Jewish American Literature

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Gained in Translation:

Reading the English Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer
"I take great care not to think about the reader in English or French or any other language. Nothing can spoil a writer more than writing for the translator."

- I. B. Singer, 1963

"Translation undresses a literary work, shows it in its true nakedness… Translation tells the bitter truth. Unveils all masks"

- I. B. Singer, 1970

In contrast to Barthes' ideal reader who understands every and all possible meanings of a text, Isaac Bashevis Singer's audience is inevitably split into those who know Yiddish and those who do not, into those who can read the originals and those who must suffice with the translations. And although recent translation theorists challenge the "dominion of the original," it is impossible to ignore the question of translation, especially in the case of Singer. As of the first appearances of Singer in English, the textual status of his works has been one of the central issues debated among both English and Yiddish scholars. "In a tug-of-war that has yet to cease," says Grace Farrell in her introduction to a collection of critical essays on Singer, "Yiddishists and American critics continue to engage in a long turf battle over Singer's works" (Farrell 20). To what audience belong the interpretation rights of Singer's texts, whether authoritative analysis and discussion of the works can be achieved solely by readers of the "original" Yiddish or at all by the readers of the "subsequent" translations, are questions that pertain not only to Singer's work but to the general question of translation - for which no satisfactory answers can be easily attained.

In the first chapter of *After Babel*, George Steiner argues that all understanding is translation. Even within a single language, "when we read or hear any language-statement from the past, be it Leviticus or last year's best-seller, we translate" (28).

But beyond the intriguing questions that may be asked regarding the interpretation and understanding of any translated work, including questions of cultural translation, in Singer's case the issue of translation is particularly complex. First, the Jewishness of his writing - the Jewishness inherent in the Yiddish language and in Singer's subject matter - divides Singer's audience into not only Yiddish-speaking and English-speaking but also into Jewish and non-Jewish. Linguistic, cultural and religious translations are all rolled into any reading of Singer's works.

Secondly, to fully grasp Singer's unique position one must consider his own, personal circumstances within the specific circumstances of the Yiddish language and audience at the point in which Singer is writing. In the 1920's, at the start of his career, Singer is in Poland within a thriving circle of Yiddish writers, with a potential audience of millions of Yiddish speakers throughout Europe. By 1945 Singer has been in the United States for ten years, his audience in Europe has been literally obliterated, and, in his own words in 1963: "although I don't feel that Yiddish will die completely, it's a fact that the number of readers is becoming smaller and smaller. … The future [for Yiddish literature] looks very black. They say that if a Yiddish reader dies, there is no one to replace him. This is true" (Blocker & Elman 3). The readers that would have first-hand knowledge of the culture
that is the basis of Singer's work no longer exist. And indeed Singer's success was in the
English, not Yiddish, language.

So as early as the late 1950's Singer is writing in one language to an audience that reads
in another. One of Singer's translators, Joseph Sherman, in an essay regarding his
translation of *Shadows on the Hudson*, notes that "the latest list of Singer's books in English
numbers thirteen novels, ten volumes of short stories, five volumes of memoirs, fourteen
books for children and three anthologies of selected writings. In Yiddish, on the other
hand, we have access in published book form to only five novels, three collections of
short stories and two volumes of *Mayn tants bes-din-shuth*. This disparate ration is
disturbing" (Sherman 49). Later Sherman will confidently conclude that "Singer's work
appears as virtually the only case in literary history in which the translation must of
necessity be accorded greater validity than the original" (52). Farrell resolves that the
scholar must separate between the two *oeuvres* in which Singer exists, the one Yiddish and
the other English, yet goes on to say that "he called them his second originals, yet his
*English texts*...might be considered his *final drafts*. The claim could be advanced." (my
emphases, Farrell 20). This claim is indeed advanced by editor Hugh Denman who, in a
recent collection of critical essays devoted to Singer's work, dedicates an entire section to
"the Status of the Yiddish and English Texts," and in his introduction determines that "it
is certainly true that Bashevis often regarded the *Yiddish texts* serialized in *Forverts* as little
more than rough drafts for the English version which he would later create with the help of collaborators" (my emphases, Denman 2).

