

Two Immigrations: Singer's “The Joke” and Malamud's “The German Refugee”

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Isaac Bashevis Singer and Bernard Malamud are widely regarded as two of the main representatives of contemporary Jewish-American letters. Their rise to prominence coincided with the rise of interest and popularity that Jewish fiction began to gain in the United States after the end of World War II. The European-born Singer has lived in America since 1935 and he is currently considered as the foremost living Yiddish writer in the world today. His later works have appeared simultaneously in Yiddish and in English. The Yiddish qualities in the fiction of Bernard Malamud – Singer's junior by ten years – have also been frequently commented on, even though he was born to Russian immigrant parents in New York and he only writes in English. In spite of the similarities and obvious parallels that occur on different narrative levels, the Jewish qualities in each of the two writers show themselves in divergent ways.

Several critics have pointed out that Singer's and Malamud's works, particularly their short stories, strike similar chords, but so far the common features have not been given more than fleeting attention in the critical books and articles on the two writers. Singer and Malamud are accomplished storytellers who have won more praise for their short fiction than for their long works. They both use Jewish materials and their special achievement is in large part based on their treatment of Jewish characters and settings. They draw on the rich tradition of Jewish storytelling, but in their choice of subjects, themes and style they are distinctively modernistic.

Singer and Malamud tend to bind together stylistically different

modes. They like to fluctuate between reality and sheer fantasy, which gives their narratives a timeless and mythic quality. A mixture of the tragic and comic modes often lends an ironical cast to their short fiction.

There are several similarities between Singer's and Malamud's choice of subject matter. Matchmaking, for instance, is one of Singer's favorite subjects. It is also used in Malamud's master tale "The Magic Barrel" as well as in "The First Seven Years." True love, to take another example, is tested in Singer's "A Day in Coney Island" and in Malamud's "The Lady of the Lake." Singer's "Old Love" and Malamud's "In Retirement" are tragic accounts of old men's attempt to start new lives through a sexual relationship.

One can also notice striking parallels between the titles of the stories. One of Singer's stories is called "The Son," another one "Her Son," and a story called "The Son from America" is also from his pen. Malamud's "My Son the Murderer" deals with a desperate father's effort to come to terms with a son from whom he has been estranged. As the titles indicate, Singer's "The Key" and Malamud's "Behold the Key" are built around the same leitmotiv and its conventional spiritual meaning.

Thematically the two writers seem to be very close to one another. Their stories are often concerned with human suffering and they frequently deal with the problems of rootlessness, alienation and loneliness in the modern world. In their stories the Jews tend to become symbols of all men and their predicament.

Despite the multiple parallels, Singer's and Malamud's stories have been created by two very different writers; ultimately, their divergences may prove to be more significant than their superficial resemblances. It seems to me that Singer and Malamud depart radically in two respects that are decisive for any comparative assessment of their work. First, their short fiction conveys two completely different visions. Singer more often than not either suggests or implies redemptive solutions which rise directly out of his belief that the universe is governed by forces higher than man's will or reason. He says in an interview: "The supernatural is always in my writing . . . even though life looks to us chaotic, it is not as chaotic as we think. There is a scheme and a design behind it."¹ Malamud, on his part, is amenable to complexity, ambiguity and open endings. He uses the supernatural only in his humorous stories. Malamud's concern is with the natural world and the moral issues that are raised in the real world.² Singer and Malamud also

respond very differently to the formal demands of the modern short story. Malamud is sensitive to the norms of formal composition, whereas Singer's fiction suggests a close affinity to a much freer and older European tradition of storytelling. Singer frequently allows his narrators to digress and to be guided by caprice. The reader of his stories is always told more than the strictly necessary, while Malamud is inclined towards compression and the use of subtle symbolical techniques of representation.

