divided and ambivalent. At times, especially in his English-language interviews, he scrupulously dissociates himself from it. "I feel myself naturally a part of the Jewish tradition . . . . But I wouldn't say I feel myself a part of the Yiddish tradition" (interview with Blocker and Elman 8). However when the author's own tradition is not debated, he consciously negates parochialism. "Sholom Aleichem would have been a good writer in any language and in any culture (interview with Pinsker 17). He iterates his heritage which is an inexorable sense of a past, which though embedded in memories of humiliation and suffering, associates him with historicity and destiny.

As Harold Bloom points out, the heterogeneity of poetic influence or poetic misprision cannot be delimited to a survey of sources, the history of concepts or the constellation of images. The survey of intra-poetic relationships as analogues of the Freudian "family romance" and as constituents in the history of modern revisionism cannot preclude an application towards "life-cycle of the poet-as-poet" (*Anxiety* 7-8).

Singer's formulation, in modern terms of archaic myths reveals the urge to discover signification and a transhistorical justification for

historical events. This presupposes an essential confrontation with the modern historical man who consciously and voluntarily creates history owing to the world not having undergone an absolute conversion to historicism. As a corollary a conflict between the notion of history which is archaic and ahistorical and the modern post-Hegelian conception which seeks to be historical comes into view. The man of traditional civilizations had a negative perspective towards history. This is evident in his diverse gestures such as periodical invalidation and depreciation through the perpetual quest for transhistorical models and archetypes (Eliade, *Myth* 3-4).

Singer's propounding of the dangers of messianic delusion in his fiction appears as a political rather than a religious caveat against the utopian inveiglements of communist, particularly Stalinist ideologies. "All these illusions and all these vain hopes. I compared them to the people who believed in Sabbatai Zevi, they were just as honest in their own way, just as zealous, and just as disappointed" (interview with Howe 129). Thus even the Zionist motif which inlays the texts of the classicists is only an appurtenance of Singer's conviction that the experience of the Jewry is a dramaturgic representation of Biblical

archetypes (Alexander, *Short Fiction* 31). The author's approximation of the legends and treatises of Hasidism as opposed to the Enlightenment which engaged in a lustration of the folk elements in Judaism led to his interest in the Kabbalah, a substantial body of esoteric theoretical work centered around Jewish mysticism of the Torah, seeking to discover the mysteries of creator and the nature of God (Lee, *Exile* 109-110). The theology of the ancient Kabbalah is reworked in Singer's fiction to explore the infidelities of the modern world so that the text rests on the borderline between the scriptural and the lay or temporal, between faith and paganism (Lee, *Exile* 12).

A consistent narrative strategy in Singer's fiction is the invocation and manipulation of the literary tradition inherited in interbellum Poland. Contrary to the predicament of Sholom Aleichem who had to create a literary tradition Singer had to select and master several traditions and not a few avant-garde movements such as the *Khalyastre* and *Albatros* in Eastern Europe and the *inzikhistn* (introspectivists) in New York. To identify Singer's early canon as isolated from mainstream Yiddish literature would be to accept both Singer's later claim of autotelicity and the modern American concept of a literary tradition forged within an

Anglo-American frame of reference with no recourse to the Yiddish literary milieu (D.N Miller 2-3).

Literary influence is predicated upon the reality of an agency, and "relations built on dyads of transmission from one unity (author, work, tradition) to another." Intertextuality may be identified as the expansion of an accustomed concept, or an entirely new notion to supercede the *démodé* concept of influence. In the case of the former, intertextuality may be apprehended as a generic term, subsuming within itself "unconscious, socially prompted types of text formation (. . . by archetypes or popular culture); styles (such as genres); and other prior constraints and opportunities for the writer." In the case of the latter, intertextuality might be sought to eliminate the primacy accorded by influence theorists to authorial intentions and prowess in favour of the paradigm of substitution (Clayton and Rothstein 3-4).

As the first exponent and in some ways the originator of the minimalist fictional genre which eschews recourse to involuted narration, extended fictiveness and omniscience of the narrator's presence, Avrom Reyzen can be said to be Singer's precursor in narrative strategy. It is obvious and with introspective logic almost foreordained that Singer

adopts this narrative mode of a nonfictional genre which lays claim to literal historicity and charts the borderline between fiction and reportage. The author was yet untutored in the subversion of anticipations aroused by less unequivocally fictive genres. The fact that his fictions appeared in the periodical or tabloid press predicated an appropriate response on the part of the readership towards the formal elements in the works in their shared context (D.N. Miller 4-5). Singer mastered a coetaneous genre, related to but discrete from minimalist fiction, *reportazh* (reportorial writing) which also merits tags like *portret* (portrait), *bild* (picture, portrait), *vinyet(ke)* (vignette) and *minyatur* (miniature). In spite of the equivocal nomenclature the generic norms are well specified in a "marked foregrounding of the linguistic surface" (D.N. Miller 8-9).

Northrop Frye assumed what was retrospectively described as intertextuality, when he postulated the "conception of literature as . . . containing life and reality in a system of verbal relationships (*Anatomy* 122). Thus it collates the texts of major and minor authors in a multiple positional typology based on relation and difference. Temporal priority is an important component with regard to influence. The limitations of the term intertextuality cede way for a more accurate term,

interdiscursivity, to signify the collective modes of discourse from which the writer draws (Hutcheon 12). A derivative of Singer's discursive pluralizing in his texts which incorporate magic, the Holocaust, ritual, metaphysics, religion and intertextual parody of canonical classics is the dissipation of the centres of history and fiction. The exploration of traditional gestures which were questioned, violated and subverted by secular intrusions and the Nazi cataclysm do not compel the author to posit any historiosophical overview as a rationale for the Holocaust (Ezrahi 126). Ironically, as J Hillis Miller has posited, the possibility of historical facts in fiction is subverted not by the narratological principle of constructed history but by the cognizance on the part of writers about the fabulative nature of their constructions. This ultimately calls into question the possibility of unvitiated facts even in narrative which stakes claim to historicity:

Insofar as a novel raises questions about the key assumptions of story-telling, for example, about the notions of origin and end, about consciousness or selfhood, about causality, or about gradually emerging unified meaning, then this putting in question of narrative form becomes also obliquely a putting

in question of history . . . . What seemed to be the *locus standi* by analogy with which the novel was written turns out to be itself undermined by the activity of story-telling. Insofar as a novel "deconstructs" the assumptions of "realism" in fiction, it also turns out to "deconstruct" naïve notions about history or about the writing of history ("Narrative" 462).

The literature of Holocaust survival is predicated upon the self as the empyreal fount and referent of signification. Inasmuch as personal deliverance from death and disintegration and acquiescence in the existing order are posited as a final capitulation, the texture of the fiction is ordered by the struggle to renounce wholeness and autonomy. As Hayden White suggests:

. . . contemporary critical theory permits us to believe more confidently than ever before that 'poetizing' is not an activity that hovers over, transcends, or otherwise remains alienated from life or reality, but represents a mode of praxis which serves as the immediate base of all cultural activity . . . . (*Tropics* 126).

Such an approach precludes the separation of events from their representations so that the factual as well as the interpretable truths of the Nazi cataclysms no longer lie beyond comprehension but inhere in the conception and interpretation of history. Inasmuch as the actualities of the Holocaust ultimately obtain only in their narrative and cultural reformulations, the associated issues of literary and historical exegesis may be seen to coalesce in "literary historiography." Such an attempt obviates any questioning of the truth of a given account and engages in a quest for veracity in the interpretations inhering to all versions of the Holocaust, the interpretations consciously affected by the writer and those which are realized for him by the narrative. Singer formulated and tested out diverse literary artifices "both to undermine the fictiveness of his ostensibly fictional writings and to suggest that his non-fictional writings might best be apprehended as near-fictions" (D.N. Miller 103). Thus Singer creates for himself in his long and accessible career as an interviewee "a persona on the margin of fictiveness" (D.N. Miller 114).

The contemporary fixation with narrative as a system of signs has its antecedent in the critical impulse to engage in a simultaneous predication of historical events and their transfigurations in writing.

Well-grounded resistance to overtly theoretical interpretations of the Holocaust arises from the fear that deconstructing it merely as a system of signs referring to other signs, and too close application to the literary construction of the Holocaust texts themselves would lead to the exclusion of readers. An offshoot would be the effect of positing that events and texts always are mutually contingent suggesting that all significations of events appearing in disparate representations are only relative (Young 1-3).

Of Singer's substantial turnout in Yiddish, only seven books were permitted to be published in Yiddish, the remaining being effectively inhumed for more than sixty years in the *Forverts* archives. (Sherman, "Guilt" 106-7) However his considerable corpus in English was used in relating to an international readership, in encountering and reconciling his loyalties towards the East European Jewish past and artistic answerability towards the American present. This profound ambiguity is

. . . directly related to [Singer's] feelings about having survived the Holocaust. He like his narrators, feels guilt . . . about having avoided the catastrophe. These unhappy responses are without question severally exacerbated by the

fact that Singer's own ascent as a popular writer cannot be separated from the very fact of his having lived to describe the perished heritage of Jewish Eastern Europe (Hadda 175).

Writing becomes an act of commemoration, a resurrection of the lost community which is a present absence, so that structures of recursion follow Yiddish culture as identifiable and discrete aspects in its literature and not merely as echoing or ventriloquizing of past texts.

Singer's power to reformulate the Yiddish folk repertoire and iconography not into component patterns but into frames that reconstruct more timeworn paradigms of memory and telling is of interpretable value. His multivalent texts are predicated upon the ancient troping and textual configuration of intertextuality, as much as they nullify the gulf between subjectivity and objectivity in their polyvocality. The schlemiel who occupies the precarious space between subjectivity and objectivity in a cultural sphere of his own in Singer's fiction will be studied in relation to the author's works in the forthcoming chapters.

# Literary Figurations of the Schlemiel: The Short Stories

Lasitha B.V “Schlemiel as paradigm: The hero in selected fiction of Isaac Bashevis singer” Thesis. Department of English , University of Calicut, 2000

### Chapter III

#### Literary Figurations of the Schlemiel: The Short Stories

In spite of his predilection for a world of abstract categories the schlemiel represents a type of alienated protagonist whose affirmation of subjectivity is often confused with existential freedom. The schlemiel's inner freedom creates its own foundation insofar as he strives in his passive introspection to protect an inherent and immutable inwardness from external qualification. Possessing Truth, he requires nothing more to complete him.

Unlike the existential protagonists of modern literature the schlemiel is never conceived exclusively in ahistorical terms. George Lukács' two-fold description of the literary outsider helps to clarify the distinction between the schlemiel and the existential heroes of modern literature:

First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him - and apparently not for his creator - any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is 'thrown-into-the-world': meaninglessly, unfathomably. He

does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only 'development' in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be (*Realism* 21).

Ironically, Lukács' criteria highlight Isaac Bashevis Singer's distinct conceptions of heroism and, more important for the present discussion, the historicized faith that is to be emphasized through his schlemiels. Attempts to demonstrate the schlemiel's authentic Yiddish characteristics do a disservice to the meaning and significance of his place in the fool tradition and consequently fall wide of the mark in investigating the full implications of such a figure in Singer's fiction. When defined in terms of archaic or mythical conventions, he takes shape as an archetypal figure with certain archetypal functions. Within the fool conventions, he may at first appear incongruous and yet he serves as a symbolic type, as a most appropriate figurative image in Singer's overall depiction of the moral element in man's experience and man's relation to the universe. He serves as a character with individual and moral dimensions of his own as well. In spite of his incongruity, he not only fits the symbolic and thematic scheme

of the fiction but actually is a dramatic presentation of the point at which these elements are clearly welded together. As a traditional fool type, he provides a focal point from which the elements of symbol, theme, and character can be fruitfully perceived.

Popular and collective memory evidences a certain anhistoricality in its inability to engage with historical events and individuals except insofar as it transfigures them into archetypes (Eliade, *Myth* 3-4). For the man who is part of a traditional culture, living entails conformity with extrahuman paradigms or archetypes. This is synonymous with venerating the "law," inasmuch as the law is essentially "a primordial hierophany, the revelation *in illo tempore* of the norms of existence, a disclosure by a divinity or a mystical being" (Eliade, *Myth* 95).

The schlemiel, analogous to the archaic man, succeeds in annihilating the pressures of historical time and yet through his paradigmatic gestures he lives in consonance with the cosmic rhythms. "Gimpel the Fool" (*GF* 9-24) demonstrates Singer's modernism as well as his primitivism and pre-Enlightenment affiliations. Gimpel is simultaneously schlemiel and saint in his naïveté and his credulous nature which make him believe even the most absurd of tales. Gimpel goes

beyond the traditional boundaries of schlemielhood when he marries a woman of doubtful virtue and alternates between the roles of cuckold and father to her growing brood of illegitimate children. Unlike classical schlemiels Gimpel is not directly responsible for his misfortunes. Theodore Reik postulates that psychoanalysis would delineate a schlemiel "as a masochistic character who has the strong unconscious will to fail and to spoil his chances." This would suggest a lack of delimitation of the type, yielding to facile psychological definition and characterization. However the fact that the expression "schlemiel" is disparate in its connotations from the English "unlucky fellow" or the German "pechvogel" would appear to imply that the schlemiel has an unconscious motivation in devising his bad luck (*Wit* 41).

Insofar as "world" typifies the accepted premises and anticipations that embody temporal reality, Gimpel the schlemiel's world can be adumbrated through an overhauling of its basal principles. Gimpel's vague understanding of the principles of the Law does not preclude his living out a personalized interpretation of it. The schlemiel's world-view generates a set of constructions. The Law and the Talmud are constructions of the first order with their stamp of authority. The second constituted by Gimpel's

sense of the Law and of the Rabbi's declarations form part of mundane reality. Second-order constructions which are typifications of first-order constructs motivate the schlemiel's actions so that the "real" world is whatever is defined as real and consequential by him. This "natural" attitude is an implicit acceptance of social reality as not only virtually real but intersubjectively vindicated so that Gimpel's world as he discovers it is the world as it really is for all men (Natanson 238-39). Gimpel's solipsistic world view is embedded in the metaphysical conviction which adheres to the traditional claim that the individual is the sole reality. Simultaneously Gimpel examines all experience from an egological perspective (Natanson 241). Gimpel's progression is from solipsism to altruism. Hence his discovery borne out of experience filtered through intentional consciousness and expressing the epistemological union of consciousness intending sociality: ". . . the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn't happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year" (*GF* 23).

It has been suggested that the themes in "Gimpel the Fool" like disillusionment, the complexities of belief and the uneasy relationship of

worldly experience to truth have been illuminated and constructed by romantic poetry. Elka's death-bed confession about her infidelity makes way for Gimpel's spiritual collapse into a Blakean condition of experience. The schlemiel's subsequent journey is an archetypal one. It is also an expiation for the sin committed in thought against the people of Frampol. Gimpel's transcendence over the world of treachery and deception is attained only by the discovery that faith must be accompanied by knowledge and understanding. Romantic philosophy sees truth as residing in a world apart from organic nature. Gimpel's and finally the author's imaginative metaphysics appears to be shaped by the epistemological and visionary concerns of the Romantics (Faustino 228-30 ). Gimpel avouches: "No doubt the world is entirely an imaginary world, but it is only once removed from the true world" (*GF* 24). In spite of its implication of a loose Platonism the passage hints at a prevailing dichotomy in Singer's canon between slavery and freedom, between faith in a world that is delusive and illusory and a life that is plausible (Pinsker, "Fictive Worlds" 34).

Following Gimpel's journey-quest he repudiates the ultimate reality or the world of physical depravity making his insights platonic

(Eisenberg 345-46). This wisdom authenticates and vindicates his earlier stance that truth, whether objective or subjective, and the world both exterior and interior do not dominate one's life except insofar as they are given active sanction to do so. Singer makes a spirited denial that he does not write in the tradition of the Yiddish writers " 'little man', because their little man is actually a *victim* - a man who is a victim of anti-Semitism, the economic situation, and so on" (interview with Flender 67-68). As men of character, thinking and suffering, the tragedies of Singer's schlemiels and the nature of their victimhood are different.

Singer creates around his schlemiel heroes an extremely complex and subtle ambience. This compels them towards dialogic revelation and explanation, towards reflection of themselves in others' consciousness, building loopholes for themselves, prolonging and thereby laying bare their own final world as it interacts intensely with other consciousnesses. Inasmuch as the hero's self-clarification, self-revelation and discourse about himself are not pre-determined by some neutral image of him, Singer's setting may be rendered fantastic as illustrated in "The Fire" (GF 138-145). As evident in "Gimpel the Fool" the verisimilitude of the protagonist Leibus simultaneously becomes the verisimilitude of this

character's own internal discourse about himself in all its purity. The phenomenon of first-person narration in these tales evokes the struggle of the schlemiels to find their way back to humanity out of the labyrinth of loneliness.

Unlike Gimpel, it is not in Leibus's nature to question his fate or offer active resistance to it. As a scapegoat Leibus's ridiculousness arises out of a deviation from the natural order of things in Janow, his village - in this instance from the passion for material success. An underdog who is alienated by society, Leibus tries to forge a selfhood which becomes ridiculous precisely because it is outside the cosmic hierarchy irradiated by love.

Herschel Revel cites the Hebrew phrase *sheluach min 'el* generally translated as "sent away from God" as one of the possible linguistic sources for the *schlemiel*. Scapegoatism, exile and alienation are embodied in this term, but there is a possibility that as the root words are used in Biblical text, a more likely translation would be "sent from god" in the sense of Biblical messenger ("The Schlemiel"). As William Willeford states it, the fool is one who "expresses both the emergence of form and meaning out of chaos and reversion to it" (*The Fool* 18). Both Gimpel and

Leibus go through such temporary aberrations. Gimpel decides to corrupt the bread of Frampol. Leibus tells a tale, the greater portion of which is best understood in psychological rather than supernatural terms: his father consistently favoured Leibus's churlish but crafty brother despite the latter's insolent neglect of his father and Leibus's long years of self-sacrifice on his father's behalf. Disinherited by his father and deprived of his credibility by both his brother and the townspeople of his native Janow, Leibus decides to set his brother's house and mill afire. Enroute he finds them both already ablaze. In spite of his foreknowledge that he would be accused of arson, Leibus rescues his brother and family. Leibus like Gimpel exists in a true shame culture where to lose one's good name is virtually to lose one's title to existence and where ridicule may be fatal. The towns of Janow and Frampol place a negative value on shame which fact yields to psychoanalytic examination. As Gerhard Piers avers, "behind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred, but the fear of *contempt* which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of abandonment, the death by emotional starvation" (*Shame* 16). Leibus's assertions of veracity both begin and conclude the narrative: "Now that I'm about to die, I want the truth known" (*GF* 145). The origins of the fire

remain mysterious to the end and evade the categories of either religion or magic which are functionally considered together for "they are always alternative techniques for inducing power . . . by means other than those of the natural cause and effect sequences . . ." (Benedict, "Religion" 637). In effecting a compulsion of a passive universe to one's own ends, magic is technological and mechanistic while "religion is animistic behavior and employs toward a personalized universe all the kinds of behavior that hold good in human relations" (Benedict, "Magic" 253). Leibus himself believes towards the end of his life that his anger may have started the fire, but at the time of the catastrophe he had no conception of thaumaturgy. Paul Radin points out that all magic "consists in the coercion of an object so that it will comply with the wishes and desires of the performer" (*Religion* 25). The mystery that surrounds the fire is compounded in the scepticism and doubt in the mind of Leibus whose psychological pre-enactment does not prepare him for the monstrous efficacy of his magic will. His truncated attitude towards the fire thus leads the schlemiel into further disaster and shame. Ridicule functions here as in many tales primarily as a social weapon, as an omnipresent threat against violation of the social order and custom of the shtetl. Suspicion and ridicule of the

Janow community which refuses to believe Leibus's protestations of innocence severe the delicate life-lines which bind him to the social body.

