Literary Figurations of the Schlemiel: The Short Stories

Chapter III

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

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

First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him - and apparently not for his creator - any pre-existent reality beyond his own self, acting upon him or being acted upon by him. Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is 'thrown-into-the-world': meaninglessly, unfathomably. He
does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only ‘development’ in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be (Realism 21).

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

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

The schlemiel, analogous to the archaic man, succeeds in annihilating the pressures of historical time and yet through his paradigmatic gestures he lives in consonance with the cosmic rhythms. "Gimpel the Fool" (*GF* 9-24) demonstrates Singer's modernism as well as his primitivism and pre-Enlightenment affiliations. Gimpel is simultaneously schlemiel and saint in his naïveté and his credulous nature which make him believe even the most absurd of tales. Gimpel goes
beyond the traditional boundaries of schlemielhood when he marries a woman of doubtful virtue and alternates between the roles of cuckold and father to her growing brood of illegitimate children. Unlike classical schlemiels Gimpel is not directly responsible for his misfortunes. Theodore Reik postulates that psychoanalysis would delineate a schlemiel "as a masochistic character who has the strong unconscious will to fail and to spoil his chances." This would suggest a lack of delimitation of the type, yielding to facile psychological definition and characterization. However the fact that the expression "schlemiel" is disparate in its connotations from the English "unlucky fellow" or the German "pechvogel" would appear to imply that the schlemiel has an unconscious motivation in devising his bad luck (Wit'41).

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

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

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

Singer creates around his schlemiel heroes an extremely complex and subtle ambience. This compels them towards dialogic revelation and explanation, towards reflection of themselves in others’ consciousness, building loopholes for themselves, prolonging and thereby laying bare their own final world as it interacts intensely with other consciousnesses. Inasmuch as the hero’s self-clarification, self-revelation and discourse about himself are not pre-determined by some neutral image of him, Singer’s setting may be rendered fantastic as illustrated in “The Fire” (GF 138-145). As evident in “Gimpel the Fool” the verisimilitude of the protagonist Leibus simultaneously becomes the verisimilitude of this
character's own internal discourse about himself in all its purity. The phenomenon of first-person narration in these tales evokes the struggle of the schlemiels to find their way back to humanity out of the labyrinth of loneliness.

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

Herschel Revel cites the Hebrew phrase *she'luach min 'el* generally translated as “sent away from God” as one of the possible linguistic sources for the schlemiel. Scapegoatism, exile and alienation are embodied in this term, but there is a possibility that as the root words are used in Biblical text, a more likely translation would be “sent from god” in the sense of Biblical messenger (“The Schlemiel”). As William Willeford states it, the fool is one who “expresses both the emergence of form and meaning out of chaos and reversion to it” (*The Fool* 18). Both Gimpel and
Leibus go through such temporary aberrations. Gimpel decides to corrupt the bread of Frampol. Leibus tells a tale, the greater portion of which is best understood in psychological rather than supernatural terms: his father consistently favoured Leibus’s churlish but crafty brother despite the latter’s insolent neglect of his father and Leibus’s long years of self-sacrifice on his father’s behalf. Disinherited by his father and deprived of his credibility by both his brother and the townspeople of his native Janow, Leibus decides to set his brother’s house and mill afire. Enroute he finds them both already ablaze. In spite of his foreknowledge that he would be accused of arson, Leibus rescues his brother and family. Leibus like Gimpel exists in a true shame culture where to lose one’s good name is virtually to lose one’s title to existence and where ridicule may be fatal. The towns of Janow and Frampol place a negative value on shame which fact yields to psychoanalytic examination. As Gerhard Piers avers, “behind the feeling of shame stands not the fear of hatred, but the fear of contempt which, on an even deeper level of the unconscious, spells fear of abandonment, the death by emotional starvation” (Shame 16). Leibus’s assertions of veracity both begin and conclude the narrative: “Now that I’m about to die, I want the truth known” (OF 145). The origins of the fire
remain mysterious to the end and evade the categories of either religion or magic which are functionally considered together for “they are always alternative techniques for inducing power... by means other than those of the natural cause and effect sequences...” (Benedict, “Religion” 637).

In effecting a compulsion of a passive universe to one’s own ends, magic is technological and mechanistic while “religion is animistic behavior and employs toward a personalized universe all the kinds of behavior that hold good in human relations” (Benedict, “Magic” 253). Leibus himself believes towards the end of his life that his anger may have started the fire, but at the time of the catastrophe he had no conception of thaumaturgy.

Paul Radin points out that all magic “consists in the coercion of an object so that it will comply with the wishes and desires of the performer” (Religion 25). The mystery that surrounds the fire is compounded in the scepticism and doubt in the mind of Leibus whose psychological pre-enactment does not prepare him for the monstrous efficacy of his magic will. His truncated attitude towards the fire thus leads the schlemiel into further disaster and shame. Ridicule functions here as in many tales primarily as a social weapon, as an omnipresent threat against violation of the social order and custom of the shtetl. Suspicion and ridicule of the
Janow community which refuses to believe Leibus’s protestations of innocence severe the delicate life-lines which bind him to the social body.

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

Moshe of “The Beggar Said So” (SMS 109-121), a credulous and naïve schlemiel is equipped with the deepest wisdom and the noblest motives. This constitutes him as the symbolic representative of an idealism which believes in the realization of its aims and takes duties earnestly and promises literally. The comic effect generated by the exaggerated facility
of these schlemiels to believe on slight evidence may be characterized as "broken" humour, the humour that smiles through tears:

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

Tanhum Makover of "Tanhum" (OL 209-220), an unworldly schlemiel, is unwilling to sacrifice the Torah to the grandiose aims of his father-in-law Reb Bendit, all without a grain of heroism or sentimentality. Like other religious schlemiels Tanhum's cosmos is verbal and his phrases are palpably Biblical: " 'My soul yearns for the Torah' " (OL 220). Tanhum comes to that point in life which Albert Camus limns in the life of his Everyman: " . . . one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement . . . Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness" (Sisyphus 19).
The leitmotif of these schlemiels is the morbidity of their passivity which at the same time extends the "shtetl's belief in the transitory nature of... life and the eternal justice of Gan-Eyden..." (Pinsker, Metaphor 59). There are insoluble contradictions in the powers granted to some of the schlemiels in these stories. The creative gift of prophecy granted to Yash in "The Chimney Sweep" (FOK 118-123) is accompanied by a dialectical duplicity embedded in the narrative. Singer leaves such questions as the relation of religion to magical powers, and whether this relation is antithetical or perhaps complementary open-ended. "Powers" (FOK 241-256) carries the implication of magical powers that are different from those suggested in "The Chimney Sweep," different methods of harnessing them as well as different practices. As a child the unnamed but certainly not uncharacterized protagonist is able to divine the money his father has hidden under the floor. He also sees a light burning over the head of a woman named Zelda, an omen of her death. When he grows up the narrator-protagonist bewitches women in a conscious action, for his is a specific power, essentially human, autonomous and independent in its action. His depredations in sex arise from the fecundity of his magical potencies. The existence of the supernatural is trailed by a
series of rational explanations that erode the former's case: accident or coincidence. In the supernatural sphere "pan-determinism" operates instead of chance, as also dreams, the influence of drugs, tricks and prearranged apparitions, illusion of the senses and finally insanity (Todorov 20-21). Being neither a lunatic who is not responsible for his actions nor a devilish persona who while responsible lacks the normal faculty of conscience, the narrator who consciously torments his victims only much later comes to realize the negative function of his powers. While the average man's transgression of the moral law is tempered by various considerations such as conscience, prudence, reason and competing desires, the intemperance of the monomaniac protagonist in "Powers" overrides all other desires such as a desire for physical comfort or the stability of marriage. Unlike normal human beings, the schlemiel exercises neither self-deception nor rationalization. Kopel Rashkes of "The Prodigy" (CF 174-186) is a phenomenon of unusual mathematical intellect, cosmic and psychic knowledge and clairvoyance. The ontological gap between event and meaning is annulled in the mind of Rashkes. He believes that only interpretation can adequately name experience and the world. At the height of his rosicrucian adventures and
his awareness of the paradox that man comes into consciousness of the world as spirit manifested in ideas, Rashkes puts a bullet into his brain.

Reuven Berger of “The Bond” (/ 32-40) finds that the slaps he administers to hysterical females have the unpredictable result of creating a kind of secret bond between them and himself. Behind all magian practices, the will assumed to be omnipotent, functions independently of space and time. The will operates in a cause-and-effect relation which is not rationalized but known to be effective. Sigmund Freud hypothesizes a sort of evolutionary movement of the magical act. The primitive man’s wishes are accompanied by a motor impulse, the will. The act of will itself adumbrates in a sense, the satisfaction to be gained from the accomplishment of the desired end. In the act of willing there is a representation or “motor hallucination” of that which is desired, and the representation brings its own satisfaction (Papers 13-21). In the same collection, Chaikin, the narrator-persona of “The Enemy” (/ 91-101) is victimized by the irrational hatred of a waiter on board an Argentine ship bound for New York. The waiter succeeds in wrecking the narrator’s peace of mind by his enmity and antipathy which appear to have no cogent reason. This enemy in order to discredit Chaikin uses all the powers within
his capacity selfishly, vindictively, maliciously, tending to anarchy or at least unsociality. On the deck occurs the climactic encounter between Chaikin and the enemy whom he now believes to be a fiend. After grappling long, silently and stubbornly with his enemy, Chaikin succeeds in throwing him, who appears to be "unusually light - sponge or foam" (199) overboard. The irony in the story is accompanied by the humanizing tendency on the part of the schlemiel towards acceptance of the premise of victimization. The reader's emergence from the fantastic is predicated on the conclusion that the fiction is uncanny: he decides that the laws of reality remain intact and concede an explanation of the phenomena described. He may also decide that the tales are marvellous, that new laws of nature must be cultivated to accommodate the phenomena (Todorov 20-21).

The narrator in "Miracles" (211-229), a self-proclaimed schlemiel, is saved by miraculous powers from cholera even when almost half the population of his native Mechev had died of the epidemic, as also from conscription in the Polish army. Miracles continue as his powers attract beautiful women to him, and help him to acquire the ardent friendship of an anti-Somite, Professor Chrabowski. The shifting natures of desire and
wish-fulfilment are enmeshed in the tale. Just after the death of his mistress' husband Hans Eggeschwinger, for which he holds himself to be responsible the narrator discovers that the powers of the universe have deserted him. Like everyone else, he is also condemned to exile, starvation and other sorrows of the Holocaust. Benjamin Schwartz of "The Fatalist" (P 218-224) believes that "'free choice is nothing but an illusion'" (P 219). The schlemiels in tales such as "The Enemy," "Miracles" and "The Fatalist" seek a form of understanding which captures those elements of experience that are otherwise evanescent, elusive, not easily apprehended by logical or empirical forms of knowledge. There is also a sense of concreteness in the form in which the understanding is conveyed. The delight in disorder or in primal energy informs certain aspects of these tales which deal with extreme situations, ultimate questions, particularly with questions of death. The heroes are not the centre of identity, essence, perfection or fulfilled will. The arbitrary and the absolute meet in the extremities of the stance of fantasy adopted by the author. In the framework of fantasy as desire the analogies of the real and the unreal move synchronically towards each other. However, beyond this sphere, the world can be pushed forward into the
supernatural or grotesque, italicising the strangeness of natural conventions or the “not-world,” into the wondrous or magical, attesting to a detachment from the natural - or the vacillation between both: the pure fantastic (Hunter 128).

Many of Singer’s stories address the dialogical dimensions of literature in their relation to the spiritual dimensions of literature. Miguel de Unamuno argues that “the very essence of all religion” turns on “the problem of human destiny, of eternal life, or of the human finality of the Universe and of God.” Unamuno renders this problem as a “religious longing for union with God” that can be consummated “only in life” (Tragic Sense 218). According to Singer: “Literature hasn’t really done anything for humanity which could be compared to religion, because people lived according to religion, they died for religion.” The survival of the Jewish people in all terrible circumstances was conditioned by their faith “in God, in Providence, and in the hereafter (interview with Burgin 89). While Singer avers that his stories are not created with the rationalistic purpose of a message, he recalls that he was “brought up in the categories of good and evil. Almost nothing was neutral. Either you did a mitzvah or you did an averah . . .” (interview with Burgin 6).
Singer’s stories about religious faith deal primarily with the conflict between faith and doubt in a single soul. Ironically it is often that of a rabbi assumed to be more firmly entrenched in his faith than others in the community. “Joy” (GF 106-116) typifies this genre, the tale of Rabbi Bainish, who after incessant bereavements is filled with an overwhelming sense of nihilism and chaos. Rabbi Bainish is a classic case of the schlemiel who is the object and impulse of Singer’s art. Struggling, striving, always en route to fulfilment but destined never quite to arrive, the schlemiel renews the context of ethical responsibility. The moment of truth in the Rabbi’s spiritual crisis comes when during a fast his deceased daughter Rebecca appears to him in a radiant dream vision. The Rabbi now reveals to the devout that the moon is obscured at Rosh Hashanah for life itself signifies free choice and freedom is susceptible to mystery: “Of all the blessings bestowed on man, the greatest lies in the fact that God’s face is forever hidden from him” (GF 114).