The premise underlying these claims that regard the English texts as "final drafts" is that Singer was blatantly targeting an English-reading audience. The vast and multifarious American public, the non-Jewish American public, was his intended audience - not his Yiddish-reading audience, with which he actually provided no texts. Denman does later conclude that "there is much evidence to suggest that he increasingly came to regard his English-language production as the one which really counted," while Sherman, true to the hostile tone employed throughout his essay, says that Singer "buried the bulk of his Yiddish texts in the archives of Forverts and tirelessly promoted the English versions of selected novels at the wholesale expense of their Yiddish originals" (Denman 7, Sherman 51).

If one agrees with the assumption that Singer is essentially writing in Yiddish to an English-reading audience, then what are the implications of this on his work? Anita Norich goes as far as to say that "we must...explore...the extent to which Bashevis' Yiddish anticipates the English in which he knew he would be more widely read" (Norich 83). This is quite extreme and most likely impossible to do. However if one applies Norich's suggestion to the reception process (to the reader) rather than to the production process (to the writer), one may discover an important and possibly more accessible aspect of translation that should be considered: the extent to which the reader anticipates the
source language behind the words he is reading. In the case of Singer, this means
examining the English-reader's anticipation of and attitude towards the Yiddish of Singer's
English texts. If one assumes, as I shall, that the reader is aware that he/she is reading a
translated text then most likely this awareness will have implications for the interpretation
and understanding of that text. I wish to explore these implications by examining Singer's
English texts as English texts in which translation becomes in a sense a literary device
which produces effects for the reader, much like other devices of translingual texts (such
as interlingual puns and use of dialect). Not knowing Yiddish, unhappy as this makes me,
works to my advantage in this case for it will allow an analysis of the translation as it works
in the 'receiving' language, the language being read, the text being read.

Seth L. Wolitz clearly positions himself on the side of the Yiddish in the "turf battle"
over Singer's works when he states that "the Yiddish locks in the real text, the key text, the
masterpiece" (Wolitz xxvii). And I would imagine that most English readers agree with
Wolitz when reading a translated text in the sense that the reader believes, even prior to
reading, that he is getting less than what should be there; he begins at a loss and with an
attitude of suspicion. For example, in the introductory paragraph of Singer's short story
"A Friend of Kafka" (published in 1970) is an expository, "situating" passage:

"It was the early thirties, and the Yiddish theater in Warsaw had already begun
to lose its audience...He wore a monocle in his left eye, a high old-fashioned
collar (known as a "father-murderer"), patent-leather shoes, and a derby. He
had been nicknamed "the lord" by the cynics in the Warsaw Yiddish writers' club that we both frequented. …In the tradition of the old-time theater, every now and then he would lapse into Germanized Yiddish – particularly when he spoke of his relationship to Kafka” (*Stories* 277).

Was it Singer or could it even be the translator who added the several pieces of cultural context for me, the handicapped reader, (that the "Yiddish theater in Warsaw had already begun to lose its audience;" "in the tradition of the old-time theater") since I am so far removed from the source culture? Did the Yiddish reader also get the parenthetical explanation of ")(known as…))" or was it simply called a "father-murderer" in the first place? Obviously "Germanized Yiddish" means something else to me than to the Yiddish reader. Was the phrase itself in "Germanized Yiddish"? Is Germanized Yiddish usually associated with specific subjects (such as Germans? Or Czechs??) What connotations am I missing in the nickname "my lord"? Is this a generic, common nickname, like "dandy," or is this invented specifically for the character of Jacques Kohn? For me, as a nickname, "my lord" doesn't bring with it much prior baggage, but did it for the Yiddish reader?

Although the answers to such questions may be irrelevant or even undesirable, the emergence of such questions, most of which would not be thought of without the awareness of translation, has significant influence on the effect, tone and interpretation of the story. First and foremost the reader is continually, even if against his will, thrown
outside of the text - to the translator and his/her intentions, to the author and his intentions, to another, parallel text one knows to exist although possibly only virtually. The English reader is distanced from the text by the inescapable feeling that one cannot contain or simply understand the full sense of much of what is there.