The question of metaphysical ambiguity, which overlays the question whether characters are free or determined assumes special significance in Singer's fiction because of his dualistic mythology. Mysterious psychic forces which the Kabbalah terms *Kavana* or "the force of an intention independent of the limitations of action, but ultimately controlling it" operate in such fictions. The consequences of such actions are unpredictable, both in this world and the other world and when suggestions of this esoteric power echo back into the realms of experience, the effects can be appalling. Thus Leibus's *Kavana* while operating to realize the schlemiel's unfulfilled desire makes him also the victim of a sinister psychic joke (Fixler 377-78).

Moshe of "The Beggar Said So" (*SMS* 109-121), a credulous and naïve schlemiel is equipped with the deepest wisdom and the noblest motives. This constitutes him as the symbolic representative of an idealism which believes in the realization of its aims and takes duties earnestly and promises literally. The comic effect generated by the exaggerated facility

of these schlemiels to believe on slight evidence may be characterized as "broken" humour, the humour that smiles through tears:

The humorous pleasure derived from sympathy originates . . . from a peculiar technique comparable to displacement, by means of which the release of affect that is already in preparation is disappointed and the cathexis diverted on to something else, often on to something of secondary importance (Freud, *Jokes* 298).

Tanhum Makover of "Tanhum" (*OL* 209-220), an unworldly schlemiel, is unwilling to sacrifice the Torah to the grandiose aims of his father-in-law Reb Bendit, all without a grain of heroism or sentimentality. Like other religious schlemiels Tanhum's cosmos is verbal and his phrases are palpably Biblical : " 'My soul yearns for the Torah' " (*OL* 220). Tanhum comes to that point in life which Albert Camus limns in the life of his Everyman: " . . . one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement . . . . Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness" (*Sisyphus* 19).

The leitmotif of these schlemiels is the morbidity of their passivity which at the same time extends the "shtetl's belief in the transitory nature of . . . life and the eternal justice of *Gan-Eyden* . . ." (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 59). There are insoluble contradictions in the powers granted to some of the schlemiels in these stories. The creative gift of prophecy granted to Yash in "The Chimney Sweep" (FOK 118-123) is accompanied by a dialectical duplicity embedded in the narrative. Singer leaves such questions as the relation of religion to magical powers, and whether this relation is antithetical or perhaps complementary open-ended. "Powers" (FOK 241-256) carries the implication of magical powers that are different from those suggested in "The Chimney Sweep," different methods of harnessing them as well as different practices. As a child the unnamed but certainly not uncharacterized protagonist is able to divine the money his father has hidden under the floor. He also sees a light burning over the head of a woman named Zelda, an omen of her death. When he grows up the narrator-protagonist bewitches women in a conscious action, for his is a specific power, essentially human, autonomous and independent in its action. His depredations in sex arise from the fecundity of his magical potencies. The existence of the supernatural is trailed by a

series of rational explanations that erode the former's case: accident or coincidence. In the supernatural sphere "pan-determinism" operates instead of chance, as also dreams, the influence of drugs, tricks and prearranged apparitions, illusion of the senses and finally insanity (Todorov 20-21). Being neither a lunatic who is not responsible for his actions nor a devilish persona who while responsible lacks the normal faculty of conscience, the narrator who consciously torments his victims only much later comes to realize the negative function of his powers. While the average man's transgression of the moral law is tempered by various considerations such as conscience, prudence, reason and competing desires, the intemperance of the monomaniac protagonist in "Powers" overrides all other desires such as a desire for physical comfort or the stability of marriage. Unlike normal human beings, the schlemiel exercises neither self-deception nor rationalization. Kopel Rashkes of "The Prodigy" (CF 174-186) is a phenomenon of unusual mathematical intellect, cosmic and psychic knowledge and clairvoyance. The ontological gap between event and meaning is annulled in the mind of Rashkes. He believes that only interpretation can adequately name experience and the world. At the height of his rosicrucian adventures and

his awareness of the paradox that man comes into consciousness of the world as spirit manifested in ideas, Rashkes puts a bullet into his brain.

Reuven Berger of "The Bond" (I 32-40) finds that the slaps he administers to hysterical females have the unpredictable result of creating a kind of secret bond between them and himself. Behind all magian practices, the will assumed to be omnipotent, functions independently of space and time. The will operates in a cause-and-effect relation which is not rationalized but known to be effective. Sigmund Freud hypothesizes a sort of evolutionary movement of the magical act. The primitive man's wishes are accompanied by a motor impulse, the will. The act of will itself adumbrates in a sense, the satisfaction to be gained from the accomplishment of the desired end. In the act of willing there is a representation or "motor hallucination" of that which is desired, and the representation brings its own satisfaction (*Papers* 13-21). In the same collection, Chaikin, the narrator-persona of "The Enemy" (I 91-101) is victimized by the irrational hatred of a waiter on board an Argentine ship bound for New York. The waiter succeeds in wrecking the narrator's peace of mind by his enmity and antipathy which appear to have no cogent reason. This enemy in order to discredit Chaikin uses all the powers within

his capacity selfishly, vindictively, maliciously, tending to anarchy or at least unsociality. On the deck occurs the climactic encounter between Chaikin and the enemy whom he now believes to be a fiend. After grappling long, silently and stubbornly with his enemy, Chaikin succeeds in throwing him, who appears to be "unusually light - sponge or foam" (199) overboard. The irony in the story is accompanied by the humanizing tendency on the part of the schlemiel towards acceptance of the premise of victimization. The reader's emergence from the fantastic is predicated on the conclusion that the fiction is uncanny: he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and concedes an explanation of the phenomena described. He may also decide that the tales are marvellous, that new laws of nature must be cultivated to accommodate the phenomena (Todorov 20-21).

The narrator in "Miracles" (1211-229), a self-proclaimed schlemiel, is saved by miraculous powers from cholera even when almost half the population of his native Mechev had died of the epidemic, as also from conscription in the Polish army. Miracles continue as his powers attract beautiful women to him, and help him to acquire the ardent friendship of an anti-Semite, Professor Chrabowski. The shifting natures of desire and

wish-fulfilment are enmeshed in the tale. Just after the death of his mistress' husband Hans Eggschwinger, for which he holds himself to be responsible the narrator discovers that the powers of the universe have deserted him. Like everyone else, he is also condemned to exile, starvation and other sorrows of the Holocaust. Benjamin Schwartz of "The Fatalist" (P 218-224) believes that " 'free choice is nothing but an illusion' " (P 219). The schlemiels in tales such as "The Enemy," "Miracles" and "The Fatalist" seek a form of understanding which captures those elements of experience that are otherwise evanescent, elusive, not easily apprehended by logical or empirical forms of knowledge. There is also a sense of concreteness in the form in which the understanding is conveyed. The delight in disorder or in primal energy informs certain aspects of these tales which deal with extreme situations, ultimate questions, particularly with questions of death. The heroes are not the centre of identity, essence, perfection or fulfilled will. The arbitrary and the absolute meet in the extremities of the stance of fantasy adopted by the author. In the framework of fantasy as desire the analogies of the real and the unreal move synchronically towards each other. However, beyond this sphere, the world can be pushed forward into the

supernatural or grotesque, italicising the strangeness of natural conventions or the "not-world," into the wondrous or magical, attesting to a detachment from the natural - or the vacillation between both: the pure fantastic (Hunter 128).

Many of Singer's stories address the dialogical dimensions of literature in their relation to the spiritual dimensions of literature. Miguel de Unamuno argues that "the very essence of all religion" turns on "the problem of human destiny, of eternal life, or of the human finality of the Universe and of God." Unamuno renders this problem as a "religious longing for union with God" that can be consummated "only in life" (*Tragic Sense* 218). According to Singer: "Literature hasn't really done anything for humanity which could be compared to religion, because people *lived* according to religion, they died for religion." The survival of the Jewish people in all terrible circumstances was conditioned by their faith "in God, in Providence, and in the hereafter (interview with Burgin 89). While Singer avers that his stories are not created with the rationalistic purpose of a message, he recalls that he was "brought up in the categories of good and evil. Almost nothing was neutral. Either you did a *mitzvah* or you did an *averah* . . ." (interview with Burgin 6).

Singer's stories about religious faith deal primarily with the conflict between faith and doubt in a single soul. Ironically it is often that of a rabbi assumed to be more firmly entrenched in his faith than others in the community. "Joy" (*GF* 106-116) typifies this genre, the tale of Rabbi Bainish, who after incessant bereavements is filled with an overwhelming sense of nihilism and chaos. Rabbi Bainish is a classic case of the schlemiel who is the object and impulse of Singer's art. Struggling, striving, always en route to fulfilment but destined never quite to arrive, the schlemiel renews the context of ethical responsibility. The moment of truth in the Rabbi's spiritual crisis comes when during a fast his deceased daughter Rebecca appears to him in a radiant dream vision. The Rabbi now reveals to the devout that the moon is obscured at Rosh Hashanah for life itself signifies free choice and freedom is susceptible to mystery: "Of all the blessings bestowed on man, the greatest lies in the fact that God's face is forever hidden from him" (*GF* 114).

Singer's tales of faith and survival are also miracle tales which presume on the timelessness of Biblical archetypes. "The Old Man" (*GF* 127-137) tells the tale of the nonagenarian Reb Moshe Ber whose faith helps him to survive both his children and grandchildren.

In "The Little Shoemakers" (*GF* 80-105). Abba Shuster imagines himself to be Noah, Abraham, Isaac or Jacob of the Book of Genesis. He finds that he is bereft of the community that nurtured him. It is when his sons join him at the workbench to ply the shoemaker's craft that Abba Shuster is able to affirm the seamless continuity of Jewish tradition. In these tales of the diaspora there is a conflation of individual destiny with communal destiny which is implicated in a set of mystifications within which nationalist ideologies subsist.

Harry Berger argues that "the alienation of social constructions of divinity and cosmos by conquest groups resembles the alienation of socially constructed kinship and status terms from domestic kin groups to corporate descent groups." This is an alienation "in anthropological jargon, from the ego-centred kinship system of families to the more patently fictional ancestor-centred system of lineages." Distinguishing between forms of "weak transcendence" and "strong transcendence," Berger maintains that "family membership illustrates weak kinship; tribal membership, strong kinship" ("Lie" 121).

A more radical theory of justification through deeds which is a by-product of Singer's habitual plea for simplicity emerges from

"I Place My Reliance On No Man" (*SF* 174-182). Rabbi Jonathan Dansiger is beleaguered by the very people whom he has selflessly served, compelling him towards a questioning of God's mercy. The rabbi's insight into the values of simplicity that his tormentors distorted effects his spiritual renewal.

Many of Singer's stories are variations of existential meditation and the exiled meditant becomes a prototype of self-imposed alienation from community. The schlemiel discovers that the world is a chaos of unfulfilment, leading to a struggle to establish an organic link with a hitherto unacknowledged centre of his personality. Joseph Campbell points out that "the essence of oneself" is synonymous with "the essence of the world."

. . . . . separateness, withdrawal, is no longer necessary. Wherever the hero may wander, whatever he may do, he is ever in the presence of his essence . . . . . Thus just the way of social participation may lead in the end to a realisation of the All in the individual, so that of exile brings the hero to the self in all (*Faces* 217).

The exiled hero in Singer's fiction has his metaphorical echoes in Biblical material. As Maurice Friedman points out, The Book of Job (3:23) especially, with its indications that mankind is "born to wander blindly" cast out from any source of ultimate existence foretokens modern representations of existence (*Rebel* 3-5).

In "A Crown of Feathers" (*CF* 9-32), piety and apostasy personified respectively by the ghostly voices of the grandfather and the grandmother vie for the female schlemiel Akhsa's soul. On her deathbed she again spies the crown of feathers, once indicative of the truth of Christianity, now apparently proof of the efficacy of Judaism, once the Devil's craft, now apparently God's artefact. The elusory and insubstantial nature of truth is underscored by the crown's ambiguous symbolism. Truth if it exists, "is as intricate and hidden as a crown of feathers" (*CF* 32). The dangers of forbidden knowledge, the longing for some ultimate perspicuity beyond deception and an inability to find it define Akhsa's exile in a universe which remains silent in the face of human questioning.

In utilizing Biblical images to confront questions of meaning Singer's fiction secularizes religious elements. The fiction hypothesizes that the Biblical image of a God who hides his face and the modern image

of a cosmos empty of transcendent meaning are agnate in nature. However the silent God who hides his face furnishes the metaphorical ambivalences utilized by Singer to complement the doctrinaire vacuity of contemporary perspectives. In his evocation through religious terms of a universe analogous to that of modern secular absurdists where mankind is alienated from the sources of signification and is surrounded by the disintegration of the phenomenal world, Singer's stance appears at first to be paradoxical (Lee, *Exile 2*)

Singer citing the Kabbalah expounds that God in order to create a space for creation first had to create a vacuum in Himself:

In the higher worlds . . . there is no free will because they are so near to God. The difference between them and God is not great enough that there should be temptations or desire for sin . . . . Only here . . . in this dark den, where Satan and all the devils rule, only here does man have free will . . . . Since we are the weakest link in God's chain, He depends on us. If we break, the whole Godly evolution breaks (interview with Farrell 136).

The behavioural indifference of society in a world dominated by anonymity and the inherent sense of "incognitio" which is a universal human predicament is the material of absurdism. Singer's fictional world is dominated by remorseful reprobates who seek knowledge, recognition and confirmation in a world where God eludes their apprehension (Lee, *Exile* 2). In *The Myth of Sisyphus* Camus uses the metaphor of exile to define the predicament of modern man:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But . . . in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger . . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (13).

The tripartite story "Passions" (P 296-312) offers a means of reifying human identity in the midst of a disordered world. It also examines the priorities involved in a difficult freedom, "the unique ontological status of the human being as one who can transcend natural necessity and act within a context of freedom" posited by covenantal theology (Hartman 23). In the first instance, a simple village peddler named Leib Belkes expresses his devotion to the land of Israel by rebuilding the Temple in a scale model.

The second instance is that of the pious but ignorant tailor Jonathan's transformation through sheer will and persistence into a Talmudic wizard and master of Jewish learning as the result of a wager. In the third instance Rabbi Mendel, a deviant Hasid who refuses to conform to the Hasidim's impulse towards joy and contempt of asceticism, engages in fasting as self-indulgence rather than self-mortification.

In the moral universe of these tales there is no breach in the cosmic order which permits the power of God and the ethical structure to yield to their manichean opposites (Feldman 173-77). It is the hard-won knowledge of their own limitations that makes the actions of these schlemiels feats of deliberate heroism no more ridiculous than sublime. Far from being passive butts of ridicule, they attain their stature by a tenacious refusal to accept the verdicts of others.

Reb Amram Zalkind of "The Pocket Remembered" (*I* 140-160) receives a vision of his pocket as "a silent witness that could testify against him on the Day of Judgement" (*I* 158) and seeks redemption in the holy land for the lewd iniquities committed by him in mind. The Hebraic view of man is indubitably ambivalent being predicated upon a dramatic tension both in the nature of man and his relations with God. Man's law of

being as constituted by the Creator and his ability for self-transcendence in reason, imagination and moral freedom come into conflict with the radical egotism of his sinful nature. In Jewish tradition, the doctrine of the two "impulses," the good and evil *yetzers*, enunciates the *anschauung* into the dual nature of man. Corruption in man is inevitable but not transmitted biologically, it operates out of the freedom of man's own nature. The propensity for good though entrenched in human nature requires divine grace for its completion, and in this respect ethics overlaps with religion (Herberg 75-76).

The 'is' of human nature and the 'ought' of human possibility are illustrated in "A Nest Egg for Paradise" (I 176-203). Reb Mendel, a pious schlemiel eschews consciously and consistently the temptation to make any choice but the moral one. However in "an instant of sheer drunkenness and utter helplessness" his body separates itself from his soul and commits "an abomination of its own accord" (I 187) by succumbing to the seduction of his sister-in-law Lisa-Hadas. This transgression is the sole blemish on an otherwise pure life but he believes that death is the only deliverance from the sin he has committed. Reb Mendel is prostrated by the intellectual pride that makes him arrogate God's powers by prejudging

himself (L.S. Friedman 206). The phases of hiddenness of God, a prime metaphysical concern of Singer's fiction form part of the discourse of Moses Maimonides. Maimonides explains that to see the face of God betokens a perception of the nature of God (*Guide* 49). This is a knowledge which is "inaccessible in its very nature . . . . *But My face shall not be seen* [means] that the true reality of My existence as it veritably is cannot be grasped" (86). According to Martin Buber, perceptual experience (*Erfahrung*) is not the sole experience accessible to man. Intuitive-ecstatic experience (*Erlebnis*) grants not a fractional picture of the world but a lived unity. Essentially linguistic, *Erfahrung* can be conceptualized in words while *Erlebnis* resides in that realm beyond words and perceptions: "Unity of the I . . . now it is no longer a bundle [of perceptions]: it is a fire." The *Erlebnis* being utterly silent, the mystic is also completely lonely: "He has no longer any community with him, no collectivity. Language, however, is the function of community." Lacking an effective language to express his experience, the mystic is left alone even though Buber posits a theoretical community of all those who had experienced a genuine *Erlebnis* (*Confession* 15).

"Something is there" (FOK 257-82) is an intense and sustained dramatization of the individual's struggle to resist containment by religion. Rabbi Nechemia of Bechev is aware of the blandishments of the Evil One as well as of the strategies of resistance against evil but his wrath against the Creator is an alien and sinister force of rebellion. The Rabbi's subsequent rejection of his religion symbolized by several specific gestures such as his identification with every kind of heresy is a corollary of his new concept of God as torturer and persecutor. The Rabbi's new life brings with it a heightened sense of emancipation and material opportunity. However the new world also steadfastly refuses to evidence order and meaning, in spite of all the incompatible means of apprehension by Spinoza, Kant, Leibnitz and Schopenhauer that attempt to define the universe and God in terms such as "substance, monad, hypothesis, blind will, nature" (FOK 279). At the end of the narrative, " a light he never knew was there" hovers in the Rabbi's brain and he murmurs at the end of the war between himself and God: "Something is there" (FOK 282).

The monumental emphasis on the Torah as Law and as a prescriptive code enjoined upon Jews has tended to accentuate the heteronomous character of Judaism. An explanation of the essentia and

ambit of the basic and continuing religious issue of autonomy vis-à-vis heteronomy in relation to affiliated texts of religious philosophy is called for. To the Jew whose faith is predicated upon acceptance of the Torah as divine revelation and as historical fact the issue of autonomy is primarily one of motivation. Blind submission to the will of God is a position of extreme heteronomy even if it merits the term theonomy by virtue of its origin. For the executor of the command, if this blind obedience which is *Kadawer-* or *Hunde-gehorsam* (canine obedience) springs from the fervent yearning to identify God's declared will with his own, a purely heteronomous motive is no longer operative. On the contrary if fulfilment of the Torah and Mitzvot are predicated upon the ratification of reason and consciousness, the radical rationalism and humanism thus constituted may doubtless imperil the a priori faith in the authenticity and steadfastness of revealed religion (Carlebach 28-29). Nachman in "The Recluse" (CF 200-13) is much maligned for his other-worldly piety and becomes "the proverbial broken vessel which is forgotten by everyone" (CF 210). Like "Gimpel the Fool" the story includes suggestive references to Yiddish precursor texts, literary texts such as

"Bontsha the Silent" and *Menahem Mendl* that focus upon the regenerative or redemptive potential of suffering.

Singer has expressed dissatisfaction with the answers provided by the analysts of nature: "Materialism - historical materialism particularly - never attracted me. In my worst moments of doubt I knew that this world hadn't evolved on its own but that behind it lay some plan, a consciousness, a metaphysical force" (*LE* 34). The discussions between Reb Mordecai Meir and Fulie of "Grandfather and Grandson" (*CF* 285-303) on both current and historical Jewish experience reach no point of conciliation. Jewish experience is traumatic and a suffocating curtailment of personal potential for Fulie who believes that the revolution is the only solution to needless suffering. The grandfather believes that being born a Jew brings with it a certain vulnerability to history, including its worst errors. He like the messianic prophets, has the "steadfast will to look history in the face and to accept it as a terrifying dialogue with Yahweh" (*Eliade, Myth* 108). These burdens appear to Fulie to be monstrously unfair. Fulie's martyrdom followed by Reb Mordecai Meir's arrest and persecution for the incriminating documents left behind by his

grandson are the intrusions of history which Singer's schlemiels are not in a position to resist.