Singer’s tales of faith and survival are also miracle tales which presume on the timelessness of Biblical archetypes. “The Old Man” (GF 127-137) tells the tale of the nonagenarian Reb Moshe Ber whose faith helps him to survive both his children and grandchildren.
In “The Little Shoemakers” (GF 80-105). Abba Shuster imagines himself to be Noah, Abraham, Isaac or Jacob of the Book of Genesis. He finds that he is bereft of the community that nurtured him. It is when his sons join him at the workbench to ply the shoemaker’s craft that Abba Shuster is able to affirm the seamless continuity of Jewish tradition. In these tales of the diaspora there is a conflation of individual destiny with communal destiny which is implicated in a set of mystifications within which nationalist ideologies subsist.

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

A more radical theory of justification through deeds which is a by-product of Singer’s habitual plea for simplicity emerges from
"I Place My Reliance On No Man" (SF 174-182). Rabbi Jonathan Dansiger is beleaguered by the very people whom he has selflessly served, compelling him towards a questioning of God's mercy. The rabbi's insight into the values of simplicity that his tormentors distorted effects his spiritual renewal.

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

... separateness, withdrawal, is no longer necessary. Wherever the hero may wander, whatever he may do, he is ever in the presence of his essence ... Thus just the way of social participation may lead in the end to a realisation of the All in the individual, so that of exile brings the hero to the self in all (Faces 217).
The exiled hero in Singer’s fiction has his metaphorical echoes in Biblical material. As Maurice Friedman points out, The Book of Job (3:23) especially, with its indications that mankind is “born to wander blindly” cast out from any source of ultimate existence foretokens modern representations of existence (Rebel 3-5).

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

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

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

In the higher worlds... there is no free will because they are
so near to God. The difference between them and God is
not great enough that there should be temptations or desire
for sin... Only here... in this dark den, where Satan and
all the devils rule, only here does man have free will....
Since we are the weakest link in God's chain, He depends
on us. If we break, the whole Godly evolution breaks
(interview with Farrell 136).
The behavioural indifference of society in a world dominated by anonymity and the inherent sense of “incognitio” which is a universal human predicament is the material of absurdism. Singer’s fictional world is dominated by remorseful reprobates who seek knowledge, recognition and confirmation in a world where God eludes their apprehension (Lee, Exile 2). In The Myth of Sisyphus Camus uses the metaphor of exile to define the predicament of modern man:

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

The tripartite story “Passions” (P 296-312) offers a means of reifying human identity in the midst of a disordered world. It also examines the priorities involved in a difficult freedom, “the unique ontological status of the human being as one who can transcend natural necessity and act within a context of freedom” posited by covenantal theology (Hartman 23). In the first instance, a simple village peddler named Leib Belkes expresses his devotion to the land of Israel by rebuilding the Temple in a scale model.
The second instance is that of the pious but ignorant tailor Jonathan's transformation through sheer will and persistence into a Talmudic wizard and master of Jewish learning as the result of a wager. In the third instance Rabbi Mendel, a deviant Hasid who refuses to conform to the Hasidim's impulse towards joy and contempt of asceticism, engages in fasting as self-indulgence rather than self-mortification.

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

Reb Amram Zalkind of "The Pocket Remembered" (I 140-160) receives a vision of his pocket as "a silent witness that could testify against him on the Day of Judgement" (I 158) and seeks redemption in the holy land for the lewd iniquities committed by him in mind. The Hebraic view of man is indubitably ambivalent being predicated upon a dramatic tension both in the nature of man and his relations with God. Man's law of
being as constituted by the Creator and his ability for self-transcendence in reason, imagination and moral freedom come into conflict with the radical egotism of his sinful nature. In Jewish tradition, the doctrine of the two "impulses," the good and evil yeizers, enunciates the anschauung into the dual nature of man. Corruption in man is inevitable but not transmitted biologically, it operates out of the freedom of man's own nature. The propensity for good though entrenched in human nature requires divine grace for its completion, and in this respect ethics overlaps with religion (Herberg 75-76).

The 'is' of human nature and the 'ought' of human possibility are illustrated in "A Nest Egg for Paradise" (I 176-203). Reb Mendel, a pious schlemiel eschews consciously and consistently the temptation to make any choice but the moral one. However in "an instant of sheer drunkenness and utter helplessness" his body separates itself from his soul and commits "an abomination of its own accord" (I 187) by succumbing to the seduction of his sister-in-law Lisa-Hadas. This transgression is the sole blemish on an otherwise pure life but he believes that death is the only deliverance from the sin he has committed. Reb Mendel is prostrated by the intellectual pride that makes him arrogate God's powers by prejudging
himself (L.S. Friedman 206). The phases of hiddenness of God, a prime metaphysical concern of Singer's fiction form part of the discourse of Moses Maimonides. Maimonides explains that to see the face of God betokens a perception of the nature of God (Guide 49). This is a knowledge which is "inaccessible in its very nature . . . But My face shall not be seen [means] that the true reality of My existence as it veritably is cannot be grasped" (86). According to Martin Buber, perceptual experience (Erfahrung) is not the sole experience accessible to man. Intuitive-ecstatic experience (Erlebnis) grants not a fractional picture of the world but a lived unity. Essentially linguistic, Erfahrung can be conceptualized in words while Erlebnis resides in that realm beyond words and perceptions: "Unity of the I . . . now it is no longer a bundle [of perceptions]: it is a fire." The Erlebnis being utterly silent, the mystic is also completely lonely: "He has no longer any community with him, no collectivity. Language, however, is the function of community." Lacking an effective language to express his experience, the mystic is left alone even though Buber posits a theoretical community of all those who had experienced a genuine Erlebnis (Confession 15).
“Something is there” (FOK 257-82) is an intense and sustained dramatization of the individual’s struggle to resist containment by religion. Rabbi Nechemia of Bechev is aware of the blandishments of the Evil One as well as of the strategies of resistance against evil but his wrath against the Creator is an alien and sinister force of rebellion. The Rabbi’s subsequent rejection of his religion symbolized by several specific gestures such as his identification with every kind of heresy is a corollary of his new concept of God as torturer and persecutor. The Rabbi’s new life brings with it a heightened sense of emancipation and material opportunity. However the new world also steadfastly refuses to evidence order and meaning, in spite of all the incompatible means of apprehension by Spinoza, Kant, Leibnitz and Schopenhauer that attempt to define the universe and God in terms such as “substance, monad, hypothesis, blind will, nature” (FOK 279). At the end of the narrative, “a light he never knew was there” hovers in the Rabbi’s brain and he murmurs at the end of the war between himself and God: “Something is there” (FOK 282).