However the flip side of this coin is the satisfaction of getting at least a glimpse of something you feel you weren't supposed to get in the first place; a glimpse into another culture, and also into another language. After reading this passage I (think that) I know that in Yiddish there is a phrase "father-murderer" that describes a high old fashioned collar. But was there really such an expression in Yiddish, i.e. was this a literal translation of the phrase, or is this the use of translation as a literary, descriptive device, a playing with the expectations of the intended audience who imagine a Yiddish phrase but really get the author's (or translator's) placement of the ideas of "father" "murderer" and "patricide" in the head of the reader?

Again, I believe the significance of such questions outweighs that of the possible answers, for an entire dimension of exploration and contemplation is added to the text, the meaning attached to each word is expanded. In more precise terms, translation in Singer's work functions in a sense as a formal literary device (like, say on the most visible end, the rhyme scheme of a poem) in that the 'form' lends to the content, is an integral part of the content/meaning of the text. Translation as a device - whether employed by Singer in the

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(2) On the first page of each story in *The Penguin Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* is a sole footnote with the name/s of the translator/s. On the first page of "A Friend of Kafka" is the footnote: "Translated by the author and Elizabeth Shub" (277).
preparation of his "final drafts" for his English-reading audience, or by the translator in his strategy or technique, or by the reader himself in his awareness of the translation – operates by bestowing and supporting the content/meaning of the work as an organic whole.

To go back to "A Friend of Kafka," the story is a nexus of contrasting elements: old and new, rich and poor, vulgar and refined, sacred and profane. The unnamed first person narrator, the "rising star" of the "Warsaw Yiddish writers' club," humors old time actor Jacques Kohn by putting up with his tall-tales and consistent cadging (Stories 277-8).

Kohn, far beyond his prime, living in an attic, and ridiculed by the club, still imagines himself as having "an overrefined taste" and "would glance disdainfully over the tables…around which the club members sat endlessly discussing literature…[and] would shake his head as if to say, 'What can you expect from such schlemiels?'" (278-9). When Kohn (whose real "name was not Jacques but Jankel") brings up his friendship with Kafka, the narrator knew he "had heard this story many times and in as many variations, but…knew [he] would have to listen to it again" (278).

But in spite of Kohn's embedded narrative in which he tells of rescuing a "countess" from being killed by her lover – a story that like Kohn's character is less than believable and sometimes quite crude - the narrator admires Kohn (281). "For me," says the narrator, "'lending' Jacques Kohn a zloty meant coming into contact with Western Europe. The very way he carried his silver-handled cane seemed exotic to me" (278). Moreover the
narrator finds it impressive that Kohn "had been friends with many celebrities," and goes into a description of Kohn's connections to European modernist intellectuals and artists: Kafka, Romain Rolland, Stefan Zweig, Jakob Wassermann, as well as Marc Chagall and Erwin Piscator. The narrator also admires Kohn's "way with women," who in contrast to the "shy" narrator could affect "the blasé attitude of a hedonist who has already tasted everything" (279). The narrator sees Kohn as with "the air of an important European celebrity" and is attracted to the supposed worldliness and intellectual superiority that Kohn loves to spout (at one point he maintains that "most of literature is produced by such plebeians and bunglers as Zola and D'Annunzio") (277, 279).