The schlemiel like the archaic and the primitive man inasmuch as he lives in accordance with extrahuman paradigms and in consonance with archetypes, recognizes suffering as the will of the forgotten supreme Divinity. Hence it is intelligible, tolerable and a signification. The motifs that provide the rationale for pain and suffering may vary but generally the afflictions are seen as the result of a "deviation in respect to the 'norm,' " and hence never blind (Eliade, *Myth* 98 ). For the Jews every historical convulsion was regarded as an ineludible castigation by Yahweh, for the orgy of sin in which the Chosen people had relinquished their righteousness. These calamities appeared to be foreordained so that the Hebrews may not infringe upon their true destiny by disaffecting the religious tradition endowed by Moses (Eliade, *Myth* 102-3).

Ozer Mecheles of "On a Wagon" (CF 263-274) in the course of a wagon journey from Rejowiec to Zamosc makes the discovery that the Enlightenment, his wife and her lover all conspire to deceive him. Assailed by doubts about God and Creation which may be a blind process the schlemiel decides to seek the truth in a yeshiva. Religion is implicated in a

relation to that which is both within life and beyond it involving a covenant between life and life, human and the divine (D. Patterson 4). Like Ozer Mecheles, Oyzer-Dovidl of "The Riddle" (*FOK* 124-134) comes to experience both the mythical and the doctrinal implication of the condition of lostness through the betrayal by his wife Nechele. The relation between the human and the divine becomes problematic but these protagonists believe that "Vision is hearing the word" (Handelman 63). Singer with his schlemiels arrives at the basic antinomies of existence. These in turn cause a reversion inward to the ego which "in reprisal for its dread of 'the infinite' seeks to enthrone false infinities" (Hopper 161). Tales such as "On a Wagon" and "The Riddle" are narratives of alienation and return. The groundwork of the quest for truth is shaken so that the ego faces an abyss of isolation. However this solitariness brings the schlemiels towards the moment of recognition "in which a character comes to understand the meaning of his dilemma and his true relation toward his fellowmen and his world . . . . The new substance must be reached through the battlefield of alienation" (Slochower 380). In "The Brooch" (*S* 223-237) the discovery of the diamond brooch placed in overt symbolism over his marriage contract becomes pivotal to Wolf Ber's understanding about Celia's deception. It

also becomes the agency of his return to humanity. In this moment of the schlemiel's transfiguration by estrangement he becomes a man inevitably stigmatized, compelled to bear ancient wounds from which there is no escape (Hopper 161).

In "The Joke" (FOK 148-167), Dr. Alexander Walden, Hebrew writer and philosopher is made the subject of a great deception for almost five years. Convinced that an heiress to millions loves and admires him, Walden carries on a correspondence with this non-existent persona unaware that he is the victim of the ego of a pseudo-intellectual, Liebkind Bendel. The sudden arrival of Dr. Walden in New York to meet his admirer precipitates a crisis that can be defused only by inventing the heiress' sudden death in an aircrash. Dr. Walden's long trip and his disillusionment undermine the learned man's health rapidly. His death smile seems to say " 'Well, *ja*, my life was one big joke - from the beginning to the end' " (FOK 167). The joke here is a cyclical leap for the schlemiel. He is ensnared by his own limitations such as old age, ill health, alienation, and the strangeness of the world he encounters. David I. Grossvogel commenting upon black humour in the absurd theatre points out that to the extent that we are forced "to recognize the identity of

the object laughed at, the spectator becomes a self-conscious part of the negative forces that hem in, and frustrate the full existence of a kindred being. [The result is a ] bitter laughter, which stresses the fundamental identity of laughter and victim" (*Blasphemers* 195).

The stratagems of humans do not affect the victims as powerfully as the games played by spirits. Yet both have their moral and philosophical stakes in that they impart enlightenment about religious faith and the nature of reality to the human participants in the game as well as to the readers. Commenting on the relationship between play and civilization, Johan Huizinga suggests that the competitive or agonistic element in play, its "element of tension, imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess, his courage, tenacity, resources, and . . . his spiritual powers" (*Homo Ludens* 29). The ethical and philosophical dimensions of these "agonistic" games between Singer's schlemiels and their antagonists place them in Huizinga's play-category of "competitions in esoteric knowledge" (127), since the games seem to test and elicit the moral strength and reality-perception of the protagonists. Thus the games become the author's vehicle "to search for eternal truths, for the essence of being" (Singer, *Nobel Lecture* 6).

Huizinga also notes that "Hebrew affords striking evidence of the identity between the agonistic and the play principle" (55). In the stories under discussion, Singer is - whether consciously or not - adhering to Hebrew linguistic tradition.

The apparent inescapability of the pattern of the inevitable victim and victimizer is dramatized in "Zeidlus the Pope" (SF 150-60) in the story of "the yeshiva boy who wanted to become Pope" (SF 160). There emerges too, the central contention that Zeidlus ultimately stands forth as a religious scapegoat. With all his religious scholarship and the brilliant perceptions of the prodigy, Zeidel possesses "much more than that sliver of vanity which the Law permits the scholar" (SF 152). Zeidel's subsequent life of apostasy and corrupt expectations is devoted to writing an authentic *Apologia Contra Talmudum*, a variety of anti-Jewish polemics. Zeidel's disillusionment with the new faith, his blindness and poverty culminate in an awareness of his transgression, leading to the would-be Pope's deathbed perception: " 'If there is a Gehenna, there is also a God' " (SF 159). The terrible irony is resident in the schlemiel's fervent acquiescence to ambition and the lust for knowledge wherein his apostasy and disillusionment with the new faith feed upon and demean one

another. This affords the schlemiel a caricature of an apocalyptic vision, a mock integration of selfhood. Apostasy does not provide Ziedel with the means to enter into a larger, richer or more meaningful region of existence. Instead it perpetually imprisons him in a contracted sphere of ignorance and falsehood which he gradually and faintly perceives to be a place of torment.

As an ostensible religious scapegoat-victim Zeidel gets to be a mere zilch whose structural objective is to make known the ironic modus by which the paradigm of society who subsumes within himself the functions of ritual instigator and purifier becomes the debased victim of his community's evils. Encounter with the sacred through transgression necessarily entails "the scapegoat's punishment, isolation and death ordained by a society and religion striving for a rational existence" (Vickery 143-44).

The myth or doctrine of the Original Sin which is central to literary discourse posits as its dialectic antithesis not the concept of Original Righteousness which is predicated upon an intellectualistic ethic but the fact of Original Freedom grounded in the ethics of love and the existential relationship to God. This is the mythical and dogmatic undertone of the

predicament of alienation which is a signal motif of modern literature (Hopper 169).

Rabbi Gabriel Klintower in "The Boy Knows the Truth" dramatizes Singer's stress on free choice and the ambiguities inherent in this concept (OL 135-148). Singer points out that "the truth is that the belief in free will is a categorical imperative . . . . The very fact that we all talk about human errors is proof that we believe in man's free will" (interview with Burgin 83). The rabbi believes that the brief ingress of his sexual impulse is responsible for precipitating Menucha Alte's death. His seclusion and self-mortification extend beyond the Shivah and the thirty days of mourning, penitence here being imbued with attrition as in "A Nest Egg for Paradise." Rabbinic Judaism which is basic to all contemporary schools of Jewish religious thought posits the view that man's nature is neutral as evidenced by the fact that in Biblical passages the *yetzer ha-ra* or evil impulse is placed side by side with *yetzer hatobh* or the good impulse. Thus it denies that "man's nature *eo ipso* can be stigmatized as evil, whether as a result of Adam's sin, or because of any theoretical distinction between body and soul, or on any other ground" (Gordis 234-35). Normative Judaism neither holds that man's nature is

intrinsically evil nor seeks to upbear this tenet by indoctrinating that Adam's sin of disobedience places a hereditary and ineludible stigma upon all his descendants (Gordis 225).

Man's propensity to evil is most powerfully manifested in the sexual impulse but not solely in it:

Two impulses God created in His world, the impulse to idolatry (*'adodoh zarah*) and the impulse to immorality (*zenuth*). The impulse to idolatry has already been uprooted, but the impulse to immorality still remains. God said, 'Whoever can resist the second is considered as though he resisted both' (*Shir Hashirim Rabbah*, ch.7, qtd. in Gordis 236).

Mark Meitels in "The Witch" (P 104-132) assumes a kind of helpless sacrificial selfhood in his slow capitulation to the enactment of the sexual ritual with the circean "witch" Bella. As in "A Tale of Two Sisters" (P 181-201) Singer limns the portrait of a schlemiel whose personal anguish and demoniac autarchy are transformed through his victimhood to an ironic acquiescence in primeval chaos. Unlike other schlemiels in Singer's fiction who achieve experiential rapport

with the community through their victimization Haim Leib of "A Tale of Two Sisters" grimly accepts his own degeneration and atrophy in preference to a life of will and memory and communion with others. He comes to believe that "everything lives, everything suffers, struggles, desires. There is no such thing as death" (P 200). Alvin H. Rosenfeld suggests that Singer understands sexual passion as another source of *gnosis* and Bella of "The Witch" like a female *golem* (spirit), in her final act takes the reader through sexual conflict to religious celebration ("Good" 87).

For the schlemiel as for the saint, success is largely, if not entirely, the triumph of the will over personal and human limitations. The success of the schlemiel though, depends upon his distinctive attributes to a far greater extent than does the success of the saint, whose actions necessarily lead him to a sort of divine framework. Through the purity of his intent, the schlemiel simultaneously becomes hero and saint. Like the hero his effectuation alone can complete the desires that his life was spent in creating and realize immortality by offering a dynamic resistance against God. Like the saint he offers what he can and like the hero he works for

enlightenment through self-enrichment and an obdurate refusal to annihilate his own ego.

Between the antipodes of repudiation and compliance oscillate, with a mystifying indifference to consistency, the schlemiel figures in "The Séance" (S 3-15) and "The Bishop's Robe" (CF 130 -140). Inasmuch as the author introduces the supernatural as a paranormal, unexplained and rationally inexplicable phenomenon, some of the stories like "The Séance," "Taibele and Her Demon," "Blood" and "The Destruction of Kreshev" merit the term "Gothic".

... in its purest form, the literature of the occult operates in that area where ... two worlds clash head on - that sense of radical disjunction, that *thrill*, the sensation of numbing dislocation which arises at that point of intersection between two separate worlds, the material and the supernatural. It is this sense of *fracture* which provides the real power of this type of literature (Messent 2).

Dr. Zorach Kalisher of "The Séance" knows that the medium Lotte Kapitzky, her seances, her automatic writings, paintings and symphonies are " 'crazy, meshugga . . . ' " (S 10). He is aware too that her

control Bhagavar Krishna duplicates both Kapitzky's accent as well as her limited theosophic and spiritual knowledge and that the stage properties of the spiritual meeting with his mistress Nella are part of a world of predictable possibility. Yet her seances evoke the mystery at the core of experience affirming man's relationship to the supernatural or numinous reality, and performing a function formerly carried out by myth and religious ritual. While acknowledging the medium's powers to be chimerical, Dr. Kalisher, a quintessential schlemiel is still impressed by its objectives, preferring the state of immersion in the underground habitations of consciousness, undergoing transformation "into a superficial scapegoat whose comic efforts are reduced simply to chaos rather than enlightenment . . ." (Schlobin 123). In "The Captive" (CF 44-59) all the major characters are possessed by the spirit of a Polish Jew, an impressionist painter and Jewish intellectual Zorach Kreiter who epitomizes all the vices of transgression and excess castigated by traditional Judaism. An escapee from his faith and from anti-Semitism Tobias Anfang creates paintings out of his nihilistic predicament. Spiritist possession gradually replaces autonomy and Anfang is forced to live a lie, in a trap that he attempts to idealize. Anfang is now immured in the

hollowness of the Zionist mythos much as he had earlier been imprisoned in that of the Enlightenment mythos (Rice 271).

Fiction prevails in the fantastic where the representational and referential attain predominance. The fantastic reaches its extreme in magic. The magical fabricates a surrogate world which by virtue of its circumstantial and representational elements of contact endeavours to claim actual existence in spite of the reader's resistance to accepting it as natural. Unlike allegory, the fantastic never discards the literal and this effects a natural movement toward the grotesque which functions by preserving the literal through extreme distortions and perversions (Hunter 81). Dr. Kalisher's shaming of himself and his bracing himself for the ultimate degradations of his body are quickly accompanied by the conviction that his own sufferings and the spectacular events in the world defy attribution to Schopenhauer's blind will, his own eroticism, Spinoza's substance, Leibnitz's monads, Hegel's dialectic or Heckel's monism (§ 13). The primacy given to the reader's identification with the character and events of the plot effects the exclusion of the supernatural from both symbolic and figurative readings. An event may exist actually in nature and is literal or appropriate. It may also be actually supernatural and is

then referential and representational or fictional. The distinctions between the symbolic/fictional and the figurative/proper are predicated upon the historical and ideological perspective as much as upon a discrepancy "between the actual and the referential: existence and the perception of existence" (Hunter 81).

The narrator of the "The Captive" as well as Tobias Anfang the ghost painter are victims in the grotesque game of pseudo-resurrection played by Sonia to resuscitate the fame of her dead husband Zorach Kreiter. Though this fiction is a grotesque satire it has its basis in reality and not in a phantasmagoric world. "The Séance" ends with Lotte Kapitzky's utterance: " 'There is no death, there isn't any. We live forever, and we love forever. This is the pure truth' " (S 15). The story's power centres on "this play of truth, this ritual of ambiguity" (Malin, *Singer* 96). "The Captive" deals with literal reincarnation that accommodates itself in the reality of location in time and setting even while the transmigration of the soul is an incontrovertible fact of existence for the characters implicated. The reincarnation, possible or at least conceivable in stories like "The Captive" and "Hanka" (P 3-23) has a double effect : the narrator of the "The Captive" travels to Israel to

discover that he is as vulnerable to spirit transmigration as the friends he is trying to save. In a mockery of his determination to expose the deception practised by Sonia he becomes a captive of Sonia's reincarnated husband as much as that of the mystic spirit of his ancient Jewish past (Mc Intyre 232).

In "Taibele and Her Demon" (*SF* 9-19) the core narrative matter is that of a woman who tells a story about demonic possession and is herself ravished, echoing many such stories within oral tradition.<sup>12</sup> Alchonon poses as Hurmizah the demon, a subterfuge that is transformed into an *idée fixe*, inducing the same fixated idea in the mind of Taibele.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the tale, after Alchonon's death, Taibele is "alone, doubly deserted - by an ascetic and by a devil" and self-estranged too because she can never admit to herself that she had transgressed the Law: "There are secrets that the heart cannot reveal to the lips" (*SF* 19). The demonics animates the major themes of Singer's works. According to Irving H. Buchen:

Satan . . . constitutes the avant and the rear guard of all messianic crazes, both religious and communistic, and reigns supreme as the archetypal overreacher . . . . Specifically, the overt and explicit nature of the Devil has to be seen within

the Jewish context of an unseen God who is without face or form. Indeed the Devil often uses the very elusiveness of God on the one hand and the availability of the demonic on the other to his regular advantage. In the same vein, the Devil is *the* graven image against which the commandment warns, and prides himself at being not only tangible and available, but recurrent ("Devil" 24).

Demonology does not constitute an integral part of mainstream Judaism. Gershom Scholem expounds that "Jewish philosophers dismissed [the problem of evil and the demonic] as a pseudo-problem, while to the Kabbalists it became one of the chief motives of their thinking" (*Kabbalah* 99). This suggests that there is another and perhaps more problematic dimension to the exploration of Singer's use of demonology and the fantastic within the framework of its cultured sources. Both the demonics and fantasy acknowledge a linguistic/cultural community as the source of the imaginative text of recovered meaning. Consideration of the approximation of consciousness in these aspects of Singer's fiction reveals that they become a vehicle for aligning real and imaginative events in both the present and the past and for dissolving the temporal and spatial bridges

between them. The fantastic here engenders narratives "that transgress, subvert, focus on the unknown and move toward endlessly unsatisfied desire . . . ." This results in a struggle by fantastic desire against the reality principle in its endless quest for the gratification of desire (Hunter 102-3). In spite of his simultaneous inversion and introduction of the folklore motifs Singer in the tale "Taibele and Her Demon" mutes the opportunities to signal the fantastic: According to Eric S. Rabkin:

One of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted. The reconfiguration of meanings must make an exact flip-flop, an opposition from up to down, from + to -.

Rabkin continues that one of three kinds of clues will suggest to the reader that an element in the narrative is fantastic; the incident will be manifestly antithetical to the stance sustained by the author; a character in the narrative will register amazement in the face of the incident; the narrator will furnish statements that reveal that the incident does not square with the story's accepted perspectives (*Fantastic* 8). The very opening of

"Taibele and Her Demon" indicates that the narrative voice prevents the reader from feeling that the world of devils is fantastic.

Attempting to confer a theoretically modern framework to the folk-narrative technique in Singer's short fiction and the role of possession in it, Edwin Gittleman argues that the narrator, no matter what the apparent shape of the teller, is in fact a dybbuk who is among other things "the disembodied past recklessly returning and seeking ways of preserving itself. It is memory intent upon being articulated and gaining validation" ("Dybbukianism" 259).

The Kabbalists evolved an involved complex of demonology, integrating conformations from medieval Arabic and Christian demonology apart from Germanic and Slavic folklore. Human-made sources of evil abound in demonology, generated out of Adam's copulation with Lilith, the leading female demon, apart from other transgressions of the sacred law (Lee, *Exile* 30). *Gilgul*, or the transmigration of souls, reincarnation, or metempsychosis and *ibbur* which implicates the entry of one soul into that of another person, occur often in Singer's work as a form of displacement. As Gershom Scholem explains: "The exile of the body in outward history

has its parallel in the exile of the soul in its migrations from embodiment to embodiment, from one form of being to another" (*Kabbalah* 116).

In "The Man Who Came Back" (*SPM* 122-134), an uncanny tale bordering on the fantastic, Shifra Leah brings back the soul of her dead husband, an action which corrupts the soul and ultimately the end itself. Alter's return is a supernatural disruption of a normality, namely death. An occult fiction, a curiously ambivalent stance, containing elements of both sympathy and revulsion is directed toward the sinister protagonist. The resuscitation of the protagonist functions as a symptomatic metaphor for the alienation of his soul from the generative cult of apocalyptic Jewish eschatology. Alter's new self violates the Hebrew conceptions of a living person as essentially a psycho-physical organism. If life is to be renewed after death and the living individual is to be constituted "both the physical body and its animating spirit had to be restored and re-integrated . . . ." (Brandon 64).

Henia Dvosha of "The Power of Darkness" (*OL*-233-244), one of " 'those that kiss the Angel of Death's sword' " (*OL* 239) induces her death so that her husband Godel may marry her sister Dunia. Blighted and ill fated in this sphere she becomes an instigator of trouble in the

other: " 'The living die so that the dead may live' " (*OL* 244). This revelation which is almost a coda implies both that renewal of life depends on moral qualification and that man may not contradict divine judgement or arrogate the powers of God. This is an instance of a psychological imperative determining a theological position and with profound implications. "Short Friday" (*SF* 191-202) presents the case for an inherent death (*thanatos*) impulse or force (*Bia*) in all nature. In Singer's fiction the body frames the mind rather than creates it. The contest between the conscious heroic ego or the realm of the mind and the unconscious psyche or the realm of soul is the result of two mutually exclusive desires : the psyche's desire to absorb ego in order to acquire more awareness of its depth, and the ego's desire to retain its separation and continuity. As James Hillman points out, "the image-soul's delight is the ego-soul's dread" (*Dream* 152).<sup>14</sup> Before considering the death experience of Singer's schlemiels in this light it is relevant to reconsider contemporary thought on the psychological experience of death. The theories of prevailing scientific literalism attempt to delimit all discourse regarding death to a physical event. However, a psychological experience of death, or the conscious awareness of a temporary but significant loss of normal

ego-centric identity, may be similar to the death experience (Hillman, *Suicide* 60). The emphasis on a metaphorical perception of death is pivotal in archetypal psychology, but there are other sources that advocate this position. Robert Jay Lifton, writing of what he terms "experiential transcendence" - the experience of temporary loss and subsequent transformation of the self - perceives it "as epitomizing the death-and-rebirth experience. It is central to change or transformation and has great significance for psychotherapy" (*Self* 34). As Robert Ochs writes, "dying to one's self is not mere metaphor but the meaning behind death itself" (*Death* 125). This experience of "dying to one's self" is what the psychotherapist Stanislav Grof terms "ego death," a climactic experience which "seems to entail an instant merciless destruction of all previous reference points in the life of the individual." As an effect of such experience, "the subject experiences a deep sense of spiritual liberation, redemption and salvation. He or she typically feels freed from anxiety, depression, and guilt, purged and unburdened" (*Psychotherapy* 123).

