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Tradition... Transgression!
Singer In the *Shtetl* and On the Street

"They were godly without God, and worldly without a world."
- Singer on his generation

Early in the 1960s, a little over forty years ago, I discovered the work of Sylvia Plath. Alas, I discovered it (as most people did) at exactly the moment it stopped. The London *Observer*, along with its story on her suicide, printed a whole page of her poems. In the midst of "Daddy", one of the most riveting of those poems, Plath pulls herself up short and says,

I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I might well be a Jew.

A year or so later, I attended a reading by the great confessional poet Robert Lowell. He staggered onstage, and made a startling declaration: "You know, I'm a Jew". He asked if anybody doubted him; nobody did. Some of us rolled our eyes, and wondered what he would be confessing next. But he spent most of the evening reading a gentle memoir of his Sephardic maternal grandmother. When I told a friend this story, he said he had seen William Carlos Williams do the same: present his Jewish genealogy to a poetry audience in a gesture of *There, In your face*. I was mystified, yet flattered, to see these great WASP poets wanting to be part of us. My mother wasn't so thrilled. Could somebody tell the poets that as symbols of horrible but noble death, the Jews were worn out? Wasn't it time to choose some other people and give us a chance to live? I partly agreed with her, but I said, Mom, don't blame the poets, blame God.

It was only this summer, as I immersed myself in this centennial edition of Singer stories - I counted 198 in all; I may be wrong, but not by much - that the yearnings of the poets of half a century ago came back to me. *COLLECTED STORIES*, latest entry in the Library of America, places Singer in the canon of American literature, alongside Hawthorne and Melville and Henry James and Mark Twain. It is a major event in the history of Jewish American culture. This triple volume is beautifully edited and annotated by Ilan Stavans. It includes a paperback Album full of evocative photos and ephemera, a brilliant symposium by Stavans, Morris Dickstein, David Roskies, Jonathan Rosen and Isaiah Sheffer, commentary by Francine Prose, Cynthia Ozick, Joyce Carol Oates, and many more. Stavans was right to focus the collection on Singer's stories; his talent and originality come across far more vividly in his short fiction, which

compresses volatile forces till they explode, than in his novels, where he tries to construct enduring worlds. These stories, spread over the whole 20th century, are set in prewar Polish *shtetls*, in postwar European cities, in New York, in Israel, in Buenos Aires and Rio, in the Brazilian jungle (Yiddish in the jungle?), and in Miami Beach, where he died; on innumerable ships and buses and trains and planes; in neighborhoods destroyed by the Nazis, neighborhoods destroyed by the real estate market, neighborhoods where we could bump into him today if he were still alive. This collection shows that Singer could “do the police in different voices”, that is, write wonderfully in very diverse literary styles, and that his work had an enormous emotional range. Singer’s people, Jews from Poland, are drawn from a fairly narrow demographic base. But they have experienced the 20th century in all its depths. As he said in 1973, “They lived in the midst of almost all the social movements of our time. Their illusions were the illusions of mankind.” The life they shared was “a treasury of individuality”.¹ Even when they died – and so many died before their time – they *lived*. Singer was fully attuned to that life. He may be able to help us see why great modern poets with noble *goyishe* pedigrees would want to be part of us.

If we focus briefly on one of Singer’s short masterpieces, “A Crown of Feathers”, it can give us a sense of his uncanny power as a writer. “Crown”, set in a *shtetl*, describes a woman’s twisted and tragic life journey. We meet Aksha, as a rich, smart, beautiful, spoiled girl, raised by adoring grandparents. She must find a husband: in the closed society of the *shtetl*, without a husband a woman’s life cannot go on. (This is the context of Sholem Aleichem’s “Teveye” stories and *Fiddler on the Roof*.) With her dowry there is no shortage of candidates; but they all look like klutzes and dunces to her, and she blows them off. Her grandparents die, she finds herself alone and under pressure to make a decision fast. Then she has a vision, speaking in her grandmother’s voice: the whole Jewish world is as empty as the *shtetl*; but if she abandons the Jews, and becomes a Catholic, she can have a glorious future with the *goyim*. Her grandmother offers her a sign: “down and feathers entwined into a crown”, culminating in a Cross. She follows the sign, becomes a Catholic, and makes what at first seems a brilliant marriage with the local Squire. But “it was strange, there were no more signs after the first one.” And her marriage unfolds as a disaster: her husband drinks, screws around, and ignores her. She feels even more abandoned and alone as a Christian than she had felt as a Jew.²

¹Author’s note to *A Crown of Feathers*, 1973. *COLLECTED STORIES*, Volume 2, page 271. The story appears directly afterwards, 2, 272-96.

²This theme drives “Zeidlus the Pope”, one of Singer’s first stories (1943), told in a searing black-comic voice. A maladjusted and marginalized rabbi converts, only to find himself a maladjusted and marginalized priest. (He goes to Hell, but Hell is better than “nothing”.) “Zeidlus”, written in the midst of the Holocaust, appeared in English at a very different historical moment: *Short Friday* (1964) 1, 477-87.

“She had betrayed the Jewish God, and no longer believed in the gentile one.” In despair, she starts to hear conflicting voices: her grandmother tells her to “go back to Esau”; her grandfather says she should return to Judaism and marry the last man she rejected: “he’ll save you from the abyss.” She returns. The rabbi is merciful and understanding. But her Jewish husband, still hurting from her earlier rejection, vows revenge. In the tradition of Anna Karenina’s husband, he sanctifies his hatred as righteousness. He refuses to touch her, tortures her psychologically, and eventually starves her to death. As she feels she is dying, she wants to repent and pray.

