

1-1-1985

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Ken Frieden  
*Syracuse University*

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## Recommended Citation

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<http://surface.syr.edu/rel/70>

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## NOTES AND READINGS

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### I. B. Singer's Monologues of Demons

Some of Isaac Bashevis Singer's most powerful stories are narrated by demons.<sup>1</sup> Singer employs the literary form of monologue to depict the supernatural world as a reflection of our own. But his unusual device also works allegorically, and carries his fictions far beyond what they superficially represent. On one level, Singer's monologues of demons speak for the repressed or unconscious facets of human experience. At a deeper level, Singer's demonic monologues resemble monologues of the Yiddish language itself. In these stories, the tense relationship between demons and humans parallels the relationship between the Yiddish language and Jewish existence. To a traditionally observant Jewish community, both demons and secular Yiddish writing appear as temptations. But for Singer's narrator, after the religious tradition has been disrupted, demons and Yiddish writing appear to have lost their force, or their appropriate sphere of influence. When the community no longer recognizes the threat of temptation, this development signifies the loss of an entire worldview and form of language.

The *maskilim* were among the first to perceive Yiddish historically as a kind of collective monologue of the Jews. The Enlightened sought to overcome Yiddish, which embodied a kind of social isolation. Again and again, Yiddish has been scorned as a "jargon" or dialect. From a linguistic standpoint, Yiddish has been understood as a swerve away from Middle High German (and Hebrew).<sup>2</sup> This is, of course, a controversial interpretation, and associated value judgments are often both concealed and irrational. In any case, the identity of Ashkenazic Jewry was clearly inseparable from the Yiddish language—until assimilation and World War II claimed the majority of its speakers.

In the wake of European literary realism, narratives by Mendele, Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem give voice to individual Jewish personalities through monologues. The most prominent instances are Sholem Aleichem's late *monologn*. But Singer breaks from the European tradition of subjective, individualistic monologues, and employs monologues in a deliberately archaic framework that disturbs our modern conceptions of literary representation and human existence.

1. This paper was prepared for a Yiddish Studies seminar on 15 November 1984 at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and for a panel discussion on Yiddish literature at the Modern Language Association Convention on 30 December 1984. The author wishes to thank Dan Miron for helpful suggestions toward revision.

2. See Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: A Study in the Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1973), pp. 45, 65–69.

He does this by attributing monologues, which are ordinarily associated with individual men and women, to supernatural beings. In Sholem Aleichem's stories, monologists generally address an audience, but after the Holocaust, Singer's speakers find themselves more radically alone. Singer's demonic monologists speak for forces beyond our conscious control, whether we understand them as metaphysical realities, psychological constructs, or linguistic fictions. Singer's demons are, then, far more than sentimental allusions to kabbalistic traditions. Singer's use of *shedydim* (demons) shows the continuity between popular demonology, modern psychology, and dynamics of language.<sup>3</sup> I will concentrate on the stories "The Mirror" (*Der shpigl*) and "The Last Demon" (*Mayse Tishevits*), in order to illustrate this aspect of Singer's art.

When Singer began to publish his "monologues of spirits" in the 1940s, he hinted that they were "From a Series of Stories, 'The Memoirs of the Evil Inclination [*yeytser-hore*].'"<sup>4</sup> According to talmudic tradition, this evil inclination is both a name for Satan, and an aspect of the human spirit.<sup>5</sup> But it is equally important that these monologues are called "Memoirs," associating the activity of demons with the act of writing.

Temptation is at the center of Singer's stories that purport to be "Memoirs of the Evil Inclination." A demon tests a man or a woman, who either withstands or succumbs to the test. But Singer's demons discover that the very possibility of temptation, as understood by traditional Jewish sources, has been undermined by changes in the modern world.