Throughout Singer's work one finds many references to death-and-rebirth experiences. The necessity of a psychic experience of death as a prerequisite for radical change is posited in most of Singer's

fiction. In "The Fast" (*SF* 94-102) Itche Nokhum subjects his body to excruciating torments, and an almost endless fast in order to realize his true self. Attaining individuation, Itche Nokhum is no longer divided and all fear of death disappears: "It was as if Purah, the Angel of Forgetfulness, had plucked out a peace of Itche Nokhum's memory" (*SF* 98). At times it appears that the only truth is that with which the narrator concludes "Neighbours" (*CF* 275-284): "The radiator near which I sat hissed and hummed: 'Dust, dust, dust.' The singsong penetrated my bones together with the warmth. It repeated a truth as old as the world, as profound as sleep" (*CF* 284). In "The Egotist" (*CF* 236-245) Maria Davidovna says of the dead Kuzensky: " 'He lived for no one but himself. The world will never know how great his egotism was - never, never!' " (*CF* 245).

Jewish existence is predicated upon the idea of covenant which is the basis of the Jewish claim of redemption and posits a special relationship between God and the Chosen People grounded on two apriorisms: the people's witness and divine protection. The dialectical relationship between historical events and religious antiphons was interpreted in the eternal testing ground of covenantal existence which

implicates a sanctification of history as also a reaction to historical mutations. An activity central to covenantal existence is the decoding of history implicating at the same time the eternal condition that covenant affirmation signifies in all generations the conviction that no historical convulsion was potent enough to revoke the faith in the eternality of Israel (A.L.Berger 1-2). Moishe Heisherik in "Why Heisherik Was Born" (180-90) endures much suffering and torture at the hands of the Christian soldiers while serving in the Polish-Bolshevik war, his "pathetic book" (190) being a privileged text, the culmination of the unique comprehension of one who was witness to both events and his interpretation of events as they occurred. For the survivor-narrator, the historical imperative to remember (*zakhor*) implicates remembrance both as a self-sufficing requisite and witness as evidence (Young 171). Heisherik the schlemiel is also a schnorrer and yet the very same protagonist heroically smuggles letters during the Nazi Holocaust, from Bialystok to Warsaw, motivated by a desire to hold separated families together. The narrator surmises that Heisherik's earlier sufferings were reference points for his mission and his martyrdom (190).

A feeling of comic anguish and baroque illusionism animates some of Singer's schlemiels who lead lives without grandeur, these lives being lived at the diminishing point where life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil have arrived as tragically convertible. Singer's narratives in "Getzel the Monkey" (S 149-59) and "Passions" (P 296-312) have a naïve or cynical narrator, and are imbued with personal reminiscences, burlesques and reflections. These tales are colloquial in form, condemning a specific vice, discoursing on a distinct theme, and implicating a counter virtue. Getzel through his aping, engages in a kind of compact with Todrus. This involves a reciprocal responsibility and a satiric punishment which uncovers "the knavery of the punisher [and] the folly of the punished" (Paulson 65). The interlocking relationship between Todrus and Getzel becomes a corruption of the ideal relationship or a deviation from the norm of behaviour. Getzel is a schlemiel who masquerades as a heroic man but the ideal of heroism itself remains inviolate for both Todrus and Getzel. The excesses and decline of these men expose them as pretenders while society's assumptions about greatness are manifested as illusory. Disputing Johan Huizinga's metaphysical exegesis of the play element in culture Roger Caillois discusses the play element in games more

elaborately. This according to him is signaled by two powers, which he names *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* overlays "spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct" and though annihilative, wrackful and egomaniacal is basically "the primitive joy in destruction and upset." Conversely, *ludus* is "complementary to and a refinement of *paidia*, which it disciplines and enriches." *Ludus* is individuated by "calculation" and "contrivance," and is an issue of the "primitive desire to find diversion and amusement in arbitrary, perpetually recurring obstacles" (*Games* 28-33). Caillois comments on the distinction thus:

[Games] can also be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of controlled fantasy that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to blind it with arbitrary, imperative,

and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect. This latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity, I call this second component *ludus* (*Games* 13).

The restrained fantasy of *paidia* is evident in Getzel's mimicry and arbitrariness. The perversity of *ludus* is to be perceived in the schlemiel's subversion of the social order through acquiring Todrus' wife Fogel in a disadvantageous business transaction with him. In "The Plagiarist" (§ 95-110) there occurs a variation on the theme of mimicry. Reb Kasriel Dan Kinsker struggles to overcome his temptation to revile his pupil Shabsai Getsel who systematically abstracts the Rabbi's manuscripts about the Talmudic texts and brings out the exegesis in his own name, thereby appropriating the fame that rightly belongs to the rabbi. The narrative underscores the problematic of struggling against evil without oneself becoming evil.

"A Wedding in Brownsville"(SF 161-73) manifests exile as "a symptomatic metaphor for the state of the narrative imagination" (Seidel 8). The exilic vision is originative in that the protagonist, Dr. Solomon Margolin experiences a sense of salvation from the depression and guilt which are the residues of his survival from the Holocaust. Dr. Margolin, who has migrated from Sencimin to America is part of a disinherited race both because old relationships fail to survive and the new social forms are unrecognizable to him. A noisy, *heimesh* wedding in Brownsville provides the occasion for his mystical reunion with his lover Raizel. A metonymical purification which provides an imaginative solace to the émigré's heartache occurs through the supernatural encounter. Suggestions of extinction are present throughout the story in the juxtaposition of life and death. Gradually Dr. Margolin comes to a realization of the fact of his own death - he was the victim of the accident, his the dead body removed, he the guest who still had not come.

Lionel Trilling posits the inadequacy of the means to communicate the inexpressible suffering of both the victims and the survivors of the Holocaust (*Imagination* 264-65). Edward Alexander contends in a more

accommodative vein that "some degree of failure or inadequacy is almost a precondition of success in which we can expect no more than a shattered majesty and a noble imperfection" (*Resonance* xiii). Fictions such as these generate not a theodicy but an assertion of the metanoia and transcendental metaphysics of human potential and idealism. The Holocaust engenders a vacuity that can be filled in only by human compassion. In the case of Singer the changeover from the cosmic to the human sphere is both abrupt and belated, effected not by the order of events but by a transition in the writer's perspective. Most of Singer's work since *Short Friday* (*The Séance, Enemies: A Love Story, Friends of Kafka, Passions*) pursue a divergent strain from the earlier fiction in that their locale is the United States rather than the shtetl and most of the protagonists are survivors. In the later stories which are positioned in Europe, the concentration camp appears only obliquely and yet is seen as a sort of palimpsest with the shtetl. This effaces much of the pre-Holocaust civilization's innocence and effervescence. The earlier fiction focuses on the contention in the supernal worlds between supernatural powers for domination over the soul of man. This tenor is replaced in the later fiction with a greater application to the ethical problematics of suffering, persecution and

conflict-ridden humanity, of phenomenal existence and co-existence (Ezrahi 124). As Herman Gombiner of "The Letter Writer" (*S* 239-276) says "The spirit cannot be burned, gassed, hanged, shot. Six million souls must exist somewhere" (*S* 263). The narrator of "The Last Demon" (*SF* 103-112) confesses that it is futile to proselytize for evil in these times: "I, a demon, bear witness that there are no more demons left. Why demons, when man himself is a demon? Why persuade to evil someone who is already convinced?" (*SF* 103). Like his creator the demon attempts to convey that history has left his self intact and that he could defy time. There is also the dubious conviction that there is neither judge nor judgement and that to the generation that has indeed succeeded in becoming absolutely sinful, the only Messiah that will appear is death.

The later fiction traces the shadows of the shtetl in a post-Holocaust diaspora as well as the classical theological positions which were subverted by secular modes of thought, discontinuities and the Nazi cataclysm. At the same time it avoids the postulation of a historiosophical overview that would provide a coherent antidote to the Holocaust (Ezrahi 126).

Singer's apocalyptic fiction like his Holocaust fiction is expressive of an existential terror engendered by a rupture between a philosophy of evolving good and an abiding obsession with the medieval conception of guilt-laden, sin-ridden man. In the absence of any satisfactory theory that accounts for the existence of evil and pain, this fiction can minimally hypostatize the world felt if not perceived as mind. In "The Gentleman of Cracow" (*GF* 25-43), the town of Frampol, beleaguered by poverty and drought is inveigled into blasphemy, avarice and lust, as well as into an unmitigated and dionysiac violation of the Law to obtain the gold that the affluent stranger from Cracow has brought. At the culmination of the festival of abomination the Gentleman from Cracow reveals himself to be the Chief of the Devils, Ketev Mriri and his bride Hodle turns out to be Lilith. The conflagration in which the innocent children of Frampol are decimated is the prelude to a radical reconstruction of the community: "From generation to generation the people remained paupers. A gold coin became an abomination in Frampol, and even silver was looked at askance" (*GF* 42-43). This vaticinal tale belatedly rationalizes the hazardous theory that " 'worse is better' " (Alexander, *Fiction* 38).

Mircea Eliade in his transcultural studies of the nature of religion emphasizes the sacral importance of forming community. For traditional societies such acts were "only repetition of a primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation. When they tilled the desert soil, they were in fact repeating the act of the gods who had organized chaos by giving it a structure, forms, and norms" (*Sacred* 31). Singer educos his symbolism from a mythic worldview in which creation and the demonic are primitival antipodes. The demonic incarnates the vacuity which may be negated by the fullness of choate creation, the chaos ever traversed by God's formal order, the darkness thwarted by God's light, the silence expunged by God's word (*Lee, Exile* 54).

In Jewish folk tradition, Chelm is a Polish town remarkable only for the large number of fools who inhabit it. As in Frampol the only alternative in this legendary town to incongruence is the imperative of comic ironies whereby the fulfilment of the Messianic promise is construed as a formidable apocalyptic threat (*Gittleman, "Apocalyptic Town"* 64-65). "The Destruction of Kreshev" (*SPM* 160-214) reifies the drama of the mind engaged in the quest for

metaphysical and moral absolutes in a world that proffers amorphous semblances of an occult order but withholds ultimate revelation and illumination. The Midrash and the Book of Ezekiel envision an apocalyptic redemption, the former even containing the legend that the Messiah was born on the very day of the Destruction of the Temple, apart from the Talmudic idea that the Messiah will appear only to a generation totally innocent or absolutely corrupt (Ezekiel 11:13,16 qtd. in Alexander, *Short Fiction* 35).

The year 1492 was long believed by many Kabbalistic writers to be the age in which redemption would come to the Jews. However while the cataclysm came in the form of the exile from Spain the redemption was still nowhere in sight. The Chmielnitzki pogroms which are proximate to the Holocaust in Singer's imaginative universe induced a large segment of the Jewry to place faith in the false messianism of Sabbatai Zevi out of a desperate urge to perceive the cataclysm as an antecedent to the apocalyptic revelation. Singer's works link the tradition of false messianism with political and religious utopianism which is believed by this author to be a dangerous human impulse capable of subverting humanity. The latter with its intolerance of human and social frailties and

its impetuosity induces the desire for chaos and rebirth. Like "The Gentleman from Cracow" "The Destruction of Kreshev" is also animated by the element of desperation, eager faith in an evil spirit or messianic disciple offering escape from the taboos of rabbinical dictates, the lure of eroticism and the desire for chaos (Alexander, *Short Fiction* 35-36). The degenerate Kabbalist Shloimele is a follower of Sabbatai Zevi whose cult, after his apostasy, encouraged cozenage and perverse inversions of messianic beliefs. Shloimele convinces his mystically inclined bride that they are atavisms destined to be reincarnations of King David's children. Lise is lured by the clever Shloimele into Kabbalistic and sexual research as well as experimentation with animalism. Lise's transgressions with Mendel arise from Shloimele's overdeveloped intellect and messianic delusions. The Holocaust visualized by the aficionados of apocalypse even when it materializes brings no redemption in its wake. The heretic schlemiels, Lise and Shloimele like the unfortunate folk of Frampol, commit the sin of idolatry which in Jewish faith is the root cause of all transgressions and moral evil. In its broad sense "Idolatry is the absolutization of the relative, it is absolute devotion paid to anything short of the Absolute" (Herberg 94).

The necessity for religious authenticity which demands a reinterpretation of Jewish mystical concepts and that of a spiritual journey whose goal is salvific animates the fiction of Singer who believes that the artist's role is invested with vital civilizational implications. In "The Slaughterer" (*S* 17-30) the abhorrence of the town *shohet* (slaughterer) for the savagery of the ritual act of slaughter induces him to question the divine power that sanctified it. The ancient ceremony of *shehitah* is abruptly transvalued into an act of brutal murder in spite of the rabbi's injunction that man may not have more compassion than God. Yoineh Meir blasphemously indicts God with indifference to animal slaughter: "Thou art a slaughterer and the Angel of Death! The whole world is a slaughter-house!" (*S* 29). Simon the horse trader of "The Parrot" (*S* 203-222) and Professor Vladislav Eibeschutz of "Pigeons" (*FOK* 107-117) with their love for all creatures act and perform things that proceed not from an external mechanical rationale, but from the interior pressures of their own psyche. The protagonist of "Pigeons" ultimately realises that it is the "*reshayim*, the wicked . . . who make history" (*FOK* 113). In its resonances of anti-Semitism and the pogroms "The Pigeons" arises out of the same perception that generates the vision

underlying "The Slaughterer" - the ineluctable causative link between individual morality, history and religion.

These protagonists draw on humanist and secular traditions, advocating a reverence for the sacredness of all life, rejecting traditional theological categories. The scriptural description of the creation of man expresses the profound truth of the schlemiel's paradoxical status in the universe. Even while man is in nature he transcends it. In spite of being subject to the tenets of natural exigency he retains an inextirpable freedom of self-determination within the delimiting and conditioning elements of nature and history. An adequate philosophy of man must take into account the inseparable aspects of his nature.

The Hebraic conception of man eschews alike the hazards of naturalism and of body-soul dualism. Naturalism believes that man is merely a natural object with no intrinsic character, a part of the order of nature with no significant difference from "other" animals. Hence accommodates him into a scheme of causal determinism that concedes no space for freedom, reason or ethical responsibility. Dualism conceives of the body as a prison-house of the soul from which the latter perpetually struggles to escape, thus construing man as essentially immaterial. While

dualism views the essence of human existence in the contemplative life appropriate to a discarnate spirit, naturalism is a reductionist philosophy that perceives human existence as the interaction of organism and environment. In spite of its ostensibly materialistic emphasis on man as dynamic and unitary, Judaism sees man's capacity for the word and his free will to be the mark of the divine likeness impressed upon him (Herberg 69-74).

The protagonists in the afore cited stories know and resent their finiteness, relativity and incompleteness. Yet in a world intent on the systematic extirpation of natural motivations, the very survival of the spontaneous impulse, however haphazard, is in itself a feat of heroic implication. However in some of Singer's schlemiels can be seen the hazards of a puerile intellectualism which negates and subverts the human and humanizing impulse. In "The Spinoza of Market Street" (*SPM* 3-24) Dr. Nahum Fischelson, an elderly philosopher, a former yeshiva prodigy now estranged from orthodoxy by a passion for Spinoza rediscovers human compassion as well as his own virility through his marriage with Black Dobbe, his mannish neighbour. In his solitary state Dr. Fischelson had found comfort in the thought that he was a part of the

cosmos: "In such moments, Dr. Fischelson experienced the *Amor Dei Intellectualis* which is, according to the philosopher of Amsterdam, the highest perfection of the mind." He is "aware of that infinite extension which is, according to Spinoza, one of God's attributes" (*SPM* 7). He entertains opinions so heterodox as to give rise to rumours that he is either a heretic or an apostate. However after the "miracle" of his love Dr. Fischelson's vision synthesizes the worlds of the stars and the street. Dr. Fischelson recognizes the untenability of neutrality at the end of the conflict which is the culmination of the pain of the Singerian choice.

The Spinozist system of ideas finds only a tangential reference in Singer's work for the author focuses upon the philosopher's personality and the paradox of his simultaneous estrangement and commitment to Jewish tradition. Figuratively Spinoza is a focal point of the tension between rationalism and supernaturalism, between enlightenment and canonical authority, or between Spinozist intellectualism and Hassidic emotion. Spinozist ethics obliquely represent the problematic status of the Yiddish writers from Mendele Mocher Sforim up to Singer himself who had to reconcile themselves to the opposing cultures of the Haskalah and the Jewish tradition (*Mintz* 75).

In spite of his existential leanings Dr. Fischelson fails to become a full-fledged existential hero because he does not continue to remain in a world "where knowledge but increases vertigo" (Auden 84). Instead he desires to arrest the flux of existence by seeking images of stability and rest. Dr. Fischelson had conceived of a scheme of existence and yet he had lost sight of the chaos against which the pattern was evolved. Martin Heidegger points out that every structure of consciousness is dialectically part of that chaos which negates it. He emphasizes the need of "letting oneself go into Nothing, that is to say, freeing oneself from the idols we all have and to which we are wont to go on cringing" (*Existence* 347-49). Man's failure to free himself from idolatry is ultimately for Heidegger as for the schlemiel of "The Spinoza of Market Street" a denial of his experiential being in time. Singer points out that the story is partly ironic, for the protagonist in spite of being a Spinozist is a deep thinker. Disputing Spinoza's negation of emotions, Singer points out that human emotions are "not only a material treasure, but also a great treasure of revelation, because our emotions reveal to us things which we cannot grasp with our intellect" (interview with Pondrom 348).

Like Dr. Fischelson, Dr. Yaretzky of "The Shadow of a Crib" (*SPM* 61-88) disentangles himself from commitment to a world which he sees as full of suffering and devoid of purpose. Exiled in the night, Dr. Yaretzky has a vision of community in the homely love between the rabbi and his wife, and yet he rejects his vision. Years later, after his death, still haunted by the redemptive possibility he had once perceived and chosen to renounce, he haunts the rabbi's study. Very often, the life anatomized in Singer's narratives is rendered in anti-thesis; the pattern character may need to choose between two worlds or he may be balanced against an antipodean character (Golden 35).

What is ultimately placed in the balance against the weight of the protagonists' intellectualism in these stories is the new vision which resists self-serving and destructive illusion. The categories of self-consciousness that determine the life of these schlemiels whether they be commitment or repudiation, rebellion or reconciliation are transformed into basic categories for contemplating the world. As the ideological discourse about the world merges with confessional discourse about oneself, the direct signifying power of self-utterance is enhanced resisting any external finalization. Thus the protagonist of "The Cabalist of East Broadway"

(*CF* 123-129) makes an antithetical decision. After this old sick cabalist Joel Yabloner is resuscitated in Israel with much hype and recognition he unexpectedly returns to a lonely existence in New York, perhaps to be buried near a woman he had loved. Yabloner's circuitous journey from Exile to Zion and back again, demonstrates what might be termed a motto of the collection itself: " 'Man does not live according to reason' " (*CF* 129). Unable to enter the world of the mystically ascetic rabbi of the town Dr. Yaretsky withdraws only to reappear in it many years later as an apparition: "Why should a Christian heretic seek the house of a rabbi?" (*SPM* 88). To answer that the mystic life is superior to the life of the mind embedded in the aridities of secular enlightened thought would do only partial justice to the story (*Mintz* 80). A similar issue is broached in "Caricature" (*SPM* 97-108). A progeny of the Jewish Enlightenment Dr. Boris Margolis has a manuscript which is nothing less than an exposition of his own metaphysical system, and the arguments which appeared to be incisive at one time now after a lapse of years seem to be jejune.