But such was her fate, doubt did not leave her even now. Her grandfather had told her one thing, her grandmother another....

She had but one desire now – that a sign should be given, the pure truth revealed....

With her last strength she got up and found a knife...she ripped open the pillowcase. From the stuffing she pulled out a crown of feathers. A hidden hand had braided in its top the four letters of God’s name,...YHWH.

Hallelujah! a miracle! Yet it gives her no inner peace. Her brilliant critical mind, which has driven her so far, cannot stop now. She asks herself:

In what way was this crown more a revelation than the other?
Was it possible there were different faiths in Heaven?

“Aksha began to pray for a new miracle.” Yet she knows, and we know, that no matter how many miracles happen to her, they can only become part of the inherently endless series of miracles that she has experienced already. She grasps an idea that is a fundamental idea in 20th-century philosophy and ethics: *the plurality of values*. William James, Max Weber, Jean-Paul Sartre, Isaiah Berlin, could have comforted her. But the closed world that is her only world has no comfort and no place for a pluralist. “At dawn” – like a prisoner being executed – “she sighed and gave up her soul.”

The women who wash her body find pieces of down between her fingers. But they find no crown. They don’t understand.

...what had she been searching for? No matter how much the townspeople pondered,...they never discovered the truth.

Now the narrator steps back slowly from Aksha, her *shtetl* and her story, and closes the ark with one of Singer’s most glorious sentences:

Because if there is such a thing as truth it is as intricate and hidden as a crown of feathers.

Even though the truth is hidden and the world is closed, Aksha gets some recognition after she dies. Her fellow townsmen “buried her near the chapel of a holy man”, and “a rabbi spoke a eulogy for her.” Singer doesn’t share the text of this eulogy with us. But if we have stayed with him through Aksha’s ups and downs, we can compose it ourselves. Actually, Goethe has already composed it for us, in his *Faust*. Goethe’s God (*der Herr*, he calls him) says it at the start:

As long as he may be alive,...
Man errs as long as he will strive.

A chorus of angels says it at the end:

Saved is the spirit kingdom’s flower
From evil and the grave.
Whoever strives with all his power
We are allowed to save.³

This *shtetl* girl, messing her life up but striving with all her power, shares Faust’s glory. And Singer and Yiddish share in the glory of modern culture.

“A Crown of Feathers” contains a number of themes that pervade Singer’s whole long career. One is what critics have come to call *magic realism*, a vision of the world where demons and dybbuks and supernatural forces are as alive as you and me and a lot more powerful; though Singer often goes out of his way, as in “Taibele and her Demon” and “The Séance”, to say that his supernatural forces are created out of human needs, and that humans know it. Another is *empathy for women*: there is no serious male writer since D.H. Lawrence who has focused so intensely on women’s inner lives, and celebrated them, far more than men, as symbols of universal humanity. Singer highlights woman’s power to be a *searcher*, and to suffer for her search, even when, as in Aksha’s case, it is unclear “What was she searching for?” Another powerful motif is the experience of *betrayal*. So many of Singer’s heroes of both sexes commit horrible betrayals: they betray each other and accuse each other of betrayal; they betray whatever ideals they believe in; they betray God, but they also charge God himself with massive betrayal. When Singer’s characters address God, it is very often in the mode of *Jaccuse*. (“He remembered a scene he had witnessed in a camp...how could God, if He existed, ever rectify such evil? No Messiah, no angels, no paradise could compensate The past is stronger than God.”⁴) A form of discourse

³Goethe’s *Faust*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (Anchor, 1962), lines 315 ff, 11934 ff.

⁴“Two”, *COLLECTED STORIES*, 3, 856.

that recurs relentlessly in these stories, especially in later ones, could be called *theology against God*. An important part of suffering in Singer’s people is memory of the dead, and a feeling that we should be dead ourselves. Since World War One, this kind of memory has been called *survivor guilt*. People crippled by survivor guilt often hope to unite with the dead through *suicide*. Many people in this collection do it; others sound like they could do it next week. And frequently their stories are told by their widows, lovers or friends, who stretch themselves out on the rack of a whole new round of survivor guilt, which then creates a new generation in danger. Singer’s atmosphere often feels like a giant undertow that could drown us all, writer, characters, readers, all in one great wave.

We need to remember that this writer was the younger brother of the great Yiddish novelist and playwright I.J. Singer, author of *The Brothers Ashkenazi* and *Yoshe Kalb*. Israel Joshua had done everything to get Isaac Bashevis out of Poland and onto the *Forward*, and encouraged him to write. I.J. died of a heart attack in 1944, at the height of his powers, and I.B.’s talent as a serious writer began to thrive more or less the moment he died. This was also the moment when their whole generation of Polish Jews – including their mother and a younger brother – were being annihilated by the Nazis. The correspondences and contradictions between their works sound fascinating, and could be a thrilling subject for critics, if only there were anybody still alive to write or to read criticism of Yiddish literature. (Do I hear a voice?)