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

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

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

Ozer Mecheles of "On a Wagon" (CF 263-274) in the course of a wagon journey from Rejowiec to Zamosc makes the discovery that the Enlightenment, his wife and her lover all conspire to deceive him. Assailed by doubts about God and Creation which may be a blind process the schlemiel decides to seek the truth in a yeshiva. Religion is implicated in a
relation to that which is both within life and beyond it involving a covenant between life and life, human and the divine (D. Patterson 4). Like Ozer Mecheles, Oyzer-Dovidl of “The Riddle” (FOK 124-134) comes to experience both the mythical and the doctrinal implication of the condition of lostness through the betrayal by his wife Nechele. The relation between the human and the divine becomes problematic but these protagonists believe that “Vision is hearing the word” (Handelman 63). Singer with his schlemiels arrives at the basic antinomies of existence. These in turn cause a reversion inward to the ego which “in reprisal for its dread of ‘the infinite’ seeks to enthrone false infinites” (Hopper 161). Tales such as “On a Wagon” and “The Riddle” are narratives of alienation and return. The groundwork of the quest for truth is shaken so that the ego faces an abyss of isolation. However this solitariness brings the schlemiels towards the moment of recognition “in which a character comes to understand the meaning of his dilemma and his true relation toward his fellowmen and his world . . . . The new substance must be reached through the battlefield of alienation” (Slochower 380). In “The Brooch” (S 223-237) the discovery of the diamond brooch placed in overt symbolism over his marriage contract becomes pivotal to Wolf Ber’s understanding about Celia’s deception. It
also becomes the agency of his return to humanity. In this moment of the schlemiel's transfiguration by estrangement he becomes a man inevitably stigmatized, compelled to bear ancient wounds from which there is no escape (Hopper 161).

In "The Joke" (FOK 148-167), Dr. Alexander Walden, Hebrew writer and philosopher is made the subject of a great deception for almost five years. Convinced that an heiress to millions loves and admires him, Walden carries on a correspondence with this non-existent persona unaware that he is the victim of the ego of a pseudo-intellectual, Liebkind Bendel. The sudden arrival of Dr. Walden in New York to meet his admirer precipitates a crisis that can be defused only by inventing the heiress' sudden death in an aircrash. Dr. Walden's long trip and his disillusionment undermine the learned man's health rapidly. His death smile seems to say "Well, ja, my life was one big joke - from the beginning to the end" (FOK 167). The joke here is a cyclical leap for the schlemiel. He is ensnared by his own limitations such as old age, ill health, alienation, and the strangeness of the world he encounters. David I. Grossvogel commenting upon black humour in the absurd theatre points out that to the extent that we are forced "to recognize the identity of
the object laughed at, the spectator becomes a self-conscious part of the negative forces that hem in, and frustrate the full existence of a kindred being. [The result is a] bitter laughter, which stresses the fundamental identity of laughter and victim" (Blasphemers 195).

The strategems of humans do not affect the victims as powerfully as the games played by spirits. Yet both have their moral and philosophical stakes in that they impart enlightenment about religious faith and the nature of reality to the human participants in the game as well as to the readers. Commenting on the relationship between play and civilization, Johan Huizinga suggests that the competitive or agonistic element in play, its "element of tension, imparts to it a certain ethical value in so far as it means a testing of the player's prowess, his courage, tenacity, resources, and . . . his spiritual powers" (Homo Ludens 29). The ethical and philosophical dimensions of these "agonistic" games between Singer's schlemiels and their antagonists place them in Huizinga's play-category of "competitions in esoteric knowledge" (127), since the games seem to test and elicit the moral strength and reality-perception of the protagonists. Thus the games become the author's vehicle "to search for eternal truths, for the essence of being" (Singer, Nobel Lecture 6).
Huizinga also notes that "Hebrew affords striking evidence of the identity between the agonistic and the play principle" (55). In the stories under discussion, Singer is - whether consciously or not - adhering to Hebrew linguistic tradition.

The apparent inescapability of the pattern of the inevitable victim and victimizer is dramatized in "Zeidlus the Pope" (SF 150-60) in the story of "the yeshiva boy who wanted to become Pope" (SF 160). There emerges too, the central contention that Zeidlus ultimately stands forth as a religious scapegoat. With all his religious scholarship and the brilliant perceptions of the prodigy, Zeidel possesses "much more than that sliver of vanity which the Law permits the scholar" (SF 152). Zeidel's subsequent life of apostasy and corrupt expectations is devoted to writing an authentic Apologia Contra Talmudum, a variety of anti-Jewish polemics. Zeidel's disillusionment with the new faith, his blindness and poverty culminate in an awareness of his transgression, leading to the would-be Pope's deathbed perception: "If there is a Gehenna, there is also a God" (SF 159). The terrible irony is resident in the schlemiel's fervent acquiescence to ambition and the lust for knowledge wherein his apostasy and disillusionment with the new faith feed upon and demean one
another. This affords the schlemiel a caricature of an apocalyptic vision, a mock integration of selfhood. Apostasy does not provide Ziedel with the means to enter into a larger, richer or more meaningful region of existence. Instead it perpetually imprisons him in a contracted sphere of ignorance and falsehood which he gradually and faintly perceives to be a place of torment.

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

The myth or doctrine of the Original Sin which is central to literary discourse posits as its dialectic antithesis not the concept of Original Righteousness which is predicated upon an intellectualistic ethic but the fact of Original Freedom grounded in the ethics of love and the existential relationship to God. This is the mythical and dogmatic undertone of the
predicament of alienation which is a signal motif of modern literature (Hopper 169).

Rabbi Gabriel Klintower in “The Boy Knows the Truth” dramatizes Singer’s stress on free choice and the ambiguities inherent in this concept (OL 135-148). Singer points out that “the truth is that the belief in free will is a categorical imperative . . . The very fact that we all talk about human errors is proof that we believe in man’s free will” (interview with Burgin 83). The rabbi believes that the brief ingress of his sexual impulse is responsible for precipitating Menucha Alte’s death. His seclusion and self-mortification extend beyond the Shivah and the thirty days of mourning, penitence here being imbued with attrition as in “A Nest Egg for Paradise.” Rabbinic Judaism which is basic to all contemporary schools of Jewish religious thought posits the view that man’s nature is neutral as evidenced by the fact that in Biblical passages the yetzer ha-ra or evil impulse is placed side by side with yetser hatobh or the good impulse. Thus it denies that “man’s nature eo ipso can be stigmatized as evil, whether as a result of Adam’s sin, or because of any theoretical distinction between body and soul, or on any other ground” (Gordis 234-35). Normative Judaism neither holds that man’s nature is
intrinsically evil nor seeks to uphold this tenet by indoctrinating that Adam's sin of disobedience places a hereditary and ineludible stigma upon all his descendants (Gordis 225).

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

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

Mark Meitels in "The Witch" (P 104-132) assumes a kind of helpless sacrificial selfhood in his slow capitulation to the enactment of the sexual ritual with the circean "witch" Bella. As in "A Tale of Two Sisters" (P 181-201) Singer limns the portrait of a schlemiel whose personal anguish and demoniac autarchy are transformed through his victimhood to an ironic acquiescence in primeval chaos. Unlike other schlemiels in Singer's fiction who achieve experiential rapport
with the community through their victimization Haim Leib of "A Tale of Two Sisters" grimly accepts his own degeneration and atrophy in preference to a life of will and memory and communion with others. He comes to believe that "everything lives, everything suffers, struggles, desires. There is no such thing as death" (P. 200). Alvin H. Rosenfeld suggests that Singer understands sexual passion as another source of gnosis and Bella of "The Witch" like a female golem (spirit), in her final act takes the reader through sexual conflict to religious cerebration ("Good" 87).