Singer's apparent repudiation of intellectualism as represented through his schlemiels appears to be a question of asserting the value of

intellectual life: "We are the people of the idea," writes Lionel Trilling, "and we rightly fear that the intellect will dry up the blood in our veins and wholly check the emotional and creative part of the mind" (*Imagination* 276). In his short fiction Singer explores variations on the internal/external paradigm of schlemielhood, highlighting issues that are central to contemporary understandings of Jewish identity. The complexity of subjectivity persists even for characters who do not hesitate to define themselves as Jews and whose Jewish identities rely strongly on Jewish history and community. Singer's aversion to sterile intellectualism is matched by the power of his dichotomic vision, by the unconstraint and the creativity of the life eulogized in the fiction.

Singer's intimate relationship with the *folkmentsh* and the ensuing literature that even if not always by the folk was at least of and for them, causes the author to regard himself and be regarded by others as "a continuator of a prophetic tradition which might indeed excoriate man's iniquities but never felt that it was either unheeded or defied with impunity . . . . The Yiddish writer, part of the mighty moral stream, never felt that he was a voice crying out in the wilderness" (Landis 257-58). The content of Singer's work is the theological turmoil of

Jewish existence on both communal and private planes. The predicament of the author's schlemiels revolves around religious speculation, parable and metaphysical cerebration. Amidst the chaos of the ordinary they strive for personal salvation.

# Reflective/Reflexive Postures of the Schlemiel: The Novels

Lasitha B.V “Schlemiel as paradigm: The hero in selected fiction of Isaac Bashevis singer” Thesis. Department of English , University of Calicut, 2000

## Chapter IV

### Reflective/Reflexive Postures of the Schlemiel: The Novels

The foregoing chapters have discussed a number of implications attendant upon the assumption of the ontological complexity in character. A more generic and more resilient use of myth and history in conjunction with characterization emerges when we survey some of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novelistic treatments of the concept of the schlemiel and the paradoxical possibilities inherent in this concept.

*Satan in Goray*, the only pre-Holocaust novel in Singer's canon, exhibits a manic-depressive cycle of hope and despair in which the isolate schlemiels of the town of Goray after being ravaged by Chmielnicki's massacres seek force, leadership and authority. The novel sets the pattern of aberration and penitency so vital to Singer's fiction. "Traditional Judaism invariably defines his moral norm, false messianism his mode of deviance, penitence his return to grace" (L.S. Friedman 52). The community's futile craving for transcendence is blended with an imaginative rendering of the historical event of messianism, the appearance in the seventeenth century of the false messiah, Sabbatai Zevi.<sup>15</sup> The segment of the population that has not been decimated, baptized or sold into slavery is left amidst the debris of

their existence to ponder the eternal enigma of why God's Chosen people have been abandoned to the brutality of their uncovenanted oppressors.

Rather than fixating his artistic energies on the fantastic elements of the historical movement of Sabbatianism or the brazen character of the false messiah Singer seeks to apprehend the internal pressures which induced a large segment of an ancient population who had had previous encounters with false messianism to construct their hopes around so dubious and worthless a candidate for messiahship. For the historical reality to supercede even fantasy is a frequent occurrence in Jewish history and the writer's function "is to imagine, by an act of sympathetic identification, reality itself" (Alexander, *Singer* 25). However the historical dimension of the novel is subordinant to its mythical context inasmuch as "myth is an elementary idea or archetype continuous with the whole history of man and thus capable of developing spontaneously, along traditional lines, wherever mankind lives, dreaming" (Blackburn 6).

The dialectical relationship between the contradictory forces of rationalism and irrationalism, monotheism and myth rather than the insinuation of extrinsic ideas endows Jewish history and Judaism their dynamism. The very fact that theirs was a minority community induced

dissenting Jews of the middle ages to resort to apostasy rather than internal heresy (Biale 148). For Gershom Scholem, messianism serves the same function as myth. Being a product of myth it was an "anarchic breeze" which galvanized the jaded and cloistered world of Jewry: when the powerful energies of Gnostic mysticism were liberated from meditative speculation and addressed towards messianic activity, Sabbatianism, the greatest internal convulsion of the Jewish middle ages which evolved within Jewish mysticism was born. This movement decisively unbraced the traditional medieval world and initiated the modern era in Jewish history (*Messianic* 25-26).

Gershom Scholem's historical interest in the Sabbatian phenomenon was encouraged by his perception of contemporary obsessions and the social implications of the movement. Singer, on the other hand, manipulates history to emphasize the irrational forces in man and his susceptibility to insane persuasion. The Sabbatian intrusion into Goray becomes the means by which Singer "explores the efficacy of community as a mystical source of meaning which can transcend the darkness personified by the demonic" (Lee, *Exile* 60). Rabbi Benish seeks to sanctify and bulwark the community and his very shadow contends with

evil. However he becomes himself an anchorite, unable to form community within his own household. The chapter contrasting the old and the new Goray conflates the images of anomie and disorder which pervade the rabbi's household with those which infuse the newly established community. Mircea Eliade writes:

Since 'our world' is a cosmos, any attack from without threatens to turn it into chaos. And as 'our world' was founded by imitating the paradigmatic work of the Gods, the cosmogony, so the enemies who attack it are assimilated to the enemies of the gods, the demons, and especially to the archdemon, the primordial dragon conquered by the gods at the beginning of time (*Sacred* 47-48).

The frenzied residents of Goray become totally unforbearing in the certainty of their exclusive redemption. Apart from the fact that popular memory employs a rigorously analogous process of vocalization and exegesis to historical events and personages, in the Hebrew Messianic tradition itself one has to reckon with the conception of an 'elite' who construe contemporary history in terms of myth (Eliade, *Myth* 38). The commoners of Goray are stampeded into a cultic mysticism which

propounds both asceticism and libertinism. The conflict between the cultists and the orthodox in the prayer house culminates in the victory of the former who repudiate rabbinic law and contemplate the prospect of the advent of the messiah. The messiah's arrival, they insist, invalidates the Commandments. The pathological condition of the pogrom survivors is symbolized by the schlemiels Rechele and Reb Gedaliya who receive the impact of messianism. Through them the community is erotically and diabolically convulsed by its ecstasy to free itself of history, the canon, of everything but the unworldly promise of divine salvation. The revelation of Zevi's apostasy causes the exacerbation of the saturnalian disintegration of the community. Goray is torn between the ascetic Sabbatians who believe that self-flagellation and the pursuit of absolute virtue will bring the messiah and the antinomian Sabbatians who profane everything that is consecrated.

Gershom Scholem points out that Nathan of Gaza's interpretation of antinomianism exalts an incommunicable state of apotheosis with its *euphoria*, manifesting itself in grotesque acts of profanation and desecration, to the rank of a "sacred act" in which a transcendent reality becomes apparent: the state of the new "world of *Tikkun*." In Nathan's

interpretation there exists a certain relationship between the messiah and the course of all the intrinsic processes such as the *tsimtsum* (concentration or contraction, also withdrawal or retreat of God's light), *Shevirah Ha-kelim* (breaking of the vessels) and *Tikkun* (restoration). At the inception of the cosmic process, *En-sof* (Divinity) withdrew his light into Himself, effecting the primordial space where all the worlds are born and where the formless, hylic forces, the *Kelipoth*, inhabit. The process of the world consists in endowing the *Kelipoth* with form, until which effectuation, the primal space and especially the "depth of the great abyss" remain the abode of demonic evil and dark powers. The soul of the Messiah was embedded in the original divine light of the great abyss where dwelt the serpents that try to allure and afflict it. When this soul has finished its struggle with the serpents and achieved perfection it would leave its prison and manifest itself in an earthly incarnation (*Major Trends* 296-97).

God must distance himself from the deluded and rabid schlemiels, a God whose outermost extreme is Satan or a God who like the dybbuk-narrator, retreats into a silence of renunciation. Thus in Goray, "goodness is rather ineffectual, irrelevant, or non-existent, while piety is an

invitation to demonic seizure, and innocence is valuable only because it is capable of being corrupted" (Gittleman, "Apocalyptic" 75).

Gershom Scholem defines two types of messianism: restorative and utopian-catastrophic. The former sought to restore political sovereignty, and while advocating a radical change in the Jews' exilic existence, did so within the structure of tradition: the messianic era would end the circle of history by reinstating the Jews, thus fulfilling all the commandments. The utopian-catastrophic view, also called apocalypticism, envisions an entirely new world as in a mythical Eden. The apocalyptic theory of history posits that the new aeon would be anteceded by a sudden breach in historical continuity and might be typified by a radically new law; apocalyptic messianism was therefore susceptible to heretical antinomianism (*Messianic* 3-4).

A major casualty in the search for the mythical in modern times is the world of moral discrimination. Singer's antinomian schlemiels do not inhabit "the well-explored and 'radiant' moral world, which may mean in practice the world of complex explanations, reasons and accommodations that man in any civilized context owes to man. In the stuff of the dilemma we find the myth working" (Righter 39). Paradoxically the schlemiels in

*Satan in Goray* are also scapegoats of messianism. Bestiality, desire, self-interest, voluntary as well as prescribed sacrifice, jealousy, hope and fear mould the character of the scapegoat as he appears both in reality and in imagination. Inasmuch as the concept of the scapegoat, his narrative and characterological deployment in literature are discernible in many cultures, the modern writer can hardly be deemed an innovator of the concept. Even in primordial societies the *pharmakos* or the scapegoat was an agency through which man sought the sustentation of society, obeisance to the gods and his own psychic release. The paradox that a scapegoat while foreordained for punishment and sacrifice is also exalted and venerated is replete with tragic, comic and ironic ramifications (Vickery 131). The primitive ontological conception is that an object or an act acquires reality only inasmuch as it imitates, repeats or participates in paradigmatic archetypes. The schlemiel is a paradigm of archetypal man in that like the man of traditional culture he perceives his own reality insofar as he ceases to be himself. To the extent that "primitive" ontology evidences a Platonic structure, there is also "an implicit abolition of profane time, of duration, of 'history.'" Thus a sacrifice aside from replicating the initial sacrifice revealed by a god *ab origine* at the beginning of time, occurs at the same

primordial mythical moment, man himself being projected into that mythical epoch in which the archetypes were first revealed (Eliade, *Myth* 34-35).

In order to obviate contemplation of the term "scapegoat" in its limited, contemporary sense wherein it is synonymous with "sucker" or "fall guy," and trace its affinities with the Yiddish schlemiel, some of its general features need to be examined. The Judeo-Christian tradition has it that in pre-exilic times, the sin-receiver who was sacrificed in the ritual of atonement was usually an animal, while in classical times the scapegoat was usually a human being (Vickery 131-32). However, an even broader handling of the scapegoat can be perceived in primitive cultures as evidenced in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Frazer points out that the principle of vicarious suffering and public expelling of the accumulated evils of a village are usually found among primitive cultures that are not camouflaged by the elegance of metaphysics or the ratiocinations of theology. Such societies engage in erroneous ideas as a result of the residue of religious superstitions (539). Frazer's conclusions, drawn out of innumerable instances have significant ramifications for the interpretation of scapegoat figures as they appear in literary texts. In the first place, it can

be indisputably claimed that both the immediate and mediate expulsions of evils are identical in their animus. This is due to the fact that evils are impalpable or tangible which is a circumstance entirely collateral to the ritual intent of aversion and the eradication of the evil smiting the individual and the community. In the second place, the general expulsion of embodied evil in a material vehicle may be occasional or periodic. In the third place, the scapegoat ritual itself may be preceded or followed by a period of Saturnalian license in which social hierarchies are transposed, carnival revelry and sybaritic feasts enjoyed and promiscuous and abandoned sexuality practised. Depending on its proximity to the scapegoat sacrifice, the Saturnalia may be a total plunge into evil before purification or a brief and well-bounded expression of relief at the removal of evil. Fourthly, the ritual death of the divine man or king-God who is employed as a scapegoat represents a public rite of expiation as well as a vegetation rite discrete from that of the scapegoat (575-77). The chief factors involved in this elision are the heightened possibility of misinterpretation as a result of the sense of divinity and the replacement of it with the idea of mere commonplace human victimhood (Vickery 133).

*The Magician of Lublin* is Singer's first novel where the author's primary concern is not with the inevitability of Jewish destiny but with the predicament of the individual. The author deals with the tragi-comedy of the artist's self-creation and the attempt to seek in religion the answers to metaphysical questions (Alexander, *Singer* 60-61). Singer conducts an enquiry of the contraposition between the ethic of the artist and that of the believing Jew, the intangibility of perfect freedom, the conflict between the aesthetic and moral life. Illusionist and archimage, Yasha Mazur's metaphorical tightrope walking is an image of his journey through life, his insouciant juggling and balancing of his four women. However it is also a reflection of the tension of his precarious inner journey into the soul where dark forces seek to thwart him. Yasha's calling is highly symbolic in that he can make believe that he has the ability to "defy" natural law. He is the virtuoso of rebellion, the ultimate trickster, the supreme magus. Yasha believes that his peculiar genius derives from his assumption of disparate facades and masquerades and a compulsive role-playing and self-fashioning that go far beyond the theatricality demanded by his profession, analogous to his magical illusions. "He was a maze of personalities - religious and heretical, good and evil, false and sincere" (*ML* 58). Yasha is convinced

that his ability to lead a vicarious existence through diverse selves, none of them synchronous with his own is what provides him with the key that unlocks the mystery which abides in each human being: "Everyone was like a lock, each with his own key. Only one such as he, Yasha, could unlock all souls" (*ML* 58). According to Sigmund Freud:

Sorcery . . . is essentially the art of influencing spirits by treating them in the same way as one would treat men in like circumstances: appeasing them, . . . intimidating them, robbing them of their power, subduing them to one's will - by the same methods that have proved effective with living men. Magic, on the other hand, is something different: fundamentally, it disregards spirits and makes use of special procedures and not of everyday psychological methods (*Totem* 78).

Doubtless the motives behind Yasha's magic are complex but prominent among them is mimesis, the imitation and commemoration of the primal act of creation itself. As time goes on, says Freud, the psychological emphasis moves from the *motives* for the magical act to its procedures, to the act itself. It is as though "the magical act itself which

owing to its similarity with the desired result, alone determines the occurrence of that result" (*Totem* 84). Yasha, itinerant and ambitious has implicitly accepted the conditions of material success. Ostensibly he deviates from the homogeneity of the ghetto and sectarian values toward a world of artistic success. Yet because of the prevailing superstitions about magic and the fact that his profession has no official recognition, Yasha holds little esteem in the community, though he remains an index of mystery to them. In spite of his continuing belief Yasha's God is rather an unheretical supreme artist who dexterously manoeuvres nature, than an associate in a uniquely Jewish covenant (L.S Friedman 121). The protagonist's dark night of the soul begins with his discovery of Magda's suicide and ends with his sight of Zefel's ultimate degradation.

Lawrence S. Friedman points out that Singer's Jews are besieged by competing ideologies ranging from the mystic heresy of Sabbatianism to the modern heterodox credos of Darwinism, Marxism, Freudianism and Existentialism that are variations of false messianism. Atheistic existentialism proceeds on the postulate that existence precedes essence. The definition or lack of definition places the onus of responsibility for his existence upon the individual who in his awful freedom has to define

himself through his actions. "Yasha Mazur is the Singer hero who comes closest to embodying Sartre's dictum that man is freedom" (*Understanding* 128-29).

When one speculates about the spiritual ambience embedded in the concept of the schlemiel it becomes evident that the narrative structure of *The Magician of Lublin* evidences a recurrent nudity of the self before time, a movement of negation, of reduction to an individual consciousness pre-existing culture itself, which it then may be preparing to recapitulate and recreate. Thus the ethical certitude of the authentic schlemiel compels Yasha to strip his social masks until he is a mere consciousness confronting with ancestral astuteness, the millenia of his solitude. Fundamentally a con artist, potentially a poetmaker of a new social identity, Yasha goes through a masquerade of episodic adventures. Within his community Yasha inspires both fear and respect, contempt and admiration, some of them claiming "that he practised black magic and owned a cap which made him invisible, capable of squeezing through cracks in the wall" while the more sceptical ones maintained "that he was merely a master of illusion" (*ML* 5).

Yasha imputes his attraction to the life of hedonism and criminality to a malady associated with the artist, namely boredom and justifies his

own conduct as the only anodyne for boredom. The author thus links him with the most destructive forces of the past hundred years, during which time what Irving Howe describes as "the explosive power of boredom" (*Politics* 144) led to the fragmentation of traditional society and its restraints. "Yasha was well aware that his worst enemy was his ennui. To escape it, he had committed all of his follies" (*ML* 129). Even if life often suggests a descent, Yasha's dreams are filled with fantasies of flight. He "dreamt that he was flying . . . . He dreamt this almost every night, and each time awoke with the sensation that a distorted kind of reality had been revealed to him" (*ML* 38). The possibility that Yasha ultimately plays God, a cosmic prankster, who tricks others as well as himself introduces the theme of metaphysical scepticism that undergirds the novel. This theme is developed metaphorically in the text on at least two occasions: during his journey with Magda Yasha whispers wonderstruck: "Oh, God Almighty, You are the magician, not I!" (*ML* 60). Yasha's fantasies of power can be regarded as an attempt to exist in the imagination. While Gimpel's is a movement toward transcendent knowledge from the arena of mundane existence, Yasha's vacillation is a reversal of this movement. Thus his self-created failure to pick a simple key, his last exercise of free will, at the

climactic moment of the novel occurs "when his fantasies impinge directly on his ability to act, when his process of self-deception turns him into the *schlemiel*" (Pinsker "Fictive" 37).

It has been suggested that the dominating principle in Singer's fiction can hardly be construed as "anti-Prometheanism," a lack of faith in the potency of defiance, overreaching and pride, a scepticism about the adequacy of knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand, Singer's characters must exist through their cravings, hedonistic desires and mantic expectations. "Anti-Prometheanism" ultimately is predicated upon a conviction in the inescapability of the recurrence of the Promethean urge (Howe, "Demonic" 584-85). Each time Yasha ponders over the various constraints placed over him by the relationship with Emilia - desertion of his wife, apostasy, the acquisition of money, he finds himself restrained by the mysterious immanence of Jewish religion and his own ancestral memory of his forebears. As depicted in the novel, Christian society appears to be far more accommodative, assimilative and eclectic than Jewish society: "Artfully, they had fused religion with materialism, connubiality with adultery, Christian love with worldly hate" (ML 99). It is the eclectic nature of Christian culture which Yasha viscerally resents

and rejects, for his diacritic and idiosyncratic vision of life is of a choice between extreme and mutually exclusive contingencies of debasement and asceticism, perfect freedom and total imprisonment (Alexander, *Singer* 65). In spite of Yasha's disconcertment regarding his religious identity his cultural tradition furnishes him with the generic categories that permit him to sort out the fragments of his discourse, of memories and of delusions. Yet Yasha attempts to pigeon-hole them as best he can in accordance with the demands of taxonomy whose contour and justifications escape him. He, in his lack of vision ascribes everything to his freedom, to his ego and to his enunciation.

The rite of passage between the profane and religious is not yet possible for Yasha who must later perceive the intimate and causal linkage between adultery and murder before he realizes that the violation of a single commandment is potentially the violation of all of them. It is from a profound consciousness of his own culpability in the tragic destinies of Zeffel and Magda that Yasha's decision to repent arises. The rigour of Yasha's self-imposed immurement in his new incarnation as Reb Jacob the Penitent, comes into conflict with both traditional Judaism and existential ideology. Inasmuch as God's compact is not with an

individual but with a chosen people, Yasha's extreme form of penitence threatens oversimplification of the covenantal bonding. Hence the rabbi's reminder that this is an abdication of free will. "Man deprived of free will was like a corpse" (*ML* 223). According to Singer:

Our philosophers and sages always said that this problem of free will and determinism is something which cannot be solved. It's just like the question of the squaring of the circle . . . . It is a contradiction, because if everything is determined there is no free will, and if there is no free will, there cannot be determinism. But experience shows us that both of them exist, and we live in this paradox all our lives . . . . We are both driven and we have the feeling of free will (interview with Pondrom 17).