The one vital Singer theme that’s missing from “A Crown of Feathers” is *sex*.⁵ In seminaries and yeshivas of many denominations today, Singer is still on the Index along with D.H. Lawrence. This collection helps us see why. He wrote about sex with a remarkable intensity and fluency from the very start of his career to the end. Yet there is little about *bodies* here, no limbs, no breasts, no genitals, no orgasms. But there is a great deal about how sex both opens and floods our minds. It’s a space where men and women get to act out desires that they ordinarily can’t even bear to think of. Here are a *shtetl* ritual slaughterer and his landlady:

Risha exclaimed, “Woe is me, I’m a married woman, we’ll roast in Gehenna for this.” But she, thrice married, had never before felt desire as great as on that day. Though she called him murderer, robber, highwayman, and reproached him for bringing shame to an honest woman, yet at the same time she kissed him, fondled him, and responded to his masculine whims. In their amorous play, she asked him to slaughter her...he ran his finger across her throat. When she arose, she said, “You murdered me that time.”

He answered, “And you murdered me,”⁶

⁵Still, Francine Prose, in *The Singer Album*, 76, finds it “shocking in its eroticism”.

⁶“Blood” (1964), 1, 358. Published in English in *Short Friday*, 1964.

For this adulterous couple, sex opens the portal to *transgression*. It's only a matter of time before they start slaughtering horses and pigs and throwing them into the kosher meat, and making love through their death throes. Hot sex is a driving force in Singer's very first *shtetl* stories, written in the mid-1940s. "The clever Shloime, because of his great learning, began to delve deeper and deeper into questions of 'he' and 'she'."⁷ Singer's *shtetls* are all physically intact, yet culturally and socially they are *imploding*. The forces that pull them to pieces do not come from outside agitators – though certainly there are plenty of these around – but from the inner dynamics of religious Judaism itself. The achievement of these early stories is to explode the pastoral myth of the *shtetl* forever. Singer's romance of Tradition is at the same time a romance of Transgression. His Talmudic scholars and good housewives and butchers and cooks may be victims, but they are not innocent; Singer forces us to recognize that they are perpetrators as well. His perpetrators have a rough dignity. They are not radiant saints, as in the traditional myth; they are not passive *schleps* and sad sacks, as in the Zionist myth; they are strong men and women who feel trapped in the bleak small towns they have grown up in. Singer renders small-town claustrophobia as powerfully as Sherwood Anderson or Willa Cather. His people have the brains and sensitivity to know they want a better life than the life they know, and the guts to stand up and fight for profane happiness, even though they know (and tell each other) they're bound to lose.

Readers who grew up as I did on American *films noirs* may notice that Singer's many hot-but-doomed couples sound amazingly like Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity*, or Sylvia Sidney and Henry Fonda in *You Only Live Once*. At first the similarity seemed bizarre to me: Could I be imagining it? But then I realized that many of the best American *noirs* were made at exactly the same historical moment as Singer's, by Fritz Lang and Billy Wilder and all sorts of other people who were Jewish refugees like Singer himself. Maybe we need to imagine a form of "Judeo-American *noir*", a distinctive genre with an emotional territory all its own. As a kid, I was always stymied by the question, Why are the hero and the heroine so hopelessly doomed? America is a big country; why can't they just get divorced and marry each other and leave town? If we think of the places the movies are set in – Kansas, say, or California – it's a mystery, or at least a problem. If we think of the places the directors come from – Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, Prague – we don't have to ask.

As a writer, Singer is clearly glad to exploit sex, to take advantage of its pulling power. But beyond this, he really, like Lawrence, *believes in sex*

⁷"The Destruction of Kreshev"(1944), 1, 304. Published in English in *The Spinoza of Market Street*, 1961.

as an affirmative and creative force that makes the world go round. This empowers him to imagine legally married ordinary people having nights together that are as wild as any outlaw's. One of his first stories, "Short Friday" (1945), is a romantic hymn to married love. The man is a poor *shtetl* tailor who looks like a *shlemiel* in the public world. But in bed with his wife he is a hero.

She baked a small *chaleh* for him. Occasionally she would inscribe her name on it in letters of dough, and then he would tease her, "Shoshe, I am eating you up, I have already swallowed you...."

He rose and came to her. Presently he was in bed with her. A desire for her flesh had roused him. His heart pounded, the blood coursed in his veins. He felt a pressure in his loins...he remembered the law that admonished a man not to copulate with a woman until he had first spoken affectionately to her, and he now began to speak of his love for her....⁸

This is as close as Singer gets to physical detail. But it's plenty, because he writes with such generosity and transparent empathy for both partners. But also remember "I'm eating you up": in his world, even married love, the most solid tradition, skirts the edge of transgression.

We see this same generosity and empathy in "The Spinoza of Market Street". Here, in interwar Warsaw, an old ascetic scholar lets himself be talked into marrying the housemaid. Then, somehow, to his amazement,

Powers long dormant awakened in him...The pressures and aches stopped. He embraced Dobbe, pressed her to himself, was again a man as in his youth...Later, Dr. Fischelson slipped off into the sleep that young men know.

He awakens close to dawn, goes to the window, and sees the climax of a meteor shower.

The comets, planets, satellites, asteroids, kept encircling these shining centers. Worlds were born and died in cosmic upheavals. In the chaos of nebulae, primeval matter was being formed...Yes, the divine substance was extended...Its waves and bubbles danced in the universal cauldron, seething with change....And he, Dr. Fischelson, was part of it.⁹

This is one of the nicest things anybody has ever written about sex: that it has the power to make people feel, not just that they have come to life, but that they are participating in a universal life.

⁸"Short Friday"(1945), 1, 522, 527. Published in English in 1964.