The two stories I have chosen for analysis and illustration are Singer's "The Joke" (1970) and Malamud's "The German Refugee" (1963). They are set in New York and they deal with the same subject matter: they are about transplanted European immigrants' painful confrontation with life in the United States. On the surface the differences between the New and the Old World appear to play an equally important role in the two stories. The protagonists are representatives of the Jewish experience in Europe, whereas Malamud's young narrator and the rest of Singer's cast are part and parcel of their American surroundings. The juxtaposition is used ironically and it contributes to the grim humor of the two stories.

In Singer's story, the time of action is summer 1938, while the tragic events described in "The German Refugee" take place a year later. Many references are made to time in the two stories. Both writers point out the imminence of war in Europe and they speak about Hitler's threat to Western culture.

The main characters, Dr. Walden and Oskar Gassner, are strikingly similar: they are highly respected Jewish scholars from Berlin, who have felt forced to leave their home country because of Nazis' persecution of the Jews. Both are older men, and in their comically inappropriate but highly symbolic European clothing they even look alike:

For some reason I was sure that Dr. Walden was a tall man. But he was short, broad, and fat, with a big belly and a huge head. On that hot summer day he wore a long coat, a flowing tie, and a plush hat with brim. He had a thick grey moustache and was smoking a pipe. He carried two leather valises with old-fashioned locks and side pockets. (J, p. 154)³

Oskar was maybe fifty, his thick hair turning gray. He had a big face and heavy hands. His shoulders sagged. His eyes, too, were heavy, a clouded blue . . . (GR, p. 176)⁴

He [Oskar] had put on his German hat, with its hatband bow at the back, a broad-lapeled wool suit, a necktie twice as wide as the one I was wearing, and walked with a small-footed waddle. (GR, p. 179)

"The Joke" and "The German Refugee" are told by first person narrators, two young Americans, who try to relate themselves to what they see and hear. In addition to dealing with the same themes, the two stories share many central motifs.

The catalyst of Singer's story is Liebkind Bendel, a shrewd American-Jewish owner of a literary magazine, who wants to use the famous Dr. Walden for his own purposes and tempts him to come to New York under the pretext that a very rich imaginary heiress wants to marry him. The cruel joke played on the German scholar turns on all the characters involved in his betrayal when Dr. Walden suddenly dies and an unknown rich and beautiful young lady appears at the funeral and mourns him from the bottom of her heart.

Love, death, and deception are also intertwined in Malamud's story. The main character has left his gentile wife behind in Germany suspecting her of anti-Semitism. He studies English all summer in order to write and deliver a lecture in the Institute of Public Studies that has employed him as the first refugee. After a successful delivery of his lecture Oskar learns that his German wife has been converted to Judaism in Europe. The news about her conversion and death finally breaks his heart and in desperation he commits suicide.

Judged on the surface the two stories appear similar, but a careful reading shows that Singer's story could not possibly be taken for a story by Malamud or vice versa. The two narratives differ deeply in meaning and in contrast to Malamud's beautifully structured and carefully controlled story "The Joke" sprawls in many directions. Although Hitler's holocaust mirrors man's depravity in "The Joke" and in "The German Refugee," it plays a far more important role in Malamud's story. Broadly, the thematic movement of Singer's "The Joke" is determined by the idea of the Jewish group survival and its importance.

Singer's story is episodic and shows evidence of narrative spontaneity. In its whimsical turns of the plot it is reminiscent of stories by writers who have been influenced by the oral tradition. The opening of "The Joke" runs over several pages and the action does not begin until the last third of the first chapter. The story opens with a detailed description of Bendel's magazine *Das Wort* around which the action revolves. The first person narrator, about whom the reader learns very little, wanders over the whole cast: he summarizes events that have taken place in the past, dwells on

small incidents irrelevant to the main lines of "The Joke," and speaks about characters who do not make a second appearance in the story. Everything is presented in detail, explicitly and in a chatty and familiar tone.

The talkative narrator almost imposes himself on the reader: he is confident, intimate and fully conscious of his authority. At first sight, he appears to be an affected narrator. He wonders at the inner motivation of Liebkind Bendel's viciousness: "something attracted me to that playful little man. Perhaps it was that I could not fathom him. Every time I thought I knew him, some new whim popped up" (J, p. 149). Later, however, the narrator functions as a witness, one who exposes the problems the story is about. Then he almost disappears toward the end of "The Joke."