Yasha is at once Western picaresque and Yiddish folk hero. Yiddish characters rarely experience the Aristotelian gravitation from *hubris* into humility. Inasmuch as Yiddish writers repudiate worldly criteria of greatness as mere expressions of physical appetite, Yiddish heroes are not provided with justification for pride. These writers focus on "the unheroic who 'live and endure in silence' and whose endings lack either dramatic

climax or social impact," (B. Siegel, "Sacred" 37). Yasha very often confounds dream with fulfilment and the enthralling of his own idealized nature culminates in his decreeing his own apotheosis. Picaresque fiction emblemizes a paradoxical comic affliction.

After the disintegration of existential reality, after the silencing of goodness and trust, something resilient and stoically good-humored still clings to life . . . . There is no grandeur in the picaro's life, but it is life of a kind, lived at the diminishing point where life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil, have arrived as tragically convertible (Blackburn 16).

Magic has a tenebrous and amphibological role and function in primitive culture and the magus inhabits the cusp of conflict. Magic is a powerful function in founding enterprise, in raising the stock and confidence of the individual and is simultaneously one of the means of ordaining the established order as well as of being ordained by it. Whereas the magician's function is salvific, aiming at collective regeneration, coercing the powers of nature into enduring or favourable efficacy he receives honour and reverence. However the very fact that the socially

sanctioned praxis of the magician is eased by the deployment of supernatural power implicates a complementary danger in that the powers of the magician are not always liable to social jurisdiction. The possibility for benefit but also for danger, both social and personal reside in these powers (Elliott 258-59). Coetaneously an underpinner of society and ominous threat to the social order the magician's relation to society is always vitiated by the equivocal emotional attitudes originated by this knowledge (Radin, *Primitive* 137-50). The whole theme of the artist-magician's ambiguous relation to society is encapsulated in Yasha's inability to enter community at every stage of the narrative: the others "had their God, their saints, their leaders - he had only doubt" (ML 16). "Everyone praises me but nobody wants to pay" (ML 46).

The borderline between rational discrimination, self-persecution and arbitrary persecution is sometimes difficult to trace. *The Slave* like *The Magician of Lublin* manifests a stereotype of crisis which is to be perceived in logical and chronological order as the primary variety of persecution. As it becomes less discrepated culture itself becomes eclipsed so that it is easier to apprehend the consistency in the process of persecution and the generic logic that links all the stereotypes of which it is

constituted (Girard 14). The exilic fable, one that seeks out otherness as its very object is a natural allegory of persecution, insofar as its figures represent something "other" to signify even if that other is the modus of signification itself (Seidel 14). Jacob the exiled Jewish slave adheres to his faith in opposition to the abominations and truculence of pagan idolatry. Virtually all the issues raised by Singer's explicit Holocaust literature are present in the novel. Jacob wonders how the mind could adequately mourn such a quantity of horrors as those perpetuated by the Chmielnicki pogroms. The familiar questions that are vital to Singer's fiction such as free will and evil as trials of man's faith in crisis animate the narrative; ironic questions too such as whether Chmielnicki too constitutes a part of the godhead, or whether the annihilation of the Jews manifested the existence of a radical evil in the universe, a devil without celestial origins (Alexander, *Resonance* 150-51). Jacob's escape from the massacres paradoxically intensifies the bondage of the psychological circumscribing of his Jewish identity. "Through forgetfulness, he had also been guilty of murder" (TS 82).

Within the text itself there are provocative hints of literary reference that point beyond the borders of the text, for the hero appears to repeat

Biblical, mythic and literary archetypes of victimhood. Jacob's ultimate passage is from freedom to slavery. The problem of the innocent sufferer which could no longer be attributed to the sins of the fathers is in Hebrew religion felt to be an issue of theodicy. In the *Book of Job* the predicament of the righteous sufferer vis-à-vis the equity of an almighty divinity is debated, and yet the solution that is offered is far from eschatological. Job does not receive ultimate vindication even in a *post-mortem* judgement and his problem is trivialized with regard to the cosmic transcendence of God. The Biblical work thus manifests an inherent tension within the ancient Hebrew religion of Yahwism, an ethnic faith in origin and essence, in its insistence on the ethical character of its deity, and evolution of a complex eschatology (Brandon 59-63). Job, as Murray Krieger notes about his "ethical man" undergoes "a cosmic shock" waking up to find himself irrevocably arrested without having done anything wrong. He discovers all of a sudden "that the neatly ordered and easily enacted worldly rights and wrongs of his ethical assumptions are utterly inadequate to the data of his moral experience" (*Vision* 12-13). Through the Kabbalah Jacob seeks a rationalization of his forbidden feelings for Wanda, a gentile peasant woman. "His investigations of the cabala since his return had uncovered

the doctrine that all lust was of divine origin . . ." (TS 103). The Kabbalic symbolism not only renders faith erotic but assimilates the experience of human love to an immense transcendent intention. In spite of the fact that his love is at variance with his religion, through this love he comes to affirm human communion, an emotional correlate of his spiritual yearning, and an assertion of both physical existence and a transcendent provenance of meaning ( Lee, *Exile* 104). "Lead, God, Lead," he says, " it is thy world" (TS 212).

The ethical inefficacy of halakhic Judaism as well as debased ghetto Judaism and the fact that virtue is not tempered by suffering become evident to Jacob when he returns to the community. "Dumb Sarah" whom Jacob brings as his wife to Pilitz has been converted under the armament of the pure, Biblical and apocalyptic Judaism of Jacob. The themes of conversion, of the imperfections of halakhic Judaism and the true nature of Jewish religion converge in Sarah's last moments (Alexander, *Singer* 78). The only benediction that emanates towards Jacob following Sarah's death and his own excommunication is a manifestation of the true nature of the Torah: "But now he at least understood his religion: its essence was the relation between man and his fellows. Man's obligations toward God were

easy to perform" (TS 189). Jacob's perilous existence among the Gentiles is analogous to the predicament of the Diaspora Jews who in their wanderings, victimized by popular prejudice, were transformed into scapegoats at every visitation of calamity in the host country (Milbauer 95). In his schlemielhood Jacob belongs to a race that is particularly susceptible to persecution, and within the context of other imaginary and real stereotypes of persecution this particular one acquires reality. This is due to the fact that ethnic and religious minorities are inclined to polarize the dominating race against themselves. One of the criteria for selection of victims becomes evident here, which though contingent on the individual society is transcultural in principle. It is difficult to define the margin between consequent discrimination and willful or unwise oppression:

The persecutors' portrayal of the situation is irrational. It inverts the relationship between the global situation and the individual transgression. If there is a causal or motivational link between the two levels, it can only move from the collective to the individual. The persecutor's mentality moves in the reverse direction. Instead of seeing in the microcosm a reflection or imitation of the global level, it seeks in the

individual the origin and cause of all that is harmful. The responsibility of the victims suffers the same fantastic exaggeration whether it is real or not (Girard 17-21).

Thus the term "the perfidy of Jews" accepted literally by the general populace is exploited to advantage by Dziobak, the village priest: "Climb up and dispose of him in God's name. I warned you, did I not, little brothers? I said he would bring only misfortune" (TS 32). Jacob is also aware that "as long as the village did not suffer from famine, epidemic, or fire, [he] was to be left in peace" (TS 12). The novel concerns itself with the complex moral and ethical relationship of man to his God and to his community. It also deals with the degree to which human behaviour stakes out a moral pattern actuating that of the community. A pervasive study of the extent to which man's actions appear futile under the compulsions of historical and psychobiological forces is an achieved intention of the novel.

The conception of the relationship between the Absolute and man is explored in Singer's realistic trilogy consisting of *The Family Moskat*, *The Manor* and *The Estate*. The major characters of these novels are subtle instances of social, religious and intellectual disinheritance. The alienation of these protagonists which coincides with social crises can be

comprehended by considering it in terms of a basic relational metaphor, that of the phenomena of history and the schlemiel-victim's metaphysical meditations upon it. By mid-nineteenth century a sizable segment of the world's Jews who were East European were beginning to be implicated in the swift ideological and economic upheavals that transformed all of Europe in that period. An almost hermetically sealed world was irreclaimably laid open to liberalism, socialism, positivism, nationalism and evolutionary theory, a process which Singer demonstrates to be irreversible. The orthodox religious position and Zionism, in all their unhistoricity advocate the theory that the separate identity of the people, their myth about themselves must be maintained. "Singer's work is beautifully poised between the attractions of an ordering myth and the unsettling rush of historical realities" (Chametzky 75-76).

The intractability of Jewish self-definition becomes an intellectual as well as a religious matter. *The Family Moskat* chronicles the gradual disintegration of the Jewish community from the early years of the twentieth century to the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939. A few pious people must attempt to preserve the crumbling faith of their forebears and engage in metaphysical speculations on man's place in a world of

monumental political, social and philosophical upheavals. This is also a world of urban anonymity, behavioural apathy, and the totalitarian aggregation of social forces. The schlemiel's avowed credo of humanism becomes an unrealizable ideal in the face of the disjunctivity of modern experience.

The Moskats as exemplified by Meshulam are to outer appearance observant Jews. However the progression of the fiction manifests the fragmenting authority of the family and the erosion of faith in Judaism. These are accompanied by a virulent individualism inevitably articulated in terms of self-gratification through the pursuit of physical pleasure and material wealth. Spinoza's pantheistic deity in whom every idea is true, the inadequate and confused ones no less than those that are adequate and lucid, is conceived of as being conterminous with nature or reality. This deity is a felicitous paradigm for the type of individualism practised by Asa Heshel Bannet in contrast to the monotheistic deity who, conceived in his anthropomorphism as the Father is a suitable paradigm for the whole conception of marriage and family (Dembo 95-96). Asa Heshel becomes the apogee of the individualism that Singer posits to be the cause of the ruin of the Jewish community ruled by Meshulam. He personalizes the spiritual

conflict of the last generation of European Jewry, who trapped in a transitional era are propelled to the foreground of the exigencies of history. Asa Heshel's objectification of the crisis of faith reaches such proportions that *The Family Moskat* becomes as much *Bildungsroman* as family chronicle (L.S Friedman 83-84). Asa Heshel an inspiring Talmud scholar comes to Warsaw to make his fortune, becomes enamoured of one of Meshulam's granddaughters Hadassah, and eventually turns into an intellectual and spiritual drifter. Asa Heshel is a sociopathic, a soul-sick man incapable of genuine feeling and emotionally paralyzed by masochism and self-recrimination. A basic disenchantment with absolutes makes Asa Heshel congenial to the main impulse of European existentialism. Thus he gravitates "from the centre of active obedience to the periphery of enlightened paralysis" (Buchen, *Eternal* 74).

The schlemiel like the existential hero experiences an anxiety and an affliction that are independent of circumstantial events, the source of which is often psychic or spiritual. In his childhood Asa Heshel was always asking questions: " 'What's at the other side of the end of the world? Who made God?' " (*FM* 35). During a meeting with Hadassah, Asa Heshel wonders, " 'How can I aspire to her? She's all belief, I'm all doubt' " (*FM* 163).

Later, after his loveless marriage to Adele he muses: " 'Well, and what of his dreams of revaluating all values, of discovering Truth, of bringing salvation to the world?' " (*FM* 247).

In some of Singer's fiction animated by the antirational motif the schlemiel figure is sublimated "by the association of a personality pattern with a metaphysic" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 64). Inasmuch as he attempts to modify reality the traditional Western protagonist becomes heroic. However the schlemiel's heroism is predicated upon the impossibility of genuine action, where action is the only means of self-definition. As long as the schlemiel has the possibility of choices he is ridiculed for his inability to make a wise choice. "Once the environment is seen as unalterable - and evil - his stance must be accepted as a stand or the possibilities of 'heroism' are lost to him altogether" (Wisse, *Schlemiel* 39). In adulthood Asa Heshel becomes the "retentive type," seeking freedom in withdrawal, entering into relationships out of personal need but unable to recomprise through responsibility. Both Adele and Hadassah fret over his depression and negativism while his intellectual life remains utterly sterile, revealing a "lack of ego integration" (Bezanker 75).

The novel traces the tragic disintegration and fall of a family as much as of a vibrant Jewish community in Poland of the pre-Nazi era. However Asa Heshel's tragedy is that of a key person who epitomizes the anger, rebellion and ethical uncertainty of a whole community (Field 35). Adele ultimately perceives the essence of Asa Heshel: "... he was not a worldly man by his very essence. He was one of those who must serve God or die. He had forsaken God, and because of this he was dead - a living body with a dead soul" (*FM* 606).

Asa Heshel's lack of essence is created from the emotional and intellectual sensibility grounded in alienation, an attachment to the Judaic tradition that is largely sentient and hardly examined or substantive. Irving Buchen points out that Asa Heshel is a homeless wanderer between heaven and earth, the past and the present, and epitomizes the terrible freedom of being sundered from God. "As an object of inhuman persecution without parallel in history, he begets an unforgettable and perhaps unforgivable source of guilt for all men who in forgetting God have forgotten to be men" (*Eternal* 76). Having virtually cast off the Mosaic Law Asa Heshel now has the moral and philosophic freedom of the existential man and yet like the latter this freedom cannot be commended to

person, thing or cause (Dembo 96). This includes Hadassah whom he marries after almost insurmountable obstacles, for both are imprisoned in loveless marriages, only to experience increasing indifference and mutual antipathy.

Asa Heshel's predicament has its own fatal logic when seen from the perspective of Martin Buber. In contrast to the epicurean Abram Shapiro who leads a life of indulgence and yet affirms himself a Jew on his death bed, Asa Heshel in spite of his pursuit of women is a born ascetic and suffers from his pleasures. His failure in human relations is a failure of responsibility - or response to address by another. The closest that Asa Heshel comes to a dialogic event in the parlance of Buber is his unwitting gesture of intimacy towards his son. Buber posits that far from loving God exclusively, man can love him only through his creatures. "Every I requires a Thou: Only when I have to do with another essentially . . . in such a way that he is no longer a phenomenon of my I, but instead is my Thou, do I experience the reality of speech with another - in the irrefragable genuineness of mutuality" (*Between* 50-51).

Even though he is not a strategist Asa Heshel is aware of the approaching Holocaust. And yet his ennui does not allow him to resort to

the usual tactics of evasion. An ambitious Holocaust novel, *The Family Moskat* is also Zionist in its emphasis. Through a series of correlates the author appears to demonstrate that neither the faithful nor the sceptics can cognize the atrocity of Jewish suffering (Alexander, *Resonance* 159). At the outbreak of World War I, the Jews are expelled from Tereshpol Minor and neither Rabbi Dan Katzenellenbogen nor Jekuthiel the unbeliever can adequately rationalize the immensity of Jewish suffering. A similar analogue can be discerned between Rabbi Dan and his grandson Asa Heshel. The manuscripts of both are the outcome of a lifetime of grappling with the ultimate questions. Convinced that the world will survive without his commentaries, the Rabbi burns them, a gesture that is repeated by Asa Heshel who acknowledges the futility of his own hedonistic solution: "In the drawer of his desk lay an old version of the 'Laboratory of Happiness', written in Switzerland. Asa Heshel unscrewed the door of the stove and thrust it inside" (*FM* 629-30).

The question is whether a pre-existentialist, antimodernist sensibility, one in which the private person remains inviolate can offer a viable response to the Holocaust. There is also the problematic issue of whether suffering issues from the Jew's forgetfulness or whether the causal

link begins with God and all else follows from His absence (Roskies 195). The existential response to suffering would thus be a more meaningful antiphon than the intellectual efforts of either the faithful or the sceptics. "Get thee out of thy country" is an injunction that echoes within Jewish consciousness and permeates that of several characters in the novel, including that of Asa Heshel himself (Alexander, *Resonance* 160). Abram Shapiro, chassid, lecher, and spokesman of Zionism insists that the Exile alone has demoralized the Jews, created the "cripples, *schlemiels*, lunatics" who inhabit Warsaw (*FM* 152). The iniquity of the outside world only strengthens his faith in the resilience of the Jewish spirit. Asa Heshel correlates the communist strategy of imputing social ills to capitalists with the anti-Semite scapegoating of Jews. Through his protagonist Singer appears to imply "that man's eternal need for scapegoats overrides his more humane instincts" (L.S. Friedman 90).

The vital force for change at the end of the events of the novel is potentially demonic and destructive. Hertz Yanovar's statement clinches the novel's attitude towards the German millennium: " 'Death is the Messiah. That's the real truth' " (*FM* 636). The collapse of the messianic hope can be subsumed to Singer's implied view that "all values, modern

and traditional, any image of order snatched from the chaos of life, are unavailing and illusory" (Chametzky 77). Gershom Scholem explains why messianism is intrinsically suspect or dubitable:

In Judaism, the messianic idea has compelled a life lived in deferment, in which nothing can be done definitively . . . . Precisely understood, there is nothing concrete which can be accomplished by the unredeemed . . . Jewish so-called *Existenz* possesses a tension that never finds true release; it never burns itself out. And when in our history it does discharge, then it is foolishly decried as pseudo-messianism (*Messianic* 35).

Scholem perceives messianism to be the real anti-existentialist idea. A basic paradox of messianism is that it is predicated upon the realization of metahistorical longings within the concrete framework of history. In order to sustain the critical dialectic of Jewish history, messianism could neither be fulfilled nor totally suppressed and the tension of a life lived in deferment not only conserved the Judaic tradition but endowed it with activism (Biale 169).

*The Manor* and *The Estate*, actually a single novel in two parts, portray the fragmentation of Polish Jewry between 1863, the year of the unsuccessful Polish insurrection against Russian domination, and the end of the nineteenth century. Civilized man's perception of the world is dependent on his apprehension of the role of causality. While his notion of the processes of the universe is embedded in an empirical context of cause and effect, insight into this functioning enables man to orient himself and steer through the infinite multiplicity of events. Yet simultaneously the personal experience diminishes in its impact insofar as it is apprehended only in its relation to other experiences and not wholly within itself (Buber, *Judaism* 103). The civilized schlemiels of Singer who appear in the novels differ from Gimpel the fool and other schlemiels of the short fiction in that the latter's idea about the functioning of causality is still rather poorly developed as in the case of the primitive man. The primitive man does not fix incomprehensible phenomena within a causal relationship or register them with the ataraxy and sangfroid acquired through experience, as he registers the familiar and the apprehensible. Inasmuch as the encumbrance of the consciousness of causal operations does not affect him "he absorbs, with all the tension and fervor of his soul, these events in

their singularity, relating them not to causes and effects but to their own meaning-content, to their significance as expressions of the unutterable, unthinkable meaning of the world that becomes manifest in them alone." Calman Jacoby and Ezriel Babad of *The Manor* and *The Estate* in their own distinct ways perceive the meaning of "experience as a signum of a hidden, supracausal connection; of the manifestness of the absolute" (Buber, *Judaism* 104). Calman, ambitious, assiduous and wealthy, is forced into situations that prevent him from continuing the traditions and values of his forebears. This results in an absolute conflict between religion and animalism, allowing for no intervening space of humanism. Calman is propelled by the secular momentum of wealth into fancy clothing, a redecorated house and later an ill-fated second marriage to the sensuous and assimilated Clara Kaminer. Embittered by experience Calman forsakes the world of business to return to absolute faith in Judaism.

The conflict between religion and naturalism is pursued from Calman to Ezriel who belongs to the next generation. Naturalism being incompatible with religion is also incompatible with Judaism, and in its Darwinian form it has the potential to develop into a creed of anti-Semitism. Singer like the modern writers who deviate from the

Darwinist heritage does so by asserting the autonomy of character with regard to the determinism of heredity and environment (Alexander, *Singer* 89). The spokesmen of progress like the convert Wallenberg and the progressive Aaron Lipman try to lure Ezriel away from Hasidism toward the enlightenment. Gradually Ezriel's faith is shaken and he wonders at the plight of the Jews: "Were people really so blind to the obvious inconsistencies of their faith? . . . . Were those victimized Jews supposed to be atoning for the theoretical sins of their ancestors?" (*M* 57-58). Ezriel later discovers that the secular faith that dominates the emancipated world of intellectual Warsaw though exacting and disquieting lacks coherence and claim to a transcendent authority (Alexander, *Singer* 90).