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

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

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

Dr. Zorach Kalisher of "The Séance" knows that the medium Lotte Kapitzky, her seances, her automatic writings, paintings and symphonies are "‘crazy, meshugga . . .’" (S 10). He is aware too that her
control. Bhagavat Krishna duplicates both Kapitzky's accent as well as her limited theosophic and spiritual knowledge and that the stage properties of the spiritual meeting with his mistress Nolla are part of a world of predictable possibility. Yet her seances evoke the mystery at the core of experience affirming man's relationship to the supernatural or numinous reality, and performing a function formerly carried out by myth and religious ritual. While acknowledging the medium's powers to be chimerical, Dr. Kalisher, a quintessential schlemiel is still impressed by its objectives, preferring the state of immersion in the underground habitations of consciousness, undergoing transformation “into a superficial scapegoat whose comic efforts are reduced simply to chaos rather than enlightenment . . .” (Schlobin 123). In “The Captive” (CF 44-59) all the major characters are possessed by the spirit of a Polish Jew, an impressionist painter and Jewish intellectual Zorach Kreiter who epitomizes all the vices of transgression and excess castigated by traditional Judaism. An escapee from his faith and from anti-Semitism Tobias Anfang creates paintings out of his nihilistic predicament. Spiritist possession gradually replaces autonomy and Anfang is forced to live a lie, in a trap that he attempts to idealize. Anfang is now immured in the
hollowness of the Zionist mythos much as he had earlier been imprisoned in that of the Enlightenment mythos (Rice 271).

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

The narrator of the "The Captive" as well as Tobias Anfang the ghost painter are victims in the grotesque game of pseudo-resurrection played by Sonia to resuscitate the fame of her dead husband Zorach Kreiter. Though this fiction is a grotesque satire it has its basis in reality and not in a phantasmagoric world. "The Séance" ends with Lotte Kapitzky's utterance: "'There is no death, there isn't any. We live forever, and we love forever. This is the pure truth' " (S 15). The story's power centres on "this play of truth, this ritual of ambiguity" (Malin, Singer 96). "The Captive" deals with literal reincarnation that accommodates itself in the reality of location in time and setting even while the transmigration of the soul is an incontrovertible fact of existence for the characters implicated. The reincarnation, possible or at least conceivable in stories like "The Captive" and "Hanka" (P 3-23) has a double effect: the narrator of the "The Captive" travels to Israel to
discover that he is as vulnerable to spirit transmigration as the friends he is trying to save. In a mockery of his determination to expose the deception practised by Sonia he becomes a captive of Sonia’s reincarnated husband as much as that of the mystic spirit of his ancient Jewish past (McIntyre 232).

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

Satan . . . constitutes the avant and the rear guard of all messianic crazes, both religious and communistic, and reigns supreme as the archetypal overreacher . . . . Specifically, the overt and explicit nature of the Devil has to be seen within
the Jewish context of an unseen God who is without face or form. Indeed the Devil often uses the very elusiveness of God on the one hand and the availability of the demonic on the other to his regular advantage. In the same vein, the Devil is the graven image against which the commandment warns, and prides himself at being not only tangible and available, but recurrent ("Devil" 24).

Demonology does not constitute an integral part of mainstream Judaism. Gershom Scholem expounds that "Jewish philosophers dismissed [the problem of evil and the demonic] as a pseudo-problem, while to the Kabbalists it became one of the chief motives of their thinking" (Kabbalah 99). This suggests that there is another and perhaps more problematic dimension to the exploration of Singer's use of demonology and the fantastic within the framework of its cultured sources. Both the demonics and fantasy acknowledge a linguistic/cultural community as the source of the imaginative text of recovered meaning. Consideration of the approximation of consciousness in these aspects of Singer's fiction reveals that they become a vehicle for aligning real and imaginative events in both the present and the past and for dissolving the temporal and spatial bridges
between them. The fantastic here engenders narratives "that transgress, subvert, focus on the unknown and move toward endlessly unsatisfied desire . . . .” This results in a struggle by fantastic desire against the reality principle in its endless quest for the gratification of desire (Hunter 102-3). In spite of his simultaneous inversion and introduction of the folklore motifs Singer in the tale “Taibele and Her Demon” mutes the opportunities to signal the fantastic: According to Eric S. Rabkin:

One of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted. The reconfiguration of meanings must make an exact flip-flop, an opposition from up to down, from + to -. Rabkin continues that one of three kinds of clues will suggest to the reader that an element in the narrative is fantastic; the incident will be manifestly antithetical to the stance sustained by the author; a character in the narrative will register amazement in the face of the incident; the narrator will furnish statements that reveal that the incident does not square with the story’s accepted perspectives (Fantastic 8). The very opening of
"Taibele and Her Demon" indicates that the narrative voice prevents the reader from feeling that the world of devils is fantastic.

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

The Kabbalists evolved an involved complex of demonology, integrating conformations from medieval Arabic and Christian demonology apart from Germanic and Slavic folklore. Human-made sources of evil abound in demonology, generated out of Adam's copulation with Lilith, the leading female demon, apart from other transgressions of the sacred law (Lee, Exile 30). Gilgul, or the transmigration of souls, reincarnation, or metempsychosis and ibbur which implicates the entry of one soul into that of another person, occur often in Singer's work as a form of displacement. As Gershom Scholem explains: "The exile of the body in outward history
has its parallel in the exile of the soul in its migrations from embodiment to embodiment, from one form of being to another" (*Kabbalah* 116).