There are four main characters in "The Joke," but in addition to Dr. Walden, Liebkind Bendel, his mannish wife Friedel, and the young narrator, the story involves hosts of other people who walk in and out of the story. In essence, Singer's discordant New York community acts like a Jewish shtetl where people know each other and have a strong sense of common roots.

The narrator describes the *dramatis personae* by listing their physical and psychological traits, he talks profusely about their lives, enumerates their likes and dislikes, reveals their most guarded secrets, and never fails to mention their deepest desires. The characterization of Liebkind Bendel offers a good example:

He [Liebkind Bendel] was a tiny man with a narrow skull without a single hair, a long face, a pointed nose, a longish chin, and small, almost feminine hands and feet. His eyes were yellow, like amber. He seemed to me like a ten-year-old boy on whom someone had put the head of an adult. He wore gaudy clothes – gold brocade ties. Liebkind Bendel had many interests. He collected autographs and manuscripts, bought antiques, belonged to chess clubs, and considered himself a gourmet and a Don Juan. He liked gadgets – watches that were also calendars, fountain pens with flashlights. He bet on the horses, drank cognac, had a huge collection of erotic literature. He was always working on a plan to save humanity, to give Palestine back to the Jews, to reform family life, to turn match-making into a science and art. One pet idea was a lottery for which the prize would be a beautiful girl – a Miss America or a Miss Universe. (J, p 148–9)

The main action of "The Joke" has five settings, a restaurant on Broadway, the airport, Dr. Walden's hotel room, the Bendels' apartment, and the chapel. Apart from the narrator, all the most important scenes also involve different people. Some episodes seem totally irrelevant for the progress of "The Joke." In a scene remi-

niscent of several love stories by Singer the narrator fools the cunning Liebkind Bendel with his bearded wife. An insignificant episode about a vain woman with bleached hair and false eyelashes is so meticulously told that it begins to live a life of its own and detracts from the cohesion of the story.

Singer employs much dialogue, which gives him an opportunity to display his pleasure in linguistic imitation. The ample use of the telephone as a narrative device helps him to create an illusion that a great part of "The Joke" is told in conversation. The purely descriptive passages resolve the situations and bind the episodes together.

The narrative reaches its thematic culmination in an encounter that takes place between Dr. Walden and the narrator in the hotel. The veil is finally stripped away. Dr. Walden has deceived himself all his life. His previous social rise had been due to his brief marriage to the daughter of a Jewish multimillionaire. Dr. Walden's intense desire to meet Eleanor Seligman-Braude, the American heiress, whom he has showered with love letters, helps him to overcome a morbid fear of death that his travel phobia causes. There are, however, no doubts about his ulterior purposes: he comes to America to make money and it is his greediness that makes him such an easy target for Liebkind Bendel.

Left alone in his New York hotel room Dr. Walden finally faces himself: during all the years he has lied to himself. He has posed as a Hebrew scholar and devoted his best years to editing a Hebrew encyclopedia that he is unable to bring to its last volume. All his life Dr. Walden has been supported by others, but nevertheless he has acted like a rich man.

In Singer's as well as in Malamud's story, and in Jewish literature in general, the language motif is linked with the character's cultural involvement, self-esteem and self-deception. Dr. Walden has gained his reputation as a Hebrew scholar and as a representative of high culture, but the American Hebraists avoid him, because he speaks German. Originally, Dr. Walden is the son of a rabbi from a small Jewish village, but he, in turn, despises Yiddish, the language of the ghettos that Singer has claimed to be the only language on earth that has never been spoken by men in power.⁵ It is one of the crowning ironies of "The Joke" that the lower the German scholar sinks in his desperation, the more naturally Yiddish comes to him. The deeper his painful self-revelation goes, the more bitterly he renounces all the causes he has been believed to pursue: "What is

there to write about? We are returning to the jungle. Homo *sapiens* is bankrupt. All values are gone – literature, science, religion. Well, for my part I have given up altogether" (J,p. 161). When Dr. Walden is finally stripped of all his pretenses, he regresses to his childhood state and honestly recognizes his roots by bursting into Yiddish "with all the inflections and pronunciations of the village he came from" (J,p. 158). In the end, the illusion about the possibility of starting everything anew collapses: "I begin to suspect that this Miss Seligman-Braude never existed" (J,p. 161).