But it is Kohn's modernism that undermines the power of language and ultimately of God. In contrast to Kafka who believes, tells us Kohn, that "there must be magic words that can turn a piece of clay into a living being," and asked "did not God, according to the Cabala, create the world by uttering holy words? In the beginning was the Logos," Kohn rather empties words of their divinity (285). Quoting "Dr. Mitzkin's philosophy," Kohn tells us that "man...will eat words, drink words, marry words, poison himself with words" (284). According to Grace Farrell in her discussion of "the Kabbalic basis" in Singer's works, "the potentially revelatory power of the creative word would seem to be rendered mute in the modern world," just as Kohn reduces life to an endless game of chess, so

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(3) While all other names "dropped" in this story are historical figures, I could find no record of a "Dr. Mitzkin" (who according to the story is "the author of The Entropy of Reason"). This is interesting also because it may mean that the "hero" Singer quotes in the passage below is himself.
"language…is diminished to intellectual chitchat" (Farrell Lee 21). In a modern world -
where the miraculous is reduced to a successful sexual act and God is reduced to a
"worthy adversary" - man is left with words that mean nothing; "In my life," says Kohn,
"everything turns into words. All talk, talk" (280, 284).

Significantly, it is with these passages from this story that Singer sums up a paper
delivered at a conference on literary translation in NYC in 1970:

"We all know the expression: 'In the beginning there was the Logos,' but it
seems that the Logos will even play a bigger part at the end. Allow me to quote
a saying of one of my heroes: 'Man will end up by eating words, drinking words,
marrying words, getting drunk on words.' The very essence of hypnotism is
language, and since every language contains unique truths not to be found in
any other language, translation is the very spirit of civilization" (World of
Translation 113).

The loss of "unique truths" in the movement from language to language is parallel to the
loss of the divine, in language and in life. In Kohn's modern world, where life and words
no longer contain God, then indeed "the Logos will…play a bigger part," and as Kohn
says "man will end up as a word machine" (284). And if "hypnotism" is seen as the
submission of voluntary action and allowing oneself to be guided by language, and
translation as "the very spirit of civilization," as the endless attempt to get at those unique
truths, at understanding, at God - then reading in translation is an attempt to attain
understanding while surrendering to the guidance of the translator.
The English-reader, from the first paragraph of the story, is placed in the position of trying to understand by crossing boundaries of time, culture, and language. And to assist the reader encountering foreign territory (for example, the Yiddish theatre in Warsaw in the 1930's) and foreign language (say, "father-murderer") the "implied translator" comes to the rescue with contextual information or parenthetical explanations as briefly seen above. As Kohn joins the narrator at his table in the writer's club "he broke off a small piece of cookie, put it into his mouth, and said, "Nu ja," which meant, One cannot fill one's stomach on the past" (278). So if you had forgotten for a moment, you are sure to soon be reminded that your understanding is dependent upon an additional party. But even the English-reader can see that "one cannot fill one's stomach on the past" cannot be a literal translation of the two little words "Nu ja." The comparison between the actual words and the "translation," that the Yiddish reader could have made, I can't.

The narrator is placed in a situation identical to that of the reader of translation when Kohn, in an apparent digression, tells of Otto Weininger and "one of his sayings [he] will never forget: 'God did not create the bedbug.'" The narrator gets no further explanation, only that "you have to know Vienna to really understand these words. Yet who did create the bedbug?" (282). Again God is absent from creation and from language. The connection that Singer makes in his address to the translation conference, between translation and God ("In the beginning there was the Logos,") is shown in the story to be
bankrupt. Translation, as the bridge between language, human understanding and God, is an impassible one.

Translation functions in another and more general way in other types of Singer's stories. Irving Buchen divides Singer's short stories into "four main strands: the realistic, the philosophic, the demonic, and the apocalyptic" (Buchen 140). While "A Friend of Kafka" could be categorized in the "philosophic" or "realistic" strands, much of what Singer is famous for is his rendering of the unreal – the "demonic", the "apocalyptic," the strange. Anita Norich claims that Singer "is so widely read not because he renders the familiar, but because – whether through demons or imps or sexual license or realistic descriptions of the past – he emphasizes the strange and unfamiliar" (Norich 85). Indeed Singer's ample use of elements of the "alien" or the grotesque, which Norich above tethers to content, have induced much discussion of his methods for producing the feeling of foreignness or estrangement in his work. Maximillian E. Novak argues that "Singer's treatment of the grotesque is put at the service of his moral vision;" Eli Katz explores Yiddish literary traditions of employing the supernatural while singling out Singer's uniqueness and his use of the shtetl "as a kind of stylized exotic backdrop before which pious Jews and demons can play out their roles with equal appropriateness" (Novak 47, Katz 21). Katz points to the dual effect produced by the use of the grotesque: on one hand "the feeling of alienation caused by the combination of the terrifying and the ludicrous," and on the other "the kind of pleasure in monsters, rats, snakes, and hairy plants
that appear[s] in such early forms of grotesque painting as Raphael's grotesque designs" (my emphases, Katz 45, 48). This "foreignness" in Singer's stories and its double effect upon the reader, a simultaneous alienation and attraction, is epitomized and heightened in Singer's translated texts, as translated texts.