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

Henia Dvosha of “The Power of Darkness” (*OL* 233-244), one of “‘those that kiss the Angel of Death’s sword’” (*OL* 239) induces her death so that her husband Godel may marry her sister Dunia. Blighted and ill fated in this sphere she becomes an instigator of trouble in the
other: “The living die so that the dead may live” (OL 244). This revelation which is almost a coda implies both that renewal of life depends on moral qualification and that man may not contradict divine judgement or arrogate the powers of God. This is an instance of a psychological imperative determining a theological position and with profound implications. “Short Friday” (SF 191-202) presents the case for an inherent death (thanatos) impulse or force (Bia) in all nature. In Singer’s fiction the body frames the mind rather than creates it. The contest between the conscious heroic ego or the realm of the mind and the unconscious psyche or the realm of soul is the result of two mutually exclusive desires: the psyche’s desire to absorb ego in order to acquire more awareness of its depth, and the ego’s desire to retain its separation and continuity. As James Hillman points out, “the image-soul’s delight is the ego-soul’s dread” (Dream 152). Before considering the death experience of Singer’s schlemiels in this light it is relevant to reconsider contemporary thought on the psychological experience of death. The theories of prevailing scientistic literalism attempt to delimit all discourse regarding death to a physical event. However, a psychological experience of death, or the conscious awareness of a temporary but significant loss of normal
ego-centric identity, may be similar to the death experience (Hillman, *Suicide* 60). The emphasis on a metaphorical perception of death is pivotal in archetypal psychology, but there are other sources that advocate this position. Robert Jay Lifton, writing of what he terms “experiential transcendence” - the experience of temporary loss and subsequent transformation of the self - perceives it “as epitomizing the death-and-rebirth experience. It is central to change or transformation and has great significance for psychotherapy” (*Self* 34). As Robert Ochs writes, “dying to one’s self is not mere metaphor but the meaning behind death itself” (*Death* 125). This experience of “dying to one’s self” is what the psychotherapist Stanislav Grof terms “ego death,” a climactic experience which “seems to entail an instant merciless destruction of all previous reference points in the life of the individual.” As an effect of such experience, “the subject experiences a deep sense of spiritual liberation, redemption and salvation. He or she typically feels freed from anxiety, depression, and guilt, purged and unburdened” (*Psychotherapy* 123).

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

Jewish existence is predicated upon the idea of covenant which is the basis of the Jewish claim of redemption and posits a special relationship between God and the Chosen People grounded on two apriorisms: the people’s witness and divine protection. The dialectical relationship between historical events and religious antiphons was interpreted in the eternal testing ground of covenantal existence which
implicates a sanctification of history as also a reaction to historical mutations. An activity central to covenantal existence is the decoding of history implicating at the same time the eternal condition that covenant affirmation signifies in all generations the conviction that no historical convulsion was potent enough to revoke the faith in the eternality of Israel (A.L.Berger 1-2). Moishe Heisherik in “Why Heisherik Was Born” (180-90) endures much suffering and torture at the hands of the Christian soldiers while serving in the Polish-Bolshevik war, his “pathetic book” (190) being a privileged text, the culmination of the unique comprehension of one who was witness to both events and his interpretation of events as they occurred. For the survivor-narrator, the historical imperative to remember (zakhor) implicates remembrance both as a self-sufficing requisite and witness as evidence (Young 171). Heisherik the schlemiel is also a schnorrer and yet the very same protagonist heroically smuggles letters during the Nazi Holocaust, from Bialystok to Warsaw, motivated by a desire to hold separated families together. The narrator surmises that Heisherik’s earlier sufferings were reference points for his mission and his martyrdom (190).
A feeling of comic anguish and baroque illusionism animates some of Singer's schlemiels who lead lives without grandeur, these lives being lived at the diminishing point where life and death, truth and falsehood, good and evil have arrived as tragically convertible. Singer's narratives in "Getzel the Monkey" (S 149-59) and "Passions" (P 296-312) have a naïve or cynical narrator, and are imbued with personal reminiscences, burlesques and reflections. These tales are colloquial in form, condemning a specific vice, discoursing on a distinct theme, and implicating a counter virtue. Getzel through his aping, engages in a kind of compact with Todrus. This involves a reciprocal responsibility and a satiric punishment which uncovers "the knavery of the punisher [and] the folly of the punished" (Paulson 65). The interlocking relationship between Todrus and Getzel becomes a corruption of the ideal relationship or a deviation from the norm of behaviour. Getzel is a schlemiel who masquerades as a heroic man but the ideal of heroism itself remains inviolate for both Todrus and Getzel. The excesses and decline of these men expose them as pretenders while society's assumptions about greatness are manifested as illusory. Disputing Johan Huizinga's metaphysical exegesis of the play element in culture Roger Caillois discusses the play element in games more
elaborately. This according to him is signalized by two powers, which he names paidia and ludus. Paidia overlays “spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct” and though annihilative, wrackful and egomaniacal is basically “the primitive joy in destruction and upset.” Conversely, ludus is “complementary to and a refinement of paidia, which it disciplines and enriches.” Ludus is individuated by “calculation” and “contrivance,” and is an issue of the “primitive desire to find diversion and amusement in arbitrary, perpetually recurring obstacles” (Games 28-33). Caillois comments on the distinction thus:

[Games] can also be placed on a continuum between two opposite poles. At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety is dominant. It manifests a kind of controlled fantasy that can be designated by the term paidia. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to blind it with arbitrary, imperative,
and purposely tedious conventions, to oppose it still more by ceaselessly practicing the most embarrassing chicanery upon it, in order to make it more uncertain of attaining its desired effect. This latter principle is completely impractical, even though it requires an ever greater amount of effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity, I call this second component *ludus* (*Games* 13).

The restrained fantasy of *paideia* is evident in Getzel’s mimicry and arbitrariness. The perversity of *ludus* is to be perceived in the schlemiel’s subversion of the social order through acquiring Todrus’ wife Fogel in a disadvantageous business transaction with him. In “The Plagiarist” (S 95-110) there occurs a variation on the theme of mimicry. Reb Kasriel Dan Kinsker struggles to overcome his temptation to revile his pupil Shabsai Getsel who systematically abstracts the Rabbi’s manuscripts about the Talmudic texts and brings out the exegesis in his own name, thereby appropriating the fame that rightly belongs to the rabbi. The narrative underscores the problematic of struggling against evil without oneself becoming evil.
"A Wedding in Brownsville" (SF 161-73) manifests exile as "a symptomatic metaphor for the state of the narrative imagination" (Seidel 8). The exilic vision is originative in that the protagonist, Dr. Solomon Margolin experiences a sense of salvation from the depression and guilt which are the residues of his survival from the Holocaust. Dr. Margolin, who has migrated from Sencimin to America is part of a disinherited race both because old relationships fail to survive and the new social forms are unrecognizable to him. A noisy, heimesh wedding in Brownsville provides the occasion for his mystical reunion with his lover Raizel. A metonymical purification which provides an imaginative solace to the émigré’s heartache occurs through the supernatural encounter. Suggestions of extinction are present throughout the story in the juxtaposition of life and death. Gradually Dr. Margolin comes to a realization of the fact of his own death - he was the victim of the accident, his the dead body removed, he the guest who still had not come.