⁹"The Spinoza of Market Street" (1944), 1, 175f. Published in English in 1961.

Many of Singer's 1940s stories are written in a very distinctive literary form, "the tale". All through the 19th century, brilliant tales appeared all over Europe and America. Its masters include Gogol, Hans Andersen, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe. The tale is a kind of antiself to the 19th-century novel. Its place and time are usually uncertain, somewhere in the hinterland, sometime "before" the present, in a society whose contours are vague but relatively "underdeveloped". Tales tell of the intrusion of supernatural forces into ordinary men's and women's daily lives. Yiddish tales tend to feature the Hasidic and folkloric theme of "the *dybbuk*", a wandering soul that takes possession of young men's and women's bodies. *The Dybbuk*, Shmuel Ansky's play of the 1920s, adapted as a Polish Yiddish movie in the 1930s, is a modernist translation of the tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. This tragedy was Singer's starting point, and it won him instant recognition, even as the Nazis destroyed a thousand Veronas. It enabled him to write with great passion and intensity, to create a world that was narrow but thrilling, and to find readers in postwar America and Europe who felt he could see into their souls and feel not only their pain but their yearning.

In the 1960s, Singer went through a crucial development.¹⁰ He never stopped writing about a real or imagined lost Poland "before the fall". But he began to focus on his own generation, on Jews who had gone through the Holocaust but survived. His own neighborhood, New York's Upper West Side, was full of survivors. Many of them were just barely surviving – for years I could see them in tailored but increasingly threadbare European suits, going through the waste baskets on Broadway. Others ran the florists, the children's clothing shops, the dry cleaners; you could see the numbers on their arms as they handed you your clothes. Still others, like Vladek Spiegelman, Art's father in *Maus*,¹¹ were having more success in the postwar American economy than they had ever had in Poland. Some were able to afford nice clothes, big cars, splendid apartments in palatial New York buildings – like the building on Broadway and 86th where Singer and his wife could move in the 1960s, after his first great successes in the American paperback market. But Singer saw that many of his neighbors were among the most tormented people anywhere in the world. And he felt an obligation to them that was rooted in "survivor guilt" – he, whose survival had never been in doubt. In dozens of the stories here, including many of the best, he found ways to make their torments his own. In his New York stories, Singer puts the supernatural tale and the realistic novel in bed together.

¹⁰Morris Dickstein blocks this out very perceptively in *The Singer Album*, 118.

¹¹Art Spiegelman, *MAUS: A Survivor's Tale*, Volume I, "My Father Bleeds History", Volume II, "And Here My Troubles Began" (Pantheon, 1986, 1991). This luminous graphic novel is the best Holocaust book by a child of survivors.

"The Cafeteria" (1968) is a marvelous panorama of this generation. Hundreds of Jews pass through, amazed that they aren't dead, fearing the end could come anytime, but overflowing with gossip and intrigue against each other. They disparage each other for what they think they did to survive ("see that one? He had a store in Auschwitz?"), and they lacerate themselves for what they know they themselves did ("to get a bowl of soup you had to sell your soul"). In the new world, people strive to live new lives. "Everyone tries with all his powers to grab as many honors and as much money and prestige as he can. None of us learns from all these deaths." Then abruptly "a fresh young woman", a glamorous presence comes in. Her name is Esther, and she overflows with life. Her life force awakens all "the old has-beens", and they buy her everything. Soon Esther and the narrator get together in a typical Singer way:

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

She gave me both a kiss and a bite.

I said, "You are a ball of fire."

"Yes, fire from Gehenna."

This is an encounter between a woman who *went through* the Holocaust and a man who, like Singer himself, came to America in time to avoid it. She has plenty of stories to tell: "The way people behaved in the war – you will never know. They lost all shame." He wants to hear her story, and to make it his own. His desire to know inflames his sexual desire – they don't call it "carnal knowledge" for nothing. He invites her to his place to tell all, hoping to make love to her. When they are alone at last, she tells him what strikes her as ultimate horror: "I saw Hitler...I saw him here on Broadway...right here in the cafeteria." He acts rational – just as we would – and tells her it's hallucinatory. But given what he knows she has really lived through, can he say it's unreal? She sees he's disturbed, and takes it as proof her vision is true.

"I saw him just as I am seeing you now."

"You had a glimpse back in time."

"Well, let it be so. But since then I have had no rest...."

He never sees Esther again, but often thinks of her. He worries, has she committed suicide? "How can the brain produce such nightmares? What goes on in that marrow behind the skull?" The story's *denouement* is a travesty of sexually transmitted disease: he is infected with her nightmares. He asks, "what guarantee have I that the same sort of thing will not happen to me?" Intimacy with this woman who has been through it all – though he never gets as intimate as he wants, and never finds out the exact meaning of that "all" – gives the narrator's imagination an

apocalyptic shock. Here is how he comes to imagine the future:

...Buildings will collapse, power plants will stop generating electricity. Generals will drop atomic bombs on their own populations. Mad revolutionaries will run in the streets, crying fantastic slogans. I have often thought it would begin in New York. This metropolis has all the symptoms of a mind gone berserk.¹²

The cafeteria, and indeed the city itself, looked at first like shelter from the storm. But it may be that this environment not merely contains, but actually compresses and condenses, enough twisted psychic energy to generate even more violent storms to come.