Dr. Walden's pitiable end does not bring or suggest any fundamental change or transformation. Even the menace represented by the Nazis seems incidental. In the final analysis, Singer seems to think that the Hitler holocaust is only one more unavoidable phase in the long and varied history of the Jewish people, no more tragic or threatening in itself than the great historical catastrophes that the Jews have suffered in Europe such as the medieval Chmielnicki massacre, the aftermath of which he describes in *The Slave* and in *Satan in Goray*.

The end of "The Joke" emphasizes the importance of the spiritual heritage that the immigrant Jews of New York share. In spite of the inner conflicts that surfaced in Dr. Walden's cold reception, all the different language groups gather at his funeral and their representatives speak eulogies on the deceased scholar. His tragic death binds the Hebraists, Yiddists, German Jews and Anglo-Jewish writers together. They know too much of the hardships of survival to maintain their petty hostilities. The sense of a common fate suddenly rises to consciousness, and only after his death does the European-born Dr. Walden become a symbol of the meaningful ancestral world.

As in many other American stories by Singer, chaotic New York stands for a world coming apart in "The Joke." The ultimate understanding that Dr. Walden manages to reach in such a world is that the only solidity lies in self-knowledge. The world in which he has lived is, however, mysterious, not merely irrational. The supreme joke of "The Joke" is that the divine scheme is always superior to all the schemes that the human mind is able to conceive. "Well, ja, my life was a big joke – from the beginning to the end" (J,p. 167), Dr. Walden seems to say smilingly in his coffin, but the truth is that his life is not a bigger joke than Liebkind Bendel's life, or anybody else's for that matter. The very existence of the young lady in whom nobody has believed, and who nevertheless sits in

the chapel with "a ring with a huge diamond on her finger" (J,p. 166) and mourns the greedy scholar, outwits the malicious characters' cunning in "The Joke." She brings with her another sense of life that is deeper than the characters have imagined. "I had realized long ago that whatever anybody can invent already exists somewhere" (J,p. 166), the narrator says. The young lady is the embodiment of the supernatural that according to Singer's vision governs all life and makes it worth living.

The key to the thematic meaning of this story is given in the form of a question. "Why should a Polish Jew in New York publish a literary magazine in German?" (J,p. 148) the narrator wonders at the opening of "The Joke." In an interview, Singer quotes Abraham Cahan, who has claimed that the first generation of Jews in the United States would speak Yiddish, but the second generation would not. "It was so, but somehow the Yiddish press goes on living. It's like the Jews generally. They die all the time and they keep living all the time,"⁶ Singer concludes. Miracles occur all the time, "The Joke" seems to confirm, and everything, it suggests, has its purpose in the Great Plan.

The beginning of Malamud's "The German Refugee" is compact and carefully focused. The first passage with its beautiful light symbolism establishes the tone of the story and it also refers to the thematic range. The details are few but highly suggestive:

Oskar Gassner sits in his cotton-mesh undershirt and summer bathrobe at the window of his stuffy, hot, dark hotel room on West Tenth Street while I cautiously knock. Outside, across the sky, a late-June green twilight fades in darkness. The refugee fumbles for the light and stares at me, hiding despair but not pain. (GR, p. 175)

Malamud's story depicts an encounter between two people only. Like "The Last Mohican" or "A Choice of Profession," to take two examples, it centers around the ambiguities inherent in a relationship between two characters, one of whom stands for innocence, the other one for experience. The meeting in "The German Refugee" takes the form of mutual education. Thematically, the story is concerned about some of the most classical issues in American literature.