The "foreignisation" (somewhat simplistically labeled) produced in the stories through content, narrative strategy, and other literary devices, is produced also on the basic level of language - through the translation; alienation is inherent to Singer's translated work. Because the reader is mindful of the gap between the original and target languages there emerges an attraction to a foreign and now possibly accessible world (and language) and at the same time affects a distancing, not only from the original language, but also from the reader's own language and culture. The "The Last Demon" (published in 1964) provides an interesting example of this general effect of foreignisation that translation provides in Singer's stories and also of its operation as a device on the level of the content of the story. The story begins:

"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? I am the last of the persuaders. I board in an attic in Tishevitz and draw my sustenance from a Yiddish storybook, a leftover from the days before

(4) On the bottom of the first page of the story is the note: "Translated by Martha Glicklich and Cecil Hemley." Interestingly, as pointed out by Buchen, "Hemley did not know Yiddish" (x). Even so "Hemley and Singer…are listed as the translators" of several of Singer's works, including his novel The Slave. Buchen describes how Singer and Hemley worked together: "Singer translated into English from the point of view of Yiddish; Hemley then complemented the process by responding and editing from the point of view of English" (x-xi). Singer's work with his "translators" or "collaborators" is explored by many critics, Sherman and Denman among them, in regards to the above discussion of Singer's perception of his English translations as "final drafts."
the great catastrophe. The stories in the book are pablum and duck milk, but the Hebrew letters have a weight of their own" (Stories 179).

The story is a post-Holocaust ("great catastrophe") lament of the loss of the shtetl - its culture, its people and its language. Edward Alexander says of this story: "of the many stories in which Singer uses a first-person narrator who bears marked resemblances to the author, none comes so close to representing his inner relationship to his own work as this one… Like Singer, finally, the demon must sustain himself on dust and ashes and Yiddish books" (142). The pending doom, the very real and personal fear of the obliteration of Yiddish, its culture, and of the Jews themselves, lingers in the demon's closing of the story: "what will happen when the last letter is no more, I'd rather not bring to my lips. When the last letter is gone,/The last of the demons is gone" (Stories 187). Grace Farrell connects the story, like "A Friend of Kafka," to its Kabbalic roots and linguistic theories of creation – "when the last letter is gone, all of creation will cease to exist" (Farrell Lee 26).

But neither Alexander nor Farrell, for perhaps they are reading in Yiddish, comment on the paradox created for the reader of the English text of this story, a paradox that (at least for the Jewish-English-reader) is quite disturbing. For the English-reader the Yiddish is gone. The "Hebrew letters" of Yiddish and the "weight of their own," which are enough to sustain the demon, can no longer (and never could) sustain the reader of the English letters. The absence of the Hebrew letters is enhanced in the translation of the
story – the Yiddish stories, says the demon, "are pabulum and duck milk." The phrase "duck milk," although constituted of English words, is not English; to the English-reader it is, or would seem to be 'residue' from the Yiddish; and moreover according to the context of the paragraph the English-reader can induce that "duck milk" in Yiddish most likely means "nonsense." But without the language, without the letters, the reader of translation cannot and will not know. Yiddish literally becomes "nonsense."