Esther has many soul sisters. One of them turns up in a late story, "The Bus", on a tour bus gliding through the Alps. The bus turns out to contain a whole Grand Hotel full of strange people who will generate a lot of plot in a few pages. A Swiss Protestant doctor sits next to the narrator and explains his troubled marriage. As sublime mountain scenery opens up before them, he plunges into intimate talk. "She's the one who allegedly converted," he says, "but I seem to have turned into a Polish Jew." To be a *Polish Jew*, for Singer, means to have passed through the Holocaust, and to have memories that are unspeakable. She is impossible to be with, but she has one grand trait: "sexually, she was amazingly strong." Her source of sexual energy is not her body, but her mind; she has "a powerful imagination, a perverse fantasy." Describing her allure, "She has said things to me that drive me to frenzy. She has more stories than Scheherazade. Our days were cursed, but our nights were wild. She wore me out..." Her sexuality is overpowering, but not unique: this *goy* can feel it in all Jews, especially in Jewish women, and most of all in Jewish women who are survivors of the Holocaust. "I have a theory", he says, "that the Jewish woman of today wants to make up for all the centuries in the ghetto." In all those centuries, women were both sexually and spiritually repressed. The new Jewish woman is sexually open and free; but sex for her is part of a larger project, the full liberation of the spirit. The doctor is surprised that her project of liberation has not yet ignited Jewish literature, but he is sure it will: "the Jews are a people of imagination... I can see it in their eyes."¹³ This is vintage Jewish chauvinism, though you can bet you won't find it in the *Jewish Press*.

Embedded in the doctor's riff are some provocative ideas: that the primary source of sexuality is our mind, our imagination; that women are far more imaginative than men; that normal sexual feeling is in some way perverse (Freud said this in *The Case of Dora*); that normal *Jewish*

¹²"The Cafeteria" (1968), 2, 70, 81.

¹³"The Bus" (1978), 3, 214f. Published in English in *Old Love*, 1979.

sexual feeling is politicized, in the sense of infused with a sense of historical mission; that all of us, Jews and *goyim* alike, can transport ourselves and each other into sexual frenzy by telling stories; that the new Jewish woman can tell stories that can liberate us all. I love this vision, with its echoes of feminisms and counter-cultures close to my heart. But in a Singer story, it's hard to take it at face value. Any Scheherazade who has been through encounters with the Nazis has got to be choked with stories of horror beyond dreams. How can she have the emotional freedom to be, as her husband dreams, a goddess of liberation? At the story's end we see her up close and personal: a nervous wreck, luminous but suicidal, who barely makes it through the night. Singer's stories often close with terrific punch lines, and she offers one of the best: "Unlike the driver of our ill-starred bus", where the story began, "the forces that drive us mad have all the time in the world."¹⁴

Many of Singer's late stories portray him as a kind of Rock Star. Should I say "Singer", or just "the narrator"? In these stories, Singer's usual sense of distance between narrator and creator seems to collapse. This narrator spends most of his life on the road, flying to ever-more-far-flung parts of the world to read his Yiddish stories. Wherever he goes, a strange woman finds him. She says something like "Only you know my soul", or even "I read you in the camps", and she takes him home to bed. Sometimes there is a husband at home; he typically echoes his wife's admiration for Singer and disappears into the night, leaving them alone. They do what men and women do, and then – this often seems to be the encounter's real point – she tells him her life story. Some of these stories are tragic, at least one ("One Night in Brazil")¹⁵ is hilarious. Next morning she takes him to the train or plane, he promises to remember her, and then promptly forgets. These narratives project a sense of sexual privilege and entitlement that isn't so nice; it's easy to see how Singer's fellow-writers could hate him.¹⁶ I have no idea how many (if any) of these encounters were real. *The Singer Album* has many posed photos of the writer and his wife Alma, which seem placed there to make us feel, "None of that hanky-panky really happened." The photos aren't very persuasive. But whether or not Singer actually *lived* as a seventy-year-old Rock Star with Holocaust-survivor groupies, what's important to us is

¹⁴"The Bus", 3, 233.

¹⁵"One Night in Brazil" (1977), 3, 7-20. Published in English in *Old Love*, 1979.

¹⁶There were many reasons to hate him. Other Yiddish writers called him *der chazer*; "the pig". They said they were only alluding to his very pink complexion. (*Singer Album*, 70) But he himself, at the start of "The Cafeteria", in the line, "Everyone tries..." (see above), showed he knew very well what they meant. The demonization of Singer is the theme of Cynthia Ozick's brilliant story, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America", *Commentary*, November 1969; included in her 1971 collection, *The Pagan Rabbi*.

that he *writes* as a Rock Star with great poignancy – far more than any living Guitar Wizard half his age. The key, missing in most rock stars, is his *empathy for women*. Whether or not there were real-life originals, whether he treated real women well or ill, he transforms them into memorable characters in print.

“A Wedding in Brownsville”, Singer’s first great New York story, offers a spectacular set-piece that intertwines New York’s brilliant postwar culture of fusion – its fusion of high culture and low culture, of Europe and America, of Jews and gentiles, of tradition and modernity, of religion and secularism, of *shtetl* and metropolis – with a more alluring, unstable and emotionally threatening fusion, the fusion of the living and the dead.

The hall...was filled with people and music, with tables heaped with food, a bar stacked with bottles. The musicians were playing an Israeli march that was a hodgepodge of American jazz with Oriental flourishes. Men were dancing with men, women with women, men with women...Guests kept arriving, pushing their way through the crowd, some still in their hats and coats, munching hors d’oeuvres, drinking schnapps. The hall resounded with stamping, screaming, laughing, clapping. Flash bulbs went off blindingly....