There is very little explicit characterization in Malamud's story. Almost always when the author makes use of externals, he does so to point beyond surfaces, to suggest the two characters' inner natures or their emotions. The narrator's and the refugee's inward

development and mutual influence are vitally important, but they have to be inferred from the action and from the symbolical structure of "The German Refugee." As in Singer's story, the narrator initially tells next to nothing about himself. His tallness and thinness are explicitly linked with his hunger for life. The self-ironic tone and the rapid change into the past tense indicate in the beginning that a considerable amount of time has elapsed since he, then a young student, used to teach the German scholar. Even the narrator's name, Martin Goldberg, is learned only from the refugee's testament. Oskar's wife, a central minor character, is left entirely to the reader's imagination.

"The German Refugee" contains very few changes of place, and they contribute to the symbolic effects of the story. Oskar's moving from the stuffy hotel room to a small apartment, for example, bears on his gradual adjustment to life in New York.

In Singer's story the five main dramatic scenes have well-defined beginnings and endings. They are like the props around which "The Joke" is built. Malamud incorporates the dramatic portions in the first person narration, and as a rule he does not make a sharp distinction between description and dialogue. His dialogue is terse and economical, but it always contains strong implications of unspoken thought and feeling. The method of interspersing dialogue with the first person narration helps Malamud to achieve and sustain an illusion of continuity.

Malamud works a careful parallel between historical time and Oskar Gassner's experience in New York, but the reader must conclude what the parallel is and what it signifies to Martin Goldberg, the affected narrator. The key to the parallels lies in the opening of the story. The introductory summary about the young man contains a great deal of self-criticism:

I was in those days a poor student and would brashly attempt to teach anybody anything for a buck an hour, although I have since learned better. (GR, p. 175)

The same passage concludes with a question: "Will I ever forget what went on with Danzig that summer?" (GR, p. 175) Danzig is not mentioned in Malamud's story a second time, but Oskar's progress in New York parallels the dramatic events in Europe in the summer of 1939.

"The German Refugee" is directly linked with the American tradition in literature that has been dominated by a belief in humanism and progress, the representatives of which have always

had a hard time in dealing with tragedies. In contrast to "The Joke" the story is not about tough people, who have been hardened by a continuous history of persecution, but about gaining experience and losing one's innocence. In Malamud's story Nazism stands for a serious threat to humanist values.

In the beginning of the story the naively self-confident narrator has a very simplistic notion of the world and he fails to achieve a deep understanding of the highly Germanized refugee's tragic experience. He takes Oskar's misery at its face value. "Gentile is Gentile, Germany is Germany," (GR, p. 177) he thinks when Oskar tells him about his past. In the long process of mutual learning Martin matures and finally gains a lasting insight into the complexity of the German Jews' fate under the Nazi regime. In the end his new spiritual inheritance is symbolized by Oskar's leaving all his possessions to his American tutor.

Oskar has left Germany for personal reasons, but as the story progresses the country becomes symbolically more and more identified with his rejected wife. The refugee has lived his best years in the democratic Weimar Republic, and his most meaningful German inheritance is symbolized by the books and paintings given by his Bauhaus friends. As in Singer's story, language is, however, the most significant cultural symbol in "The German Refugee." Oskar has a strong faith in the possibilities of culture, but he wants to dissociate himself from his roots by learning to speak English and forgetting German. All the comic effects of Malamud's story spring from the refugee's desperate attempts to learn a new language. Oskar's stubborn dismissal of his mother tongue points to the fact that something in his vision of reality has gone wrong. The ironical episode in which the refugee and his teacher practice English pronunciation in front of a mirror is the turning point and very significant in underlining how the two seemingly different characters are being twinned and to what extent the double education is intertwining their fates.

Initially Oskar is immobilized by his fear of a new life in America, but Martin's support helps him to get back his faith in the future. The refugee's spiritual rebirth is symbolized by his successful lecture, the delivery of which coincides with the fall of Warsaw, a coincidence that produces a powerful contrapuntal effect in the terms of the story.