"The Mirror" begins with a metaphorical description of sin as a net or spiderweb:

There is a kind of net that is as old as Methuselah, soft as cobwebs, full of holes, but to this day it has not lost the power to ensnare. When a demon tires of chasing after yesterday, or of turning in a windmill, it can always settle in a mirror. It hovers like a spider in its web, and the fly must fall in. (1)<sup>6</sup>

Because human beings are prey to sins of vanity, mirrors are the strategic hide-outs for demons. Of course, the image of a mirror does not only reflect human vanity. It also directs us to problematics of artistic representation in general. Singer's demon implies that all art, including the literary representation in which we discover its monologue, stands in the tradition of idol worship. For the anti-heroine of this fiction, the sin of *avoyde-zore* involves self-worship as facilitated by a mirror. In particular, the demon observes that "God gave vanity

3. Compare Singer's early essay on "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America" [Yiddish], *Svoive* 1:2 (March-April 1943): 12. For a recent statement, see the interview in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 1 (1981): 162, where Singer comments that "many of these supernatural beings are psychologically sound."

4. *Svoive* 1:2 (January-February 1943), in a subtitle to the story, "Zeydlus der ershter." This story opens with a discussion of pride as a virtually inescapable human sin.

5. Baba Batra 15b. Cf. the interview in *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 1 (1981): 173, where Singer equates the *yeytser-hore* with the human body, and Satan with human nature.

6. All translations of Singer's work are my own, based on *Der shpigl un andere dertseylungen*, ed. Chone Shmeruk (Jerusalem, 1975), henceforth cited by page alone. To avoid confusion, however, I have referred to "Mayse Tishevits" by its English title, "The Last Demon." In English, see *The Collected Stories* (New York, 1982).

to women—especially to the young, the beautiful, the rich . . . who have much time and little sociability” (1).

Vanity is linked both to asociality and to modes of solitary speech. The monological form is especially appropriate to this tale about a solitary woman: the demonic narrator in part stands for her own evil impulses. The temptation comes through Satan, but also through the mirror, through vanity, and through monologue itself. When the narrative indirectly represents Tsirl’s thoughts, we learn of her impulse to isolate herself from the surroundings: “What could Tsirl, the beautiful and well-educated woman raised in Cracow, speak about with such country souls?” (1). Separating herself from the community, Tsirl engages in her characteristic sin, which is already suggested by her name: Tsirl views herself as *tsirung*, ornamentation.

Her sin, then, is not merely vanity, but solipsism. This arises from the fact that, isolated as she is, she exists only for herself. No one sees her, or rather only she observes herself. She is, in any event, the only important human protagonist in the story. Her narcissistic self-observation is a sexual perversion which involves an isolation or inward turn of desire. One might also say that narcissism gives expression to linguistic solitude. Yet even while Tsirl revels in the sight of her nakedness, she longs to share what she sees with an imaginary hunter, or poet, or swordsman (2). The desire for an Other is eloquently expressed by the demonic narrator, through the doubleness suggested by paired rhymes. In Singer’s work (as in a long Western tradition), demons often give themselves away by their tendency to express themselves in awkward language. A kind of dialectical dualism surfaces again when, in the rhythms of doggerel, the narrator muses:

Vos iz Khave on a shlang?  
 Vos iz bsomim on geshtank?  
 Vos iz zun on a shotn?  
 Un vos is got on a sotn? (5)

[What is Eve without a serpent?  
 What are spices without a stink?  
 What is sun without a shadow?  
 And what is God without a Satan?]

Tsirl falls into the demon’s trap, as if by a linguistic reflex, and begins to utter doggerels of her own. The mortal sin occurs when she kisses the demon in the mirror; that is, of course, she kisses her own image. Tsirl exemplifies the fate of monologists, in an extreme form. The sin of consorting with evil spirits appears as the sin of encouraging narcissistic and auto-erotic impulses.<sup>7</sup> But the temptations by Singer’s demonic monologists take on an added dimension when associated with a decaying tradition which, by referring endlessly to itself, isolates itself from the surrounding world.

The story entitled “The Last Demon” presses further. While the events of “The Mirror” take place at an indefinite time, those of “The Last Demon” occur

7. It is thus no accident that masturbation is mentioned in the parallel story, “Mayse Tishevits” (17).

before the Holocaust, as narrated afterward. Once again, the plot centers around demonic efforts at temptation. But in this context, the meaning of temptation and sin is difficult to maintain. How is it possible to speak of an "evil inclination" in Jewish life, when the Jews of Eastern Europe have been annihilated? What is the status of the Yiddish language itself, after the destruction of the Yiddish-speaking community?