He became half-drunk on the amalgam of odors: flowers, garlic, sauerkraut, perfume, mustard....“Hello Schloime-Dovid, you don’t recognize me, eh! Look, he forgot!”...Why don’t you eat something? Why don’t you have something to drink? Come over here. Take a glass. What do you want? Whiskey? Brandy? Cognac? Scotch? With soda? With Coca-Cola? Don’t let it stand. Take some, its good.

So long as you’re here, you might as well enjoy yourself.” “My father? He was killed. They were all killed. I’m the only one left.”

“Beresh the son of Feivish? Starved to death in Russia....His wife? In Israel, she married a Lithuanian.” “Sorele? Shot, together with her children.”...“Your brother Chayim? Your Uncle Oyzer? They killed everyone, everyone. They took a whole people, and wiped them out with German efficiency: *gleichgeschaltet!*” “Have you seen the bride? Pretty as a picture, but too much makeup....Do you see that young woman dancing in the yellow dress? It’s Riva’s sister – her father was Moshe the candlemaker. Riva herself? Where all the others ended up: Auschwitz. How close we came ourselves! All of us are really dead....Even the survivors carry death in their hearts. But it’s a wedding, we should be cheerful. *Lechayim...*”¹⁷

This is a generation that overflows with a vitality that makes postwar New York the cultural capital of the world. And yet, by some weird magic, it also turns out to be a generation that doesn’t know if it’s alive or dead. It leaps to choose life – *Lechayim!* – but who knows if life will return the compliment?

¹⁷“A Wedding in Brownsville” (1962), 1, 499. Published in English in *Short Friday*, 1964.

In the 1960s, Singer achieved tremendous success in America. (Other Yiddish writers bitterly called him “Yankee Doodle”).¹⁸ But for much of his generation, and for many of his readers, it was a decade of hard times. In cities all over America, Jewish neighborhoods downscaled and went through what sociologists called “white flight”. Many young people with rising incomes moved to suburbs, which were federally subsidized through the Highway System. People like their parents, old people on fixed or declining incomes, stayed in “the old neighborhood”.¹⁹ As Jewish neighborhoods lost their economic base, and grew less safe and more violent – as all American cities did in the 1960s – they also lost much of their *gemutlichkeit*. Within a few years, hundreds of cafeterias closed; for generations, they had been the main centers of Jewish public life (not to mention gold mines for Jewish writers). In a short time, many Jews who had come to feel at home in American cities suddenly felt marginal and endangered. Here, unexpectedly, was a whole new world of Jewish suffering. It wasn’t *shtetl* poverty, it wasn’t Tsarist pogroms, it wasn’t Nazis, but it was real.

In the 1960s, Jewish urban liberals, who had fought discrimination, supported diversity and pluralism, celebrated the American city for its grand inclusiveness, found themselves under a new kind of stress. It wasn’t hard to find Jews talking like this:

The street between Broadway and Riverside Drive became noisier and filthier from day to day. Hordes of urchins ran around half naked. Dark men with curly hair and wild eyes quarreled with little women whose bellies were always swollen in pregnancy. They talked back in rattling voices.

God in heaven, since Sam died, New York, America – perhaps the whole world – was falling apart. All the decent people had left the neighborhood, and it was overrun by a mob of thieves, robbers, whores....Never had Broadway seemed to her so wild, so dirty. It stank of softened asphalt, gasoline, rotted fruit, the excrement of dogs.

This is Bessie, an old Singer lady, the heroine of his story, “The Key”.²⁰

I can recall my shock, at a late-60s Seder table, when I first heard an old Jewish lady talk this way. What struck me was her mix of fear and loathing. I had to sympathize with her fear, alone in the street, but why did she hate the other people in the street? In fact, her language sounds a lot like late-60s American politics, neo-Right wing politics. And indeed, Richard Nixon in 1968 was elected President with the aid of these politics

¹⁸See *The Singer Album*, 70.

¹⁹Ironically, these forces created openings for people like my family, who were thrilled to move from the Bronx, against the demographic tide, to Manhattan’s Upper West Side, Singer’s neighborhood.

²⁰“The Key” (1969), 37. First English publication in *A Friend of Kafka*, 1970.

– his team called it “the Southern strategy”. Most American Jews probably understood this woman’s pain. A very few used it as a pretext to move politically to the Right. (Norman Podhoretz and *Commentary* were among the few.) Most did not. But Singer, whose New York stories are so close to the streets, must have heard the talk every day. He treats Bessie with great delicacy. He portrays her paranoid eruption as part of a crisis and potential collapse of life. She has lost her way; she has got to find herself again. The subtitle of her story could be “She Shall Overcome”.

Here is how Singer makes it happen. Bessie hates going out, but she has to shop. One summer afternoon, she is coming home from shopping on Broadway, and her key sticks in the lock. She pushes and pulls it, and it breaks. Bessie is struck with terror. She feels she has nowhere to turn. She goes back to Broadway, looking for a locksmith, but she can’t find anybody open. She sits down for a rest, apparently on one of the park benches on the Broadway Mall (the green strip that splits Broadway from Columbus Circle to 122nd Street), and falls asleep.

Some hours later, Bessie wakes up. She feels disoriented, then she looks around her, and sees the moon; near it is a greenish star. She is amazed: it is like a revelation.