In all his works Malamud skillfully uses literary allusions. In his lecture on "The Literature of the Weimar Republic," Oskar

emphasizes the idea of *Brudermensch* and his speech culminates in Whitman's famous line: "And that the kelson of creation is love . . ." In a deeper sense, he has, however, failed to understand the meaning of his own words. "I feel certain that my wife, in her heart, was a Jew hater" (GR, p. 182), he confides to the narrator early in the story. Like in Bellow's *The Victim* or in Roth's "Eli, the Fanatic," Malamud's victim is also a victimizer. The same understanding is reached in "The Joke" and in "The German Refugee." Oskar realizes that he has been mistaken about himself and about his wife only when he hears about her conversion to Judaism and about her death in a mass grave.

The symbolism of the title of the story makes it clear that the German scholar has sought refuge not only from Hitler's holocaust, but also from his human responsibility. The final discovery does not appear until the last lines. The guilt-ridden Oskar commits suicide during the fourth week of September, three weeks after the German troops have broken down the rule of law by marching into the Free City of Danzig. The two tragic events have become united in the narrator's mind: the terrifying double confrontation with evil has caused his loss of innocence and brought him to moral maturity.

Although it is clear that Singer's loosely structured, almost conversational story is constructed very differently from Malamud's skillfully controlled narrative – a story that shows that Malamud is a very self-conscious contemporary American author, who utilizes the tradition of the "well-made story" – the main divergence lies in the way in which each writer views the transfer of the European Jew to America. Singer and Malamud write about Jews with collective destiny, but the two stories reveal that even if the authors are only ten years apart chronologically, they are worlds apart in their experience as Jews.

In each story the immigrant's confrontation with the new brings about a confrontation with the past and finally leads to a painful self-discovery. The role of the narrator, however, offers the key to the different cultural assumptions underlying each story. Singer's young American Jew is only a commentator: he provides the narrative voice, but he is not changed by the extraordinary events he witnesses. Malamud's American-Jewish narrator initially functions as the catalyst of the story, but his exposure to the complexity of the refugee's tragic fate affects and modifies him. He inherits and assimilates part of the European Jew's experience.

Singer comes to the contemporary scene of Jewish experience in America as a European Jew who for all his being part of the Enlightenment still has the spiritual legacy of an Orthodox Jew. Even the chaotic world that he sees is ultimately an ordered place. In contrast to the richness of Singer's story that is full of vital variety and vivacious life, there is more depth in "The German Refugee" and it is also more focused. Malamud's reaction to the European Jew's experience is ironical and paradoxical. His vision is not based on the Old World spiritual certainty, and yet there is a shadow of that experience in the strong cultural consciousness and sincere moral probing of his story. Both Singer and Malamud work within the larger Jewish tradition, but as the two short stories show, each of the two writers also draws his nurture from the soil of his origin.

NOTES

- 1 Paul Rosenblatt and Gene Koppel, *A Certain Bridge: Isaac Bashevis Singer on Literature and Life* (Tucson, Ariz.: The University of Arizona, 1971), n. pag.
- 2 See, for instance, Bernard Malamud, "The Writer's Task," in *Writing in America*, ed. John Fischer and Robert B. Silvers (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960), p. 173.
- 3 J-abbreviation for Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Joke," in *A Friend of Kafka and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975). Subsequent references will be noted parenthetically in the text.
- 4 GR-abbreviation for Bernard Malamud's "The German Refugee," in *Idiots First* (New York: Pocket Books, 1975). Subsequent references will be noted parenthetically in the text.
- 5 Isaac Bashevis Singer, "A Phantom of Delight," *Book Week Supplement*, 4 July, 1965, p. 2.
- 6 Joel Blocker and Richard Elman, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, ed. Irving Malin (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 5.
- 7 Irving Howe has maintained that the subject that matters most to the Yiddish writers is the collective destiny. See his "Introduction to Yiddish Literature," in *Breakthrough: A Treasury of Contemporary American-Jewish Literature*, ed. Irving Malin and Irwin Stark (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1963), pp. 281 and 284.