Lionel Trilling posits the inadequacy of the means to communicate the inexpressible suffering of both the victims and the survivors of the Holocaust (Imagination 264-65). Edward Alexander contends in a more
accommodative vein that "some degree of failure or inadequacy is almost a precondition of success in which we can expect no more than a shattered majesty and a noble imperfection" (Resonance xiii). Fictions such as these generate not a theodicy but an assertion of the metanoia and transcendental metaphysics of human potential and idealism. The Holocaust engenders a vacuity that can be filled in only by human compassion. In the case of Singer the changeover from the cosmic to the human sphere is both abrupt and belated, effected not by the order of events but by a transition in the writer's perspective. Most of Singer's work since Short Friday (The Séance, Enemies: A Love Story, Friends of Kafka, Passions) pursue a divergent strain from the earlier fiction in that their locale is the United States rather than the shtetl and most of the protagonists are survivors. In the later stories which are positioned in Europe, the concentration camp appears only obliquely and yet is seen as a sort of palimpsest with the shtetl. This effaces much of the pre-Holocaust civilization's innocence and effervescence. The earlier fiction focuses on the contention in the supernal worlds between supernatural powers for domination over the soul of man. This tenor is replaced in the later fiction with a greater application to the ethical problematics of suffering, persecution and
conflict-ridden humanity, of phenomenal existence and co-existence (Ezrahi 124). As Herman Gombiner of "The Letter Writer" (S 239-276) says "The spirit cannot be burned, gassed, hanged, shot. Six million souls must exist somewhere" (S 263). The narrator of "The Last Demon" (SF 103-112) confesses that it is futile to proselytize for evil in these times: "I, a demon, bear witness that there are no more demons left. Why demons, when man himself is a demon? Why persuade to evil someone who is already convinced?" (SF 103). Like his creator the demon attempts to convey that history has left his self intact and that he could defy time. There is also the dubious conviction that there is neither judge nor judgement and that to the generation that has indeed succeeded in becoming absolutely sinful, the only Messiah that will appear is death.

The later fiction traces the shadows of the shtetl in a post-Holocaust diaspora as well as the classical theological positions which were subverted by secular modes of thought, discontinuities and the Nazi cataclysm. At the same time it avoids the postulation of a historiosophical overview that would provide a coherent antidote to the Holocaust (Ezrahi 126).
Singer's apocalyptic fiction like his Holocaust fiction is expressive of an existential terror engendered by a rupture between a philosophy of evolving good and an abiding obsession with the medieval conception of guilt-laden, sin-ridden man. In the absence of any satisfactory theory that accounts for the existence of evil and pain, this fiction can minimally hypostatize the world felt if not perceived as mind. In "The Gentleman of Cracow" (GF 25-43), the town of Frampol, beleaguered by poverty and drought is inveigled into blasphemy, avarice and lust, as well as into an unmitigated and dionysiac violation of the Law to obtain the gold that the affluent stranger from Cracow has brought. At the culmination of the festival of abomination the Gentleman from Cracow reveals himself to be the Chief of the Devils, Ketev Mriri and his bride Hodle turns out to be Lilith. The conflagration in which the innocent children of Frampol are decimated is the prelude to a radical reconstruction of the community: "From generation to generation the people remained paupers. A gold coin became an abomination in Frampol, and even silver was looked at askance" (GF 42-43). This vaticinal tale belatedly rationalizes the hazardous theory that "‘worse is better’" (Alexander, Fiction 38).
Mircea Eliade in his transcultural studies of the nature of religion emphasizes the sacral importance of forming community. For traditional societies such acts were "only repetition of a primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation. When they tilled the desert soil, they were in fact repeating the act of the gods who had organized chaos by giving it a structure, forms, and norms" (Sacred 31). Singer educos his symbolism from a mythic worldview in which creation and the demonic are primitial antipodes. The demonic incarnates the vacuity which may be negated by the fullness of choate creation, the chaos ever traversed by God's formal order, the darkness thwarted by God's light, the silence expunged by God's word (Lee, Exile 54).

In Jewish folk tradition, Chelm is a Polish town remarkable only for the large number of fools who inhabit it. As in Frampol the only alternative in this legendary town to incongruence is the imperative of comic ironies whereby the fulfilment of the Messianic promise is construed as a formidable apocalyptic threat (Gittleman, "Apocalyptic Town" 64-65). "The Destruction of Kreshev" (SPM 160-214) reifies the drama of the mind engaged in the quest for
metaphysical and moral absolutes in a world that proffers amorphous semblances of an occult order but withholds ultimate revelation and illumination. The Midrash and the Book of Ezekiel envision an apocalyptic redemption, the former even containing the legend that the Messiah was born on the very day of the Destruction of the Temple, apart from the Talmudic idea that the Messiah will appear only to a generation totally innocent or absolutely corrupt (Ezekiel 11:13,16 qtd. in Alexander, Short Fiction 35).

The year 1492 was long believed by many Kabbalistic writers to be the age in which redemption would come to the Jews. However while the cataclysm came in the form of the exile from Spain the redemption was still nowhere in sight. The Chmielnitzki pogroms which are proximate to the Holocaust in Singer's imaginative universe induced a large segment of the Jewry to place faith in the false messianism of Sabbatai Zevi out of a desperate urge to perceive the cataclysm as an antecedent to the apocalyptic revelation. Singer's works link the tradition of false messianism with political and religious utopianism which is believed by this author to be a dangerous human impulse capable of subverting humanity. The latter with its intolerance of human and social frailties and
its impetuosity induces the desire for chaos and rebirth. Like “The Gentleman from Craców” “The Destruction of Kreshev” is also animated by the element of desperation, eager faith in an evil spirit or messianic disciple offering escape from the taboos of rabbinical dictates, the lure of eroticism and the desire for chaos (Alexander, Short Fiction 35-36). The degenerate Kabbalist Shloimele is a follower of Sabbatai Zevi whose cult, after his apostasy, encouraged cozenage and perverse inversions of messianic beliefs. Shloimele convinces his mystically inclined bride that they are atavisms destined to be reincarnations of King David’s children. Lise is lured by the clever Shloimele into Kabbalistic and sexual research as well as experimentation with animalism. Lise’s transgressions with Mendel arise from Shloimele’s overdeveloped intellect and messianic delusions. The Holocaust visualized by the aficionados of apocalypse even when it materializes brings no redemption in its wake. The heretic schlemiels, Lise and Shloimele like the unfortunate folk of Frampol, commit the sin of idolatry which in Jewish faith is the root cause of all transgressions and moral evil. In its broad sense “Idolatry is the absolutization of the relative, it is absolute devotion paid to anything short of the Absolute” (Herberg 94).
The necessity for religious authenticity which demands a reinterpretation of Jewish mystical concepts and that of a spiritual journey whose goal is salvific animates the fiction of Singer who believes that the artist's role is invested with vital civilizational implications. In "The Slaughterer" (S 17-30) the abhorrence of the town shohet (slaughterer) for the savagery of the ritual act of slaughter induces him to question the divine power that sanctified it. The ancient ceremony of shehitah is abruptly transvalued into an act of brutal murder in spite of the rabbi's injunction that man may not have more compassion than God. Yoineh Meir blasphemously indicts God with indifference to animal slaughter: "'Thou art a slaughterer and the Angel of Death! The whole world is a slaughter-house!'" (S 29). Simon the horse trader of "The Parrot" (S 203-222) and Professor Vladislav Eibeschutz of "Pigeons" (FOK 107-117) with their love for all creatures act and perform things that proceed not from an external mechanical rationale, but from the interior pressures of their own psyche. The protagonist of "Pigeons" ultimately realises that it is the "reshayim, the wicked . . . who make history" (FOK 113). In its resonances of anti-Semitism and the pogroms "The Pigeons" arises out of the same perception that generates the vision
underlying "The Slaughterer" - the ineluctable causative link between individual morality, history and religion.