Traces of Yiddish, and its absence, persist throughout the story: Tishevitz itself is the "smallest letter in the smallest of all prayer books" (179); Rabbi Bozyc "sways and chants in Hebrew, 'Rachel, t'unah v'gazezah,' and then translates: 'A woolly sheep fleeced" (182); our first-demon narrator describes the stories of the other demon in the story: "every one of his stories wears a long beard" (183). Into what language does Rabbi Bozyc translate the Hebrew?! Into Yiddish of course, so that the English-reader is getting the translation of a translation. What can 'stories wearing a long beard' mean?

The play with the absence/presence of Yiddish becomes even more significant in light of Hana Wirth-Nesher's discussion of the "post-Holocaust sensibility and responsibility" that "redraw the map of Jewish languages for American Jews," as well as for Jewish-American authors (Wirth-Nesher 118). Wirth-Nesher explains that "the fierce drive away from Yiddish that marked many immigrant writers...[was] partly replaced by a

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(5) In a discussion of this phrase with the members of the online "Yahoo! Yiddish Forum" I received some interesting possible translations. "Meyer" says: "foygl milk' is literally 'bird milk' and it refers to something that is sweet, pleasant, etc." "Mikhoyal" says: "I remember 'foygl milkah' & 'mukn shmalts' (bird milk & gnat fat), things that do not exist, as the unobtainable, the scarcest to find, such as when one went to a store that offered things you could get nowhere else, 'They have foygl milk un muknshmalts.'"
romanticizing or reifying of Yiddish as a sacred touchstone of Jewish collective identity (118). "The Last Demon" is a story that deals with and mourns the fact "that the annihilation of the Yiddish language meant the annihilation of the culture that it expressed" (Wirth-Nesher 118). Ironically, even though Singer is writing in Yiddish – whether by choice or by force, by the translator or the reader – he joins the same tradition of those "Jewish American writers [who] weave Yiddish into their works as a memorial to the dead" (Wirth-Nesher 119). But for the reader of the story in translation this Yiddish is like that of the storybook: the demon says at the end, "I found a Yiddish storybook between two broken barrels...I sit there, the last of the demons. I eat dust. I sleep on a feather duster. I keep on reading gibberish," and again the absence of the Yiddish resounds, "But nevertheless the letters are Jewish. The alphabet they could not squander," for the English-reader the letters are not Jewish, the alphabet is squandered (my emphasis, Stories 186).

But to say that it is Singer who employs translation to produce effects of foreignisation would be misleading. In line with Singer's apparent wish to reach a wide American audience, it seems that Singer did as much as possible to accommodate that audience. It is easier to find sentences such as - "If a bride stepped outside alone at night during the Seven Nuptial Benedictions, Zluchah danced up to her and the bride lost the power of speech," ("Taibele and Her Demon," my emphasis, Stories 135); or "the cabinet, which smelled of wine and snuffed-out valedictory candles, contained a spice box, and citron box, and a Hanukkah
"candelabra" ("Joy," my emphases, Stories 32); or "...that reminded him of the flax in which the citrons for the Feast of Tabernacles were wrapped. Gossamer floated in the air. On the trees the leaved turned saffron yellow. In the twittering of the birds he heard the melancholy of the Solemn Days, when a man takes an accounting of his soul" ("The Slaughterer," my emphases, Stories 211) – rather than to find "duck milk" and "father-murderer." However in contrast, "Gimpel the Fool," translated by Saul Bellow, is saturated with Yiddish: "They talked at me and talked until I got water on the ear;" "To add to it, this little brother of hers, the bastard, was growing bigger. He'd put lumps on me, and when I wanted to hit back she'd open her mouth and curse," "There is no world to come...They've sold you a bill of goods and talked you into believing you carried a cat in your belly," "Well,' she said, 'Lie down, and be shattered by wheels," "she denied it, denied everything, bone and stone!" "What did I stand to lose by looking? Well, what a cat music went up!" ("Gimpel the Fool," my emphases, Stories 3-13). Cat music?!? I could go on. Even more than any use of the grotesque in this story, it is the translation that produces for the reader of English a sense of alienation from his own language and culture. Furthermore, the reader is placed in a position of surrender, submission to a foreign language. Buchen argues that