She had almost forgotten that there was a sky, a moon, stars. Years had passed and she had never looked up – only down....Well, if there was a sky, perhaps there was also God, angels, paradise....[She asks herself] “What have I accomplished in all these years?”...She felt as if she had awakened from a long sleep. The broken key had opened a door in her brain....

A big black man comes toward her, and she is startled, but then he goes his own way peaceably and she relaxes. Now “Fresh breezes drifted from the Hudson. New stars appeared in the sky.” A black cat comes toward her. She is terrified. But then it rubs up against her and acts friendly. How could she have feared it? “O Mother of mine, I was bewitched. I’ll begin a new life.” She even thinks, *Could I remarry?* Then she falls asleep.

She awakes, and it is a new day; she can even see the sun, which she hasn’t seen in some time. She sees men and women going to work; a young man nods good morning, and she smiles at him. She reaches her building. She is terrified of having to ask her superintendent for help. But he is open and nice, worries about her, says he will open her door right away. “Why didn’t you come to me and tell me what happened? To be roaming around all night at your age – my God!” Ironically, we know, it is only through that “roaming around” that she has started to become human again, human enough to ask people for help. Her next door neighbor comes out, expresses worry and relief, and says she put her butter and milk in her fridge.

Bessie could hardly restrain her tears. “Oh, my good people”, She said. “I didn’t know that....”
The super said, “Next time, if something like this happens, call me. That’s what I’m here for.”

She lies down on her bed, and a vision of Sam appears. It may be the first time that he has “managed to get away from the grave and visit her.” They wander arm in arm through corridors, tunnels, mountains. Suddenly she realizes, “It was like the night of their honeymoon”, in Ellenville in the Catskills, so many years ago, when the hotel owner had let them into their bridal suite. She hears the same words she heard before: “You don’t need no key here. Just enter – and *mazel tov*.”²¹ The experience of breaking her key has led her to discover the street, the Broadway Mall (on whose bench she spent the night), animals, the sky, the sun, other people: “Oh, my good people....” Losing her key enables her to find the key to staying alive in the city: to *be here now*. Her breakthrough to tomorrow carries her back to her breakthrough in yesterday, when people urged her to “be here now” with the man she loved.

For old Bessie, just as for “The Spinoza of Market Street”, Singer makes a direct link between the stars and planets, sexual feeling, and staying alive. This may sound absurd to Americans who have grown up with silly songs rhyming “moon” and “June”. It’s not absurd if we think about it from the other end, and try to imagine the inner life of a person who *can’t* see himself as part of the universe, and who *can’t* feel a spark of life that could connect him with another person. In fact, modern society is full of people who are blocked this way, and they aren’t all old ladies.

“The Key” may be the sweetest story Singer ever wrote. It evokes O.Henry, with his parables that show the universe coming together just when it looks like it’s going to fall apart. But Singer shows a lot more guts than O.Henry. He lets loose the flood of spleen and bile that people will have to overcome before they can enjoy the milk and honey. That spleen and bile flood in right at the story’s start: “hordes of urchins...a mob of thieves, robbers and whores”. But Singer empowers his heroine to conquer her fear and loathing, and to reach a point where she can be here now and share space with the rest of the people of the Upper West Side – and of the earth – and live with them. That’s the key.

One thing that gives this story a special resonance is its contrast with *Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, Saul Bellow’s vitriolic novel published in the same year, 1969. Sammler walks the same changing Upper West Side streets as Bessie. At the book’s start he speaks of the other neighborhood people with abuse very like her own. 300 pages later, he talks just the same way. He walks up and down Broadway hundreds of times, but his

²¹“The Key”, in *A Friend of Kafka*, 2, 41-44.

mind doesn't move a step. In the 1950s, Bellow had made a stirring translation of "Gimpel the Fool" (*Partisan Review*, 1953) that had brought Singer directly into American culture. But by the end of the 1960s, they seemed to be living in different worlds. Some of Bellow's best fiction – *Seize the Day*, much of *Herzog*, many stories – is not just set on the West Side, but embedded in its everyday life. In *Sammiler*, just a few years later, it seemed that Bellow had locked himself out of this city life and thrown away the key. The striking thing about Singer is how well he adapted to the city's changes. He not only held onto his key, he showed it still worked.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Singer was writing some of his best stories, he was highly visible on Upper Broadway and on the park benches of the Broadway Mall, schmoozing with people, feeding the pigeons, "roaming around". You could see him plain. My mother, a lifelong fan, would see him on her walks to Zabar's. I asked her, why not say *Shalom*? She said, "He has more glamorous women than me." In the 1970s, he became a subject for celebrity photographs. Some are reproduced in *The Singer Album*. (Bruce Davidson's are the best.) There was something gimmicky about these pictures, but I loved them from the start, not only because I loved Singer, but because of their politics. Politics? Singer's pictures and stories of this moment were terrific ads, not only for troubled New York City (our President, remember, had said it would be no loss to America if the city went bankrupt), but for good old Jewish liberalism. *Behold an old Jew in the thick of a multicultural city, completely at home. Does he fear the street, overflowing with dark-skinned "others"? No: he has the key to the city. He knows how to be here now.* Being there was his way to be both a Jew and a *Mensch*, a human being. *We are at home with lots of people in a limited space. We know how to share space. We know the street is the Garden. This is where God meant for us to be.*

*

I opened this piece by invoking Sylvia Plath, and wondering why, in the throes of her lethal aloneness, she expressed a wish to be a Jew. I want to close with a Singer story that might give us a clue. This story was published in Yiddish in the *JEWISH DAILY FORWARD* all the way back in 1970, and translated by Singer and novelist Laurie Colwin, probably around that time. But it wasn't published in English till last year, when the *COLLECTED STORIES* first appeared, and the English-language *FORWARD* published a Supplement in his honor. The Supplement contained several fine critical pieces, color photographs from what we might call his Miami Dada period, shortly before he died, and this one knockout story, called "Two".²² The central themes in "Two" are

²²"Two", in English *FORWARD* Supplement on Singer, 25 June 2004, and in *COLLECTED STORIES*, 3, 844-57. In quotations below, italics are mine.

developed in many other places in Singer's work. What makes this story special – and probably what kept it from getting published for so long – is that it's *raw*.