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

The Hebraic conception of man eschews alike the hazards of naturalism and of body-soul dualism. Naturalism believes that man is merely a natural object with no intrinsic character, a part of the order of nature with no significant difference from "other" animals. Hence accommodates him into a scheme of causal determinism that concedes no space for freedom, reason or ethical responsibility. Dualism conceives of the body as a prison-house of the soul from which the latter perpetually struggles to escape, thus construing man as essentially immaterial. While
dualism views the essence of human existence in the contemplative life appropriate to a discarnate spirit, naturalism is a reductionist philosophy that perceives human existence as the interaction of organism and environment. In spite of its ostensibly materialistic emphasis on man as dynamic and unitary, Judaism sees man's capacity for the word and his free will to be the mark of the divine likeness impressed upon him (Herberg 69-74).

The protagonists in the afore cited stories know and resent their finiteness, relativity and incompleteness. Yet in a world intent on the systematic extirpation of natural motivations, the very survival of the spontaneous impulse, however haphazard, is in itself a feat of heroic implication. However in some of Singer's schlemiels can be seen the hazards of a puerile intellectualism which negates and subverts the human and humanizing impulse. In “The Spinoza of Market Street” (SPM 3-24) Dr. Nahum Fischelson, an elderly philosopher, a former yeshiva prodigy now estranged from orthodoxy by a passion for Spinoza rediscovers human compassion as well as his own virility through his marriage with Black Dobbe, his mannish neighbour. In his solitary state Dr. Fischelson had found comfort in the thought that he was a part of the
cosmos: “In such moments, Dr. Fischelson experienced the *Amor Dei Intellectualis* which is, according to the philosopher of Amsterdam, the highest perfection of the mind.” He is “aware of that infinite extension which is, according to Spinoza, one of God’s attributes” (*SPM 7*). He entertains opinions so heterodox as to give rise to rumours that he is either a heretic or an apostate. However after the “miracle” of his love Dr. Fischelson’s vision synthesizes the worlds of the stars and the street. Dr. Fischelson recognizes the untenability of neutrality at the end of the conflict which is the culmination of the pain of the Singerian choice.

The Spinozist system of ideas finds only a tangential reference in Singer’s work for the author focuses upon the philosopher’s personality and the paradox of his simultaneous estrangement and commitment to Jewish tradition. Figuratively Spinoza is a focal point of the tension between rationalism and supernaturalism, between enlightenment and canonical authority, or between Spinozist intellectualism and Hassidic emotion. Spinozist ethics obliquely represent the problematic status of the Yiddish writers from Mendele Mocher Sforim up to Singer himself who had to reconcile themselves to the opposing cultures of the Haskalah and the Jewish tradition (*Mintz 75*).
In spite of his existential leanings Dr. Fischelson fails to become a full-fledged existential hero because he does not continue to remain in a world “where knowledge but increases vertigo” (Auden 84). Instead he desires to arrest the flux of existence by seeking images of stability and rest. Dr. Fischelson had conceived of a scheme of existence and yet he had lost sight of the chaos against which the pattern was evolved. Martin Heidegger points out that every structure of consciousness is dialectically part of that chaos which negates it. He emphasizes the need of “letting oneself go into Nothing, that is to say, freeing oneself from the idols we all have and to which we are wont to go on cringing” (Existence 347-49). Man’s failure to free himself from idolatry is ultimately for Heidegger as for the schlemiel of “The Spinoza of Market Street” a denial of his experiential being in time. Singer points out that the story is partly ironic, for the protagonist in spite of being a Spinozist is a deep thinker. Disputing Spinoza’s negation of emotions, Singer points out that human emotions are “not only a material treasure, but also a great treasure of revelation, because our emotions reveal to us things which we cannot grasp with our intellect” (interview with Pondrom 348).
Like Dr. Fischelson, Dr. Yaretzky of “The Shadow of a Crib” \( (SPM \ 61-88) \) disentangles himself from commitment to a world which he sees as full of suffering and devoid of purpose. Exiled in the night, Dr. Yaretzky has a vision of community in the homely love between the rabbi and his wife, and yet he rejects his vision. Years later, after his death, still haunted by the redemptive possibility he had once perceived and chosen to renounce, he haunts the rabbi’s study. Very often, the life anatomized in Singer’s narratives is rendered in anti-thesis; the pattern character may need to choose between two worlds or he may be balanced against an antipodean character \( (\text{Golden } 35) \).

What is ultimately placed in the balance against the weight of the protagonists’ intellectualism in these stories is the new vision which resists self-serving and destructive illusion. The categories of self-consciousness that determine the life of these schlemiels whether they be commitment or repudiation, rebellion or reconciliation are transformed into basic categories for contemplating the world. As the ideological discourse about the world merges with confessional discourse about oneself, the direct signifying power of self-utterance is enhanced resisting any external finalization. Thus the protagonist of “The Cabalist of East Broadway”
(CF 123-129) makes an antithetical decision. After this old sick cabalist Joel Yabloner is resuscitated in Israel with much hype and recognition he unexpectedly returns to a lonely existence in New York, perhaps to be buried near a woman he had loved. Yabloner's circuitous journey from Exile to Zion and back again, demonstrates what might be termed a motto of the collection itself: "'Man does not live according to reason' " (CF 129). Unable to enter the world of the mystically ascetic rabbi of the town Dr. Yaretzky withdraws only to reappear in it many years later as an apparition: "Why should a Christian heretic seek the house of a rabbi?" (SPM 88). To answer that the mystic life is superior to the life of the mind embedded in the aridities of secular enlightened thought would do only partial justice to the story (Mintz 80). A similar issue is broached in "Caricature" (SPM 97-108). A progeny of the Jewish Enlightenment Dr. Boris Margolis has a manuscript which is nothing less than an exposition of his own metaphysical system, and the arguments which appeared to be incisive at one time now after a lapse of years seem to be jejune.

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

Singer’s intimate relationship with the *folkmentsh* and the ensuing literature that even if not always by the folk was at least of and for them, causes the author to regard himself and be regarded by others as “a continuator of a prophetic tradition which might indeed excoriate man’s iniquities but never felt that it was either unheeded or defied with impunity . . . . The Yiddish writer, part of the mighty moral stream, never felt that he was a voice crying out in the wilderness” (*Landis* 257-58). The content of Singer’s work is the theological turmoil of
Jewish existence on both communal and private planes. The predicament of the author's schlemiels revolves around religious speculation, parable and metaphysical cerebration. Amidst the chaos of the ordinary they strive for personal salvation.