Yet another solution to the problem of personal isolation is advocated through Rabbi Jochanan to whom Ezriel the doubter and the assimilated Jew brings his own son Misha so that the boy can be raised in the orthodox faith that his father has irretrievably forfeited. Essentially Ezriel persists as an existential doubter till the end. *The Manor* ends with the major protagonist Calman's coming to an awareness of the fragmentation of the world around him and of the hedonism and atheism of

his wayward son Sasha. Calman retreats into his homemade synagogue where he chants the first Mishnah. When Singer moves to a modern *mis-en-scène* apocalyptic messianism is expressed through the earlier cited motto of 'worse is better.' By acerbating the evils, aberrations and hatred within the existing social framework one is setting the stage for the liberation from some arcane religion of the impulse that will eradicate those evils. In modern novels it is the religious protagonists or those who still attempt to sentimentally evoke Jewish religious values who become the advocates of patience and the critics of messianic celerity. In the nineteenth century enlightened Jews adopted a secular faith. However Ezriel, positioned irresolute between the Western Europe enlightenment and the obscurantism of Hassidism takes stock of his sister's belief in redemption through violent means. Ezriel's daughter Zina becomes a sort of "schlemiel-revolutionary" who posing as a pregnant woman, experiences the birth-pangs not of the messiah but of a revolutionary arms smuggler whose cartridges burst from under her dress during a journey in a trolley car. "The belief in false Messiahs," Singer has said, "is very old and very young." The author believes that in their own ways both Stalin and Hitler were false messiahs (interview with Andersen 430). Rabbi Jochanan of

Marshinov in his cloistered virtue articulates in traditional language the antihumanistic thought which provides the dialectic in *The Estate*: " . . . man is born to serve. If he does not serve God, he serves man" (E 74). Jews as a race shoulder the double charismatic burden of the dignity of man and the holiness of the covenantal community. They believe too that they are enjoined by God who is manifest at both the level of universal creation and the private covenant to assume a dual mission, "the universal human and the exclusive covenantal confrontation." The emancipated modern Jew, unlike his doubly confronted forebear attempts to disengage himself from these mutually exclusive confrontations. His rationale is that one cannot implement the divinely endowed mandate in synergy with mankind preoccupied with the cognitive-technological aiming at universal felicity and make a volte-face the very next instant in confronting these comrades as a discrete community (Soloveitchik 66).

As a novel of immigrant Jewish experience *Enemies, A Love story* invites definition of the physical and mental barriers that must be recognized in order to test humanity in a post-modern and post-Holocaust period. There is the pervasive ambience of the Holocaust in the novel, reflecting a haunting inability to share narratives of survival in its aftermath

and insouciant victimizer (L.S.Friedman 151). The consciousness of victimization pervades the novel to such an extent that Herman not only refuses to eat flesh but gets up in the middle of the night to free mice from Masha's traps. The novel forms a palimpsest with the shtetl stories of Singer's earlier fiction stripping much of the former nescience and effervescence (Ezrahi 124).

Singer's theological stance does not yield to facile categorization. However it can be said that he places East European folklore and mystical piety entrenched in a reverence for creation, belief in demonology and the covenantal transaction as a norm against which all subsequent expressions of Judaism are to be evaluated (A.L. Berger 80-81). Reb Abraham, Tamara's pious uncle epitomizes the ambiguity in the divine-human relationship in his rejection of the orthodox creed which sees nothing theologically unacceptable in the slaughter of six million Jews. Refusing to seek comfort in the classical religious dictum "For Our Sins We Are Punished" Reb Abraham is plagued by dissent and doubt.

In a literary-critical age in which the basic metaphorical attribute of language, cerebration, ideation and writing is fully conceded, it becomes impossible to adequately narrate the Holocaust without recourse to

metaphor. Insofar as the movement in metaphor effects a deviation from the facts as opposed to their innate significance figurative language is understood to be inconsonant with the communication of fact. As language was seen to displace the events which are its referents, figures and metaphors also appeared to substitute one experience for another (Young 89-90). Metaphor is traditionally seen as a decorative and trivializing influence which is an unsuitable frame for difficult ideas and realities. Even in modern literature, it is seen that metaphor instead of "ennobling and enhancing" and celebrating reality, "belittles and disparages" it. This does not presuppose a certain loathing or distaste for contemporary realities. On the other hand insofar as metaphor provides a means of elusion or eschewal it "disposes of an object by having it masquerade as something else. Such a procedure would make no sense if we did not discern beneath it an instinctive avoidance of certain realities" (Gasset 33-36). Dreaming about "an eclipse of the sun and funeral processions," Herman is tormented by the question "Can a condemned tribe lead itself to its own burial?" (*EL* 123). Beyond Herman's terrible memories of being hidden in the hayloft by Yadviga there is a sorrow that resists alleviation: "He was not a victim of Hitler. He had been a victim

long before Hitler's day" (EL 121). As a victim-schlemiel, Herman lacks heroic thoughts and postures, and like the archetypal anti-hero he holds himself in low esteem (B. Siegel "Confidence" 40). He considers himself an enigma, an imposter, a dissembler and an attitudinizer who commits transgressions against religion, law and morality. Ihab Hassan points out that the modern hero represents the contemporary self in re-coil, the *re-coil* itself being one of the expedients of the self's awareness, a game plan of its will. It is impossible to define either the tenor or the animus of the hero. He does not quadrate with the liberal's concept of the victim, the conservative's concept of the pariah or the radical's concept of the rebel. His disposition imbricates all of these aspects.

His capacity for pain seems very nearly saintly, and his passion for heresy almost criminal. But flawed in his sainthood and grotesque in his criminality, he finally appears as an expression of man's quenchless desire to affirm, despite the voids and vicissitudes of our age, the human sense of *life* !  
(*Innocence* 6).

Throughout the novel Herman vacillates between blasphemous calumny of God who displays his unmatched ingenuity in evil by creating

pogroms and a desire to abandon the profane space of worldly existence in favour of devotion to the Torah. Herman's conversion and return to Judaism are impermanent unlike that of Ezriel Babad and Yasha Mazur. The fictions which bear Ezriel and Yasha refer them back to "a coherent tradition" rather than immersing them in the more tangible reality, "the deracinated pluralism of contemporary American life" (Rupp 165). Thus while Herman aspires to establish a nexus between his own personal history and religion, he remains "alienated, victimized, dislocated, materially satisfied but spiritually damaged, conformist yet anomic, rational but anarchic" (Bradbury 131). The recognition that Jewry is a "hothouse growth" (EL 152) which tries to survive in a hostile environment, sustained by the belief in a Messiah does not endow Herman with a conviction of his place in a divinely imposed destiny. Herman's end is thus spiritually uncertain and inchoate, tapering off into oblivion.

The self in novels such as *Enemies: A Love Story*, *Shosha* and the subsequent fiction achieves a determinate status and identity only as it pits itself against the fractitious substance of social and political reality. Aaron Greidinger of *Shosha*, a writer hemmed in by the social realists of pro-communist inclinations, the hedonists and the escapist, creative

impotency and the urge towards self-annihilation, never renounces his desire for self-definition as an artist. A writer like Aaron cannot eschew an ahistorical perspective towards history in the face of its morbid iteration. Aaron's enlightened friends can understand neither his love for *Shosha*, an ageless, backward child-woman, nor his decision to marry her. Aaron believes that *Shosha* "in her own fashion . . . denied death" (*Shosha* 90). Through his marriage with *Shosha* Aaron executes a great leap backward evoking shock among his friends for they see it as a denial of good sense and logic. The novel has as its backdrop an intensified struggle against death. Betty Slonim refusing to attend a funeral says, "I want to enjoy life, not mourn the death of some strange woman" (*Shosha* 69). Aaron himself comes to believe that what the moralists qualify as evil is in fact "the order of life" (*Shosha* 183). Morris Feitelzon, Aaron's greatest friend believes that the chaos of divine absence may be the very essence and purpose of creation. *Shosha* is an image of innocence in the strife-torn world and even after death she lives on in Aaron, a fictional double of the author himself. Aaron survives the Holocaust to imbue the world with his childhood vision, to ensure that the lost world survives amid the chaos and

darkness of the new world (Lee, *Exile* 79-80). "I see myself" is Aaron's partial explanation for his love towards Shosha (*Shosha* 81).

The recrudescence of the past, of death in life and the ambiguous relation between the living and the dead functions as an obsessional force in many of the characters. Betty tells Aaron: "The past generations are our dybbuks . . . . A person is literally a cemetery where multitudes of living corpses are buried" (*Shosha* 205). Years later, after the holocaust and the "natural death" (*Shosha* 273) of his wife Celia who at one time had been Aaron's intimate and literary amanuensis, Haiml ponders, "how can it be that all the generations are dead and only we shlemiels are allegedly living?" (*Shosha* 269). These observations appear to imply that not only does life teem with death but that the fullness of one's being is predicated upon the accommodation of the present conscious life with the layers of being that the forebears have left behind. Thus Haiml lies at night, "a little man, a half-squashed fly," talking "with the dead, with the living, with God - if He exists - and with Satan, who certainly does exist" (*Shosha* 277). At the end of the novel Haiml and his 'Tsutsik,' (little one) Aaron are still waiting for the answer to the question of needless suffering and the etiology of good and evil. Aaron, like Yasha and Herman, while

existing in the microcosmic realm of hedonism attempts to link this realm to the macrocosmic one of universal consequentiality and significance.

It can be posited that Singer depicts his schlemiels as experiencing the existential discovery that an absurd divorce exists between the human yearning for meaning and purpose and the relentless indifference of a mute and irrational universe that steadfastly refuses to evidence either. However, *in spite of the questioning of values and the physical and emotional vicissitudes*, the ambiguity of the formal conclusion of the novels allows the author to posit a conjectural affirmation against the monumental futility of the questioning.

# A Dialogic Relationship: The Self and the Text

Lasitha B.V “Schlemiel as paradigm: The hero in selected fiction of Isaac Bashevis singer” Thesis. Department of English , University of Calicut, 2000

## Chapter V

### A Dialogic Relationship: The Self and the Text

Isaac Bashevis Singer's fiction embodies the convergence of the archaic, primary or primitival and the contemporary or civilized in a number of texts which both recapitulate and extrapolate from the protean manifestations of the schlemiel in Yiddish folklore and culture. The formal strategies and frames as well as the configurations of the schlemiel have already been considered in the preceding chapters. Such elements prepossess the issue of myth and character, since whether as paradigm or person these identifications will reveal the additional magnitude provided to this character as exteriorization of the individual human being by this aspect of metamyth. Many of these texts portray the enigma of the sentient and gnostic individual moving implacably forward to assume the role of the sacrificial schlemiel, offering a way too into the complexities of discourse about this victim-hero.

Anthropologically and existentially, the schlemiel's circumstance is not more desirable than that of other fool or scapegoat prototypes. However in Singer's fiction a wider and more intricate range of associations and significance accrues around the figure of the schlemiel. He is not only like

Gimpel the fool, the amaroidal wit and honest touchstone of reality and truth associated with the Shakespearean clown. He has also like the schlemiels of the post-Holocaust novels a basic incapacity for the simple consuetudes and quotidian rituals of ordinary existence. The philosophical schlemiels like Dr. Fietelzohn, Dr. Yaretsky and Dr. Margolis are in virtually every conceivable aspect, denizens of a world they are not part of, and can only partially apprehend or even determinate. The schlemiel lacks stable, socially prototypal or independent and idiosyncratic qualities. Hence it is difficult to form a sure conception of his character, persuasion or disposition.

In some of Singer's fiction can be seen the transference of the perspective of the hero from the objectivized plane into the plane of autobiography. In works such as *The Penitent*, *Love and Exile* and *The Certificate* the ideological principles in which the narrative construction is grounded no longer merely limn the hero, delineating the author's perspective towards him, but are expressed by the hero himself, expressing his own perspective about the world. Writing about the self can only lead to autobiography of a sort inasmuch as self is apprehended and cognized exclusively from the single source and in the single embodiment.

Whether by intention or not, the autobiography is "a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition" (Olney 35).

In its structure *The Penitent* follows the paradigm established by the author for his short fiction set in modern Israel such as "The Mentor" (FOK 93-106), "The Captive" (CF 44-59), "Two Markets" (P 225-233) and "Brother Beetle" (OL 123-133). In the latter the author's ambivalent attitudes are presented through a persona who though in certain significant respects bears resemblances to the author, does not permit direct identification with him, for he is simultaneously the frame narrator of a manifestly fictional construct. That the "Author's Note" is appended at the end of *The Penitent* suggests that the listener, the well-known Yiddish writer who may be identified with Singer himself, steps out of the frame of the story to ensure his extra-textual participation in the discussion and offers judgement (Sherman, "Author" 244). The novel explores the dilemma of the identity of the modern Jew in its relation to the Enlightenment and the Revelation, to religious Orthodoxy which is often posited as an anodyne to the problems of modern Jewry and survival in an increasingly secularized and faithless world. Singer's self-consciousness as

a Jew and his awareness of Jewish history endow his writing with a peculiar intensity so that the abstractions and generality of parable blend with the most concrete sense of actual experience felt and recollected. Joseph Shapiro, the protagonist of *The Penitent* is an archetypal Jewish survivor, for he has lived through not only the Holocaust but the Haskalah. Jews perished en masse in the Holocaust but American materialism caused the annihilation of the Jewish spirit which Singer regards as a more absolute cessation. Shapiro who is disillusioned with modern Jewish identity makes an absolute commitment to Judaism. This is not merely a wilful reversal occurring within individual consciousness. It is also a perpetual process and necessity of history through which the individual is driven to affirm and sustain human solidarity as well as the ethical position of faith between the individual and the community. The experience of alienation and commitment occurs simultaneously for Shapiro, along with the implicit notion that human consciousness is not merely ephemeral in nature but capable of imposing its values in a materialistic world determined to extinguish individual identity. At the end of his dialogue with the Evil One Shapiro replies: " I have accepted the Torah and its

commentaries because I am sure that there is no better choice. This faith keeps growing in me all the time" (TP 164).

The incompatibility of this humanistic scheme of ethics grounded in a religiously observant position and minutely defined way of life with the vicissitudes and complexities of the human condition is pointed out in the 'Author's Note:'

I cannot agree with [Shapiro] that there is a final escape from the human dilemma . . . . I feel that resistance and humility, faith and doubt, despair and hope can dwell in our spirit simultaneously. Actually, a total solution would void the greatest gift that God has bestowed upon mankind - free choice . . . . The agonies and the disenchantment of Joseph Shapiro may to a degree stir a self-evaluation in both believers and skeptics. The remedies that he recommends may not heal everybody's wounds, but the nature of the sickness will, I hope, be recognized (TP 169-70).

Shapiro's choice is necessarily accompanied by a series of concrete actions and expressions of Jewishness, an ethnic identity, a larger part of which pertains to Judaism, a religious tradition. The abiding theme of Singer's

fiction, "What is a Jew?" is explored in *The Penitent* which is also a palimpsest of the earlier fiction. The question which troubles both Singer and Shapiro is how a Jew implicated in religious dilemmas can arrive at an adequate comprehension of a world in which materialism has vitiated all morality and in which expediency has rendered relative all values (Sherman, "Author" 29). Thus Shapiro formulates the same equation as Herman Broder: "If you don't want to be a Nazi, you must become the opposite" (TP 44).<sup>16</sup> Shapiro's choice for professing faith in God and the Torah are grounded in the same reasons as that of Singer. He tells the frame narrator that "all modern philosophy has a single theme: we don't know anything and we cannot know anything" (TP 36-37). Singer has remarked that "philosophy can never reveal anything. It can tell us what we cannot do, but it can never tell us what we can do" (interview with Pondrom 22).

In works such as *Love and Exile* (a trilogy comprising *A Little Boy in Search of God*, *A Young Man in Search of Love* and *Lost in America*) and *The Certificate*, unlike as in *The Penitent* there is no need to seek beyond the work itself for evidence that corroborates the concurrence of the author's weltanschauung with that of the hero. Any

concurrency between the author's credo of representation and the hero's creed must be manifested in the work itself. This must occur as a single accent intermutual to the authorial delineation and the discourse and experiences of the hero, and not as a union in the substance of the hero's creed with the author's weltanschauung, uttered elsewhere. The representation of the discourse of the hero and his experience follows a different pattern in that they are not made objects but rather that they characterize the object toward which they are addressed and not only the speaker himself. The concurrency between the ideological positions of the author and the hero is also exteriorized through other formal features. For instance, the hero is open-ended and like the author himself does not attain internal finalization for which reason he cannot be accommodated into the "procrustean bed of the plot." The author's ideology may be spasmodically scattered throughout the work, in both organized and unorganized forms, as detached statements, observations, truisms and arguments, which may occasionally be articulated by a character without in any way detracting from the individuality of the character (Bakhtin, *Poetics* 84).

The basic story of *The Certificate*, with its persona David Bendiger, a fictive representation of Singer himself, is retold in *Love and Exile*.

The schlemiel inheritance shadows the personae in both texts: "I myself was an entire cosmos. Yet I also felt very fearful: I was a cosmos that had nowhere to spend the night" (C 16). The younger self in *The Certificate* and *A Young Man in Search of Love* indulges in equivocation, prevarication and duplicity out of a basic incapacity for commitment to an exclusive relationship. The same ambivalence hinders the persona of *Lost in America* from subscribing to any single course of action or system of belief: "I stole love, but I was always caught in the act, entangled in my lies, and I had constantly to defend myself, make holy promises, and take vows I couldn't keep" (188).

Singer in fact appears to be experimenting with the resources provided by experience, and fashioning a personal mythology that can be created and discreated at will. However the vital distinction between autobiographical fiction and fictionalized autobiography, between fictionalizing and falsification is predicated on the audience's awareness of the writer's intention, eliciting an appropriate response:

If the writer consciously introduces the real world into his fiction, he speaks to us *in propria persona* over the heads of his characters, and thus reminds us of the artificiality of his

own creation. As a result, the work may run the risk of seeming affectedly self-conscious, but the author has every right to call attention to the fictiveness of his work; after all, the audience has from the beginning assumed that what was presented was fiction and has agreed to suspend their disbelief (Grossman 38-39).

Whether autobiographic or poetic, art mediates between the ephemeral and fluctuating spheres of consciousness and sensation, of incident and affection, and the inflexible, stabile and paradigmatic world of patterning and meaning. The autobiographer, much like the poet, subsumes myriad transient perceptions and responses into an exclusive, luminous, comprehensible and significant artifact. It is a process in which the biographer who discerns from the flux of events a coherent pattern or creates an adequate or sufficing metaphor for experience, unshrouds the particular and manifests to us the universal (Olney 45). In the last part of the trilogy, namely *Lost in America*, the persona himself comes through as schlemiel. As a confused and lost immigrant he is so inept that he is unable to find his way back to his brother's home in Seagate. The irresolution, insecurity and impuissance of the typical schlemiel have an attenuating

effect on his psyche and creative powers. His neurotic self-consciousness makes him hide from people and his brother's success as a writer awakens feelings about his inadequacy as a writer. The personal revelations about his inability to protest about the bad food served to him on board ship and his almost bungling of his illegal trip across the Canadian border in an attempt to get a permanent visa are inevitably ironic. His disclosures about his writing ultimately become self-depreciating disclosures about his failures. He feels he has become a fly, "doomed to expire in darkness, a victim of a power that played games with frail creatures" (LE 349). Admitting to misrepresentations, garbling and falsifications, Singer states in the 'Author's Note' that he considers "this work no more than a fiction set against a background of truth." He calls it "contributions to an autobiography" he never intended to write (LE x). This caveat has the function of arousing many more problems such as that of "negotiating between fictive and representational constructions of the self" (Norich 91). There is also the fact that "autobiographies disclose more about the self at the moment of writing than about the past self who is the ostensible subject of the writing" (104). The schlemiel-like narrator of *Love and Exile* ends the work with the cry "I am lost in America, lost forever" (352).