"The Last Demon" gives expression to these problems by opening with a paradox: "I, a demon [*shed*], bear witness that there are no more demons" (12). There is enough superstition left in the modern world to sustain demons, but just barely enough faith. Even the "I" of this fiction casts doubts on its own existence. Not only is the scene of speech indefinite; the speaker remains an enigma. Perhaps Singer affirms the fictive status of his narrating persona, which literally does not exist. The demonic mask is an illusion, which nevertheless symbolizes aspects of the human condition: "What need is there of demons," the narrator asks, "when man himself is now a demon?" (12). If modern writers have taken over the work of demons, as one of the demons suggests (14), then the demon's narrative may represent current literary and experiential predicaments. In Singer's perception, the Yiddish writer is a particularly anomalous being, like a demon with no one to tempt.

The story moves between two time frames, two worlds, before and after the Holocaust. The narrative frame is in the present tense; the narrated events occur in the past. The narrating demon describes its life in an attic in Tishevits where it draws sustenance from the letters of a Yiddish storybook. The story itself is trash, the narrator admits, but Yiddish letters are persistent, and have a strength of their own (12). The medium shows itself to be more essential than the message. From the start, then, the demonic narrator has much in common with the Eastern European Yiddish writer who, after the Holocaust, has lost his community and retains little more than its language. The demon explains that it speaks in the present tense, because "for me time stands still" (12). This speaking "I" might be identified as "language": for language, time does stand still. The problem is that linguistic communities change, thereby changing language. The demon engages in an elaborate game of storytelling, for lack of anything else to do in a land that has been virtually purged of Jews.

The present time of narration merges subtly into the past time of narrated events, as the narrator explains a mission on which he was sent by Asmodeus, the head of the demons. Like a prevalent postwar type, the existentialist, Singer's demon finds itself thrown into a world it has not chosen. This elaborate scenario serves as a background against which Singer questions the changing realities of good and evil.

The narrator meets a companion spirit that is disguised as a spider. Together, the two demons represent two periods in Jewish history. The demon in the form of a spider is an old-fashioned, pre-Enlightenment cliché, while the narrator is a sophisticated, twentieth-century demon from Lublin. As does "The Mirror," this story represents a world of temptations and ensnarements. Yet the perspective has changed, for all is re-viewed from an indefinite time after the Holocaust. The plot centers around efforts to lead an irreproachable, pious Rabbi astray. The two demons bemoan the transformed state of even the prewar world: in the small towns, the sins are paltry; and in the cities, sin is so universal

as to have lost its meaning. Worst of all is the rise of so-called Enlightenment. The more sophisticated demon comments that

In the two hundred years since you've been sitting here, the evil inclination has cooked up a fresh porridge. There have arisen writers among the Jews, in Hebrew and Yiddish, and they have taken over our trade. . . . They know all our tricks. (14)

This explicit association of writers and demons underlines the allegory at the heart of the story. Modern writing itself has a demonic side, especially to the extent that it strives to displace God's language, the Torah. Yet on the level of represented actions, the story remains a pseudo-medieval tale, a *mayse*. Singer employs deliberately archaic effects in order to set his narratives in the context of religious and literary tradition.

The dialogues between the Rabbi and the demon (who masquerades as Elijah the Prophet) are like internal debates held by the Rabbi with himself. Once again, this emphasizes the psychological significance of traditional Jewish spirits. A further scene of tempting dialogue suggests that language itself acts as tempter. While the Rabbi is involved in studying the Talmud, the narrator distracts him with forbidden thoughts. If the demon is a stand-in for the writer, then in one sense this scene presents the comedy of an author taunting his fictional character. But the Rabbi, who as a commentator resembles a literary critic, fights off the onslaughts of his invisible enemies.