The two are a man and a woman, David, a Hebrew teacher, and Dora, proprietor of a boutique, both Holocaust survivors without children. (This could mean: without *surviving* children.) They have had a love affair that has gone on for years. For years they dreamed of getting married. In vain! Now they are planning to commit suicide together. They have rented a room in a motor court in what seems to be the Catskills. They will enjoy a last night of love, and then take poison pills at dawn. David feels "pregnant with death". As Singer describes the plan, and their first steps in setting it in motion, it sounds ridiculous. But he knows we know that, in spite of everything, ridiculous suicide plans sometimes succeed.

They get into the motel room and start bickering right away.

"This night was supposed to be a holiday, not Tishab'ov. Take off your glasses. I want to see your eyes."
"Leave me alone."

He takes out a bottle of cognac and a box of cookies and pours them drinks. They can't quite manage to say *L'chayim!* He says he can't live anyway, he has a lethal cancer; she doubts it's real. He says that on a night like this they must confess everything, all their transgressions against each other. It seems they have both been unfaithful. He has "done it" far more than she, but she, too, has done it, betrayed him. They both insist their various lovers meant nothing to them; they both respond to each other's confessions with disgust. He calls her a whore. "How many Nazis did you whore around with?" None, she swears. Then he says, "We're not Jews anymore, we're Nazis." Then he throws up.

After awhile he says, "There may still be a God."
She asks, bitterly, "What kind of God?"
He says what many Singer survivors say: "*A heavenly Hitler.*"

He shouts at her, "Cursed be the day I met you!" And yet, uncannily, and carrying him (and us) back to Poland, "it was not his language or his style. *His father entered him like a dybbuk.*"

"For you to preach morality", she says, "is like Al Capone becoming a rabbi." But then, Singer says,

She went to him, as if his terrible words were a code and a signal for her. She fell into his arms and he clung to her with passion and disgust. All their inhibitions left them....They wrestled with each other, scolding one another and caressing with forgiving vengeance.

...They fell into their old familiar love chatter: half crazy fantasies, incoherent exclamations, promises of eternal love....

Then they fall asleep.

He wakes up.

"If you want to die, now's the time."

"I don't want to die."

She hugged him tightly and wrapped herself around him. Her hair tickled his face. Only now did he smell the cognac on her breath. She half sighed, half giggled, in the way he once imagined *Lilith* the she-demon, whom Satan sends out at night to entice Yeshiva boys to sin.

He asks about the pills.

"I threw them down the drain."

"All of them?"

"Yes, my beloved. All of them."

Here as ever, Singer is a master ironist. What is the sin to which our hero is fatally tempted by his Lilith? It's the sin of *living*, that's what. And so David and Dora will get dressed and go back down to the city and their messy lives. Their night close to death has convinced them they want to live. And now we, their readers, can breathe again.

"Two" is one of the best things ever written about a couple. It needs to be read in its entirety (13 pages, not a long entirety) to feel the pauses and silences and repetitions, the comedy and self-irony, the unconscious cruelty and equally unconscious tenderness that make up any human couple's real time. But this story is also written about a *Jewish* couple. They are an enlightened couple, sophisticated and scathingly critical (in their different ways) of Jewish tradition and culture. At the same time, Jewish tradition and culture give them life and make them who they are. Freud said that in every act of sexual intercourse, there are four persons present; the woman's father and the man's mother share the bed. But for David and Dora, Lilith is present, too, and Hitler, and Al Capone, and a fatherly dybbuk, and a Hitlerian God; and Freud himself is there, along with Ludwig Feuerbach, as unregistered guests. David and Dora hate God for all he has done and for all he has failed to do. Their God has plenty to answer for. But even as they curse him, they feel he is *there*. David erupts like a soul possessed by a dybbuk; but he has learned from Feuerbach that theology is ultimately anthropology, and from Freud that it is above all our parents who possess us and don't let go. He deconstructs Jewish superstition, yet he lives inside it. As he and she make love, going through gestures of "passion and disgust", of "forgiving vengeance", they act out all the ambivalence that the Bible describes in the troubled but intact marriage between Israel and God. They give each

other grief, yet they are wrapped around each other, they are "two", *they are not alone*. One of Isaac Singer's most impressive achievements is a vision of Judaism that can keep people together, wrapped around each other, not alone, that can overcome suicidal nihilism and keep us staying alive.

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER, *COLLECTED STORIES*. Boxed Set, 3 Volumes, illustrated Album, xxxi + 2844 pages. \$105. Edited by Ilan Stavans. Album includes biographical commentary by James Gibbons. Stories translated from the Yiddish by the author and many others. New York: Library of America, 2004.