However there lies a considerable difference between loss as a literary trope and loss as a brutal reality. Joseph Sherman points out that in those of the books examined here, Singer's reconstruction of his own past has the dual function of bringing life to the world whose destruction he was fortunate to escape "while postulating an imaginary 'second chance' through which he can neutralize powerful feelings of personal guilt employing a variety of displacement techniques" ("Guilt" 108).

The device of *eironeia*, of self-depreciative dissimulation which characterizes the autobiographic personae of the works under scrutiny here as well as of the fiction examined in the earlier chapters activates an endless series of subversive interpretations. The ironist in his role of naif, offers and renders his text in such a manner and in such a context as will motivate the reader to reject its expressed literal meaning for an implicit, transliteral meaning of contrasting import. Singer's narratives explore the conformation of the ironically limited subject with techniques such as roles and role-exchange, while the interactions they extend define the problem of the schlemiel's vision and its potential for communalization. Søren Kierkegaard, guarding against unrestrained subjectivity, resorts nonetheless to a concept of the subject that sustains its self-possession and

self-transparency. From egoistic dreaming, the subject must pass on to "the true happiness wherein the subject no longer dreams but possesses himself in infinite clarity, is absolutely transparent to himself" (*Irony* 313). The schlemiel can be both a posture and a significance, both a transcendental realist and an ethical solipsist. It has been posited that "the archetype of the incongruously ironic is Christ, the perfectly innocent victim excluded from human society" (Frye 42).

Like many contemporary heroes the schlemiel is a protagonist in quest and the nature of his quest sets him apart from the world in which he lives. The schlemiel's rupture from the soporific mediocrity of his life allows him to come to a realization of its meaninglessness. These gestures of repudiation can be attributed to the schlemiel's saintliness, for the schlemiel has had a sampling of conventional ethics and found it deficient on many counts. He desires absolute immersion in the present moment and needs an occasion to articulate his humanity. These urges are concomitants of sainthood. The schlemiel as well as the saint are isolated individual consciousnesses observing themselves in conflict with a world that appears to be intent on the attenuation or the annihilation of the self. As a *sine qua non* the schlemiel offers resistance to this reality, the saint

transcends it and in the most ideal embodiments, they metamorphose reality. They are latent archetypes because they are the reification of drifts and tenors in the community that are otherwise merely fractional potentials. In Singer's fiction there are saintly schlemiels and schlemiel-like saints and the distinctions are transformed into affinities when one perceives that both prototypes attempt to uphold the sanctity of the spirit in a world of *attenuated meaning and expectation*. They negotiate the increasingly narrow path round suicide and despair towards a rejuvenated vision of man.

The term schlemiel may have a disputed etymology, but its contemporary significance is obvious. In relation to the different heroes of Singer's fiction the concept may appear equivocal, fluctuant and multifarious. Consequently the different protagonists that the term is applied to may seem to bear only insubstantial affinities. In spite of the *arbitrary and haphazard nature of the term's semantic evolution*, it may be claimed that the concept of the schlemiel advanced in this study is the *accumulative outcome of having applied the term intuitively, and deliberately to such protagonists as seemed to bear a sufficient resemblance to certain other protagonists to which the term had already been applied*. The somewhat intricate path that the concept follows in this study has led

eventually to an espial of this obscure, amphibological and quasi-mythological figure. This is due to the fact that the schlemiel is both a hero and a mere element in an ideological framework which in turn is only an expedient for dissolving the ambiguities that centre around this hero.

The idea of freedom advanced in Singer's fiction is more often than not, "freedom *to*" rather than "freedom *from*." A simplistic precept, the latter prescribes the basal parameters of existence, while the former embodies philosophic implications regarding what one can be *sui generis*. "Freedom *to*" is a phrase which for Singer offers latitude enough to sanction lapses of faith and capitulation to temptation, even while it helps to discover the manifold aspects of human perseverance. Singer's heroes, from Jacob of *The Slave* to Asa Heshel Bannett encounter the imprisoning sphere of natural causality, the world of physical appetites and the hope of guiltless joy beyond which they seek the path of virtue. The "freedom *to*" with its irreducible freedom of self-determination within the conditioning factors of nature and history entails fear and peril and yet there is always a distaste for the shallowness and superficiality of "freedom *from*." Rather than the conditioned response of sin, it is atavistic and ethnic guilt, guilt about the appetites of the flesh, about one's transgression and guilt towards

one's forebears that haunts these characters. These protagonists may drift as Asa Heshel does, or may, as does Jacob, traverse "the three stages of Everlasting No, Center of Indifference, and Everlasting Yea" which in other words is to attain redemption through divine fellowship (Karl 117-19). The schlemiel's impulse towards self-absolutization implicates a profound existential insecurity and cosmic anxiety. Conventional fools are cultural artifacts, derivatives of an ongoing theatrical tradition manifesting the prophetic and mimetic powers of art. By contrast the schlemiel through his irreducible ambivalence exposes the dramatic tension in the nature of individual salvation as well as in that of collective or corporate salvation.

Singer's schlemiels are at variance with other representatives of the archetype of the wise or sainted fool, for they embody their creator's own diacritic blend of faith and scepticism. Singer himself states: "I truly believe that there are forces and spirits in this world, about which we know very little . . . . I find it very easy to believe in reincarnation, possession by devils, and other such things . . . . Still, I myself am a little skeptical about spiritism" (interview with Blocker and Elman 371). For schlemiels like Gimpel it may be fatuous to profess faith in psychic phenomena and yet

Singer appears to be suggesting that these fantasies embody a divine and preternatural disclosure about the depths of the human consciousness from which these fantasies took shape. Tales such as "Gimpel the Fool" hypostatize the necessity of the search for truth, the perception of the otiose and fruitless culmination of such quests, the need to opt for belief, and the realization that such options have no intellectual defense against the sceptic (P.N Siegel 161).

Jewish lore, ethics, folk wisdom and religious systems are imbued in Singer's characters. They articulate the cadences, nuances and gradations of Yiddish and image its humorous irony. However a complex process of sublimation and a deep structure make heroes such as Yasha, Jacob, Herman and Aaron approximate the apocryphal sphere of a mythicized figure like Don Juan who is posited as seeker of universal answers. In their persistent endeavour to accommodate the antithetical desires of the individual, they span the profane and the religious, the earthly and the celestial, the quotidian and the numinous, the altruistic and the malignant. Even in the midst of their violations of the taboos imposed by tradition, culture and religion, these heroes obsessively seek beyond physical data for a sign of a celestial power. They search for a

confirmation that evil exists in the world not merely as an irrational and vagarious element but as a retaliation, and that their life is not mere accident or blind event. Accordingly, they are ministerial in their author's invalidation and outstripping of the confines of regional, heterodox and provincial considerations and in his endeavour to limn and represent what is predominantly a universal quest for meaning (Pladott 62). As a metaphor for universal Jewry the schlemiel has a normative and reinforcing aspect as well as an exploratory one. The notion of metaphor as a deviation from the norm can hardly be allowed to stand in its unalloyed form. In many ways what the metaphor of the schlemiel actually achieves is not deviation but confirmation.

To characterize the schlemiel as a version of existential man would be fallacious for it is an idea of conceptual rather than concrete existence which while acting as the vehicle of a metaphysical and social position is reductionist, delusive and sophistical (Dembo 18). Again, the schlemiel does not merely represent an ossified sector of the Jewish community, an anachronism that time will disperse. It can be avowed that the schism between the patent superficiality and the meditative, sombre, subterranean substance of the archetype of the amorous lover invoked by Singer and this

hero's deliberate pursuance of danger arise from the Camusian idea of the "ethic of quantity" which Camus posits in relation to his analysis of Don Juan (*Sisyphus* 69). Camus points out that the belief in the absurd is equivalent to trading the quantity of experiences for the quality. If one comes to believe that the only aspect of life is its absurdity, that its equipoise is contingent on a continual antithesis between conscious resistance and the darkness in which it strives, and concedes that one's freedom attains significance only in relation to its circumscribed fate, then one has to allow that what matters "is not the best living but the most living" (59).

Yasha confesses to Emilia, " 'I'm just a bungler' " (*ML* 191). The Yiddish word for "bungler" is *schlemiel*, the very antithesis of the category of exultant prowess limned by Camus with regard to Don Juan. The continuum between these antipodal paradigms allows Singer to explore a prolific range of characters extending from the heroic, to the passive and the utterly ineffectual (Pladott 64). Apparently the ingemination of the Don Juan figuration as employed by the author serves as much to emphasize the affinities between the male protagonists as to reveal the points of divergence between them. The disparities are conducive in

denying adducements that Singer's heroes are allegorical figures and in affirming that they abide as discrete figures with their own individual peculiarities. Each of these characters must encounter the mystery of the universe and establish for himself the dimensions of faith that are rationally feasible for him in the presence or absence of a deific force in the universe (Pladott 67).

The schlemiel lives, as it were, two lives, one transitory and relative, lived in the sequence of the consuetudes of earthly existence and the other, lived simultaneously, permanent and absolute, a life lived in the sphere of the questing human spirit. Whereas, in the sphere of relative existence, all appears to be contingent, fortuitous and without meaning, in the absolute life great stretches of meaning and exigency are gradually enshrouded. The relative life passes into the consciousness of characters like Asa Heshel, Jacob, Yasha, Ezriel, Herman and Aaron, while the absolute life becomes part of their very being.

The modern world promises no salvation for the schlemiel unless he is secured to something more material than physical desire, caprice or epicurism. Resolution of these dilemmas is to be sought deep within the individual consciousness, without any certitude of success. When Jacob of

*The Slave* breaks away from his traditional Jewish past, he confronts chaos. The profane Yasha, the magician of Lublin derides the soul and after life. He affirms conviction in natural law, secretly fears everything but with picaresque adventures conceals his disquiet and uncertainty (Karl 119).

The similarities as well as the dissimilarities of Singer's heroes operate on the universal as well as the local textual plane. When the novels are analyzed as one frame of reference, the author's application of the paradigm of Don Juan and his delineation of his amorous heroes as progressively schlemiel-like has thematic as well as formal implications. As a formal stratagem, they inhabit the ambiguous terrain between the sacred and the secular, while their increasingly attenuated rating and positioning in relation to others in the community image the lack of a categorical, manifest and definitive resolution in the author's narratives. Singer's modernism can be perceived in the repeated discovery of the heroes that all absolutes become relative in confrontation with the stark, irreducible presence of evil and misery. The protagonists together with the equivocal, problematic endings of the narratives announce their mystification in the face of the enigma of the universe. The thematic undertones of such narrative expedients are ultimately heterodox and

nonconformist from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism, for they imply that all creeds of faith and transcendent values are equally contingent and arbitrary. It is the author's modernism which urges him to posit traditional Judaism as offering no incontestable solution to the insoluble riddle of the universe, but only a fragmentary solution (Pladott 68-69). The modern quester of Singer's fiction who lacks religious certitude cannot eschew desires and experiences as allurements and tribulations, as could the medieval quester. As a quest novelist, Singer does not confuse desire and experience with achievement.

Singer's *schlemiels* traverse epiphanies, doubts and ambivalences for they confront a constant dialectic between innocence and culpability, faith and disenfranchisement, expansiveness and recoil. Singer's aesthetics centres around two key terms, metaphysics and riddle. His characters themselves derive their rationale from their struggle to apprehend the framework and *modus operandi* of a universe that eludes cognizance. That Singer's *schlemiels* are not discarnate creations who allegorize metaphysical issues or their author's credo but characters infused with animation and authenticity attests to their creator's ambivalent position in relation to the increasing mystifications of the modern world (Burgin 62).

Novels such as *The Family Moskat*, *The Manor* and *The Estate* imply one version of the identity crisis encountered by many modern Jews. When Jewish identity loses its content, when it becomes difference without a clear-cut category of explicit values, Jews are compelled to forge a significance for the word "Jew." To employ deconstructionist language, "Jew" and "Jewishness" become free-floating signifiers, and the task of formulating a coherent language that will accommodate Jewish culture becomes increasingly difficult. In the case of the heroes of Singer's Holocaust novels the shifting identities emphasize the conflict between an external, imposed subject status and the desire for a unified autonomous self. Singer's fiction suggests that the various aspects of the schlemiel's identity, gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexual reference and others intersect. Identity is neither stable nor monolithic and implicates an intricate exploration of both internal and external ideas about the content and the associations of Jewish identity. It also involves the recognition that the two sides of the paradigm of the schlemiel, the individual and the Jew can never be separated entirely.

With the curtailment of the individual, the drama of good and evil which the hero and the villain once exteriorized in history becomes

indeterminate and untenable. The conventional forms of ethical conflict and dissent are so internalized that no triumph or defeat where self is pitted against itself can be postulated to be more than pyrrhic or impugnable. Subtle in its introspection, the modern novel redefines the identity of the protagonist and channels his vitality towards virtues that are more personal than communal. To forge an identity, to attain self-realization, to enter into a relationship with another human being in terms that invite the castigation of the community, this is the concern of the anti-hero of the modern novel (Hassan 22). The hero's encounter with experience may be accommodated in the framework of initiation or victimization. The former may be apprehended as a *modus* steering through virtue and sacred knowledge to a feasible way of existence in the world, its ultimate end being confirmation. Victimization, however results in renunciation, for it is characterized by estrangement from the world, and its values are mainly inward and transmundane. It is the particular world in which the hero finds himself which decides the mode he elects to complete his fate. While man may be at liberty to reject the normative image which culture has of him, his relation to the world must inevitably be actuated by that image. The *mis-en-scène* of the individual's confrontation between self and the

world is therefore determined to a large extent by the progressive or circumscribing proclivities of culture (Hassan 34-35).

The schlemiel is a recursive structure that reappears in Singer's fiction through an interplay of orature and literature. His metaphorical nature specifies patterns in the textural weave which liberate him from the strictures of Western individuation and clarifies his source as external to the West. The schlemiel is a point of genesis of original meanings, and there are enough testimonies to his ability to instigate readings. That Singer's schlemiels are firmly placed in historical context affirms the fact that these heroes do not submit to the quality of imposition, of being rendered inactive by allegory or fantasy. At the same time the paradigm of schlemielhood inasmuch as it is an abstract concept is represented by Singer through allusion contingent on tradition, anthropomorphism which substitutes a natural context for the consciousness and exteriorization which offers ambiguity and an apparently stable identity.

Religion is at once a divine imperative imposed upon the schlemiel and a new dimension of individual being which he discovers within himself. The cultural facet of the schlemiel's religious experience relates it to great ultimates, while the ontological legitimacy and resolution of his

existence are psychic dynamics that sway his essence. The activating vehicle of myth unveils the schlemiel as a fiction, while the schlemiel's assimilation of myth attests to the laden notion of a primeval creation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle postulates that the Homeric epics are the antecedents of tragedy while *Margites*, Homer's exclusive comic and apocryphal poem about an archetypal blunderer is regarded as a less substantial contribution (Else, *Poetics* 8-9; Ch. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Examples are conveniently available in Weinberg. See Giraldi, *Ragionamento in difesa di Terentio* (1566), qtd. in Weinberg 1:289.

<sup>3</sup> Among the Dakota, one became a ritual clown (Heyoka) through a vision of the god Iktomi, a trickster, while the Koyemshi clowns were regarded as sons of a mythical figure who was simultaneously culture hero and creator. Bamapama, the trickster figure among the Murngin of Australia was the patriarch of ceremonies in which the clown became a trickster. In preliterate societies, the links between the trickster, clown or fool and satire as well as their rationale were explicit while the same in European cultures are particularized yet highly suggestive. Loki and other trickster figures of Scandinavian mythology are believed to have contributed to the eiron-like figure of Amleth, the antecedent of Shakespeare's Hamlet (Text 48-49). In the light of Scandinavian myths,

H.R. Ellis Davidson points out that the trickster and his ultimate analogue the fool are "irrecoverably linked to one another" ("Loki" 16-17).

<sup>4</sup> *Purim* is a Hebrew term signifying the Feast of Lots, on the fourteenth day of Adar, which solemnizes the emancipation of Persian Jewry from their oppressors. The story is recorded in the *Megillath Esther* (the Scroll of Esther) which is read twice in the synagogue during Purim (Kranzler 116). A seasonal event, the *Purimshpiel* (Purim play) endorsed irreverent comicality and granted license to fools such as the *lets, nar* and *payats* to engage in fooling. Droll characters such as schnorrers, schlemiels, schlimazls and luftmenschen originated in the East European shtetl (Ausubel 264 +).

<sup>5</sup> Sanford Pinsker cites specific Talmudic commentaries identifying the schlemiel with the unfortunate Zimri who appears in *Numbers* (25), *Sefer Nezikim*, Vol.6 and *Sanhedrin II*, Folio 82-b (*Metaphor* 183)

<sup>6</sup> The Motke Khabad stories are analyzed in Chapter II.

<sup>7</sup> The destruction of shtetls by modern totalitarianism generated blatant misconceptions about their constitution. It is evident that they were not villages for the term "dorf" was used by East European Jewry to signify a village. The shtetl had neither marked social classes nor was it a

democratic community (Howe, *Immigrant* 10). While ghetto life caused segregation of Jews from gentile communities, the shtetl, a maintown in a province or a mainstreet in a town brought the Jews into propinquity with other communities (Dimont 258).

<sup>8</sup> "Diaspora" is a word derived from Greek signifying a "scattering." In modern terminology the body of Jews scattered outside the boundaries of Israel is signified. It is a cultural as much as an intellectual idea. Unlike exile Diaspora life is voluntary. Acceptance of the prevailing attributes of the host civilization during the Jewish sojourn through centuries in different lands did not forestall the Diaspora in breeding a distinctly Jewish culture (Dimont 124).

<sup>9</sup> The schnorrer is a figure in Yiddish humour who begs alms as if they belonged to him by divine right. His justification is a profound conviction that he is genuinely deserving and his tactic for fleecing the rich is called *chutzpah* or unmitigated gall (Pinsker, *Metaphor* 25).

<sup>10</sup> The term *zhargón* was used by Jewish intellectuals to mean "gibberish; prattle; a subtongue, something less than a respectably cultivated language," a marginal and unsavoury language in spite of the fact

that it had eleven million speakers before the Nazi Holocaust (Ozick 174-75).

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the General Staff became a natural scapegoat when the French Intelligence in 1893 tried to cover up espionage in their own midst. Dreyfus was court-martialled and convicted immediately. In the wake of public hysteria, a second trial was ordered in 1898, but again Dreyfus was convicted. In 1906 after a review of the case he was exonerated of all charges by the French Supreme Court. However all these events conspired to make him a classic Jewish victim of history (Dimont 333-36).

<sup>12</sup> The tale "Girl Married to a Devil" (1476 B) appears in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale, Folklore Fellows Communication 184*.

<sup>13</sup> See K.1315.1, "Seduction by Posing As a God," Stith Thompson, *A Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, 6 vols*.

<sup>14</sup> The main source of psychological theory applicable here is the post-Jungian movement known as "archetypal psychology," concentrated on the work of James Hillman, which began to follow psychological theory beyond the boundaries of analytical psychology "offering a way into

Jung - and a way out of Jung, especially his theology” (Hillman, *Re-Visioning* xii). One of the many cogent points of departure of archetypal psychology from its analytical counterpart is that whereas the latter operates from a humanistic perspective warning of the dangers of inflation or engulfment for the ego in a descent into the unconscious, the former, operating from a trans-humanistic perspective, positively encourages ego-transcendence emphasizing the psychic need for the death experience (see Hillman, *Archetypal* 31-32).

<sup>15</sup> The Sabbatian movement officially began in May 1665 when Sabbatai Zevi of Ismir proclaimed himself to be the messiah and continued even after he chose in September 1666, while in Turkish captivity, to become an apostate. This movement coalesced and spread as a result of the proselytizing zeal of Nathan of Gaza, were it not for which, Sabbatai would have remained an inconspicuous dissenter (Lee, *Exile* 60). Zevi’s apostasy from Judaism appeared “to confirm the paradoxical claim of his Messianic mission, a final step of holy sinfulness, in fact, it’s apotheosis” (Scholem, *Messianic* 61).

<sup>16</sup> See *EL* 170-71

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