In "The Mirror" vanity causes Tsirl's fall, and in "The Last Demon" pride almost defeats the Rabbi of Tishevits. The demon nearly convinces the Rabbi that a scholar of his merits should not be content to study interminably; he should put aside the Talmud and work directly to bring the Messiah. In a drama of traditional proportions, the Rabbi unmasks the demon by asking to see its feet. Because demons always have the feet of geese, the demon must deny his request, and so reveal its identity. The demon's predicament is subtly and profoundly comic: in Yiddish, the word *gendzn-fislekh* means both "goose's feet" and "quotation marks." Asking for proof of the demon's authenticity, the Rabbi discovers that it is a mere quotation, an unsatisfactory imitation of sacred texts. No wonder! Demons and writers of the modern world have learned to dress up their sacrilege in the most pious-sounding language. And so, when the fraud is discovered, the demon narrator is condemned to a barren life in the ruined city of Tishevits.

The narrator returns to present time, describing its futile life as an obsolete evil inclination. If Jews and Jewish life die out, the spirits that formerly plagued them must also die. In the narrator's perception, the Holocaust appears to have destroyed the meaning of evil, at least as it was capable of being understood in traditional Jewish terms. Not only did the Nazis destroy the Jews; they destroyed the spoken language in which the Ashkenazic tradition existed. A more critical view might add that the prior temptation of assimilation—both cultural and linguistic—anticipated the physical destruction of European Jewry.

The life of the narrator is the life of an author, or of a language, whose world has collapsed. This is, clearly, the way in which Singer conceived himself. What more remains? Only those persistent Yiddish letters: the murderers have not succeeded in destroying the Hebrew alphabet (22) which nourishes the

demon narrator. As if to show off the productive power of language, the narrator composes a brief acrostic, which is even more untranslatable than the rest of the story. For the letter *Yud*, the narrator asserts, "A yid fargest"—"A Jew forgets" (*ibid.*). Singer suggests that, despite the essentially unbridgeable gap between the prewar European diaspora and postwar Jewish existence, our task is to continue to nurture and to be nourished by the Yiddish language.<sup>8</sup> The very least we can do is to write and speak Yiddish. For "without a Yiddish letter," the story ends, "a demon is undone" (22).

Through the personae of supernatural narrators, Singer appears to ask: How can Jews and Yiddish continue to live after the destruction of European Jewry? The old religious world is gone from Tishevits, and with it the mother tongue. Yiddish lives on in scattered communities and in books; the demon, like a Yiddish writer, lives off the textual past. Worse, like a writer who has no readers, the demon can only play with words. Yet the fiction ends on a note of affirmation: in order to survive, Jews, or Jewish writers, must keep Yiddish alive.

In these monologues of demons, the role of monologue has been transformed: it is no longer a man who speaks alone and for himself, but rather a figure representative of language. The monological voice in "The Last Demon" speaks for all of us (perhaps as monologists) in a post-Holocaust world. If Yiddish preserves our contact with the past, Singer observes that Jewish consciousness continues to evolve insofar as Yiddish literature carries the textual traditions further.

How, then, can we understand the monologues of spirits in Singer's work? The demon has been unmasked; its form turns out to be a mere quotation. As a post-Holocaust author, Singer strives to make the past present, to memorialize the traditional Jewish past.<sup>9</sup> On a less personal level, the demonic narratives give voice to the Yiddish language itself, which calls to us from the ruins. But given the diversity of the modern world, we are overwhelmed by an apocalyptic din of—not monologue, but—polylogue. Beyond these conflicting voices we may sense the distant echo of a more familiar voice without sound. Straining to hear, we begin to grasp the intrinsic power of words. Language transcends the individuality of men and women, and continues to live on after their community is destroyed. In the space left by the demise of demons, the spirit of Yiddish is engaged in a battle to receive a hearing: Yiddish is the solitary spirit that speaks through Singer's monologues. For the Jews of today, the transcendence that speaks most hauntingly, from a limbo between life, death, and rebirth, is Yiddish, our neglected *mame-loshn*.

KEN FRIEDEN  
Emory University

8. Compare David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 192-95.

9. Compare "Problems of Yiddish Prose," pp. 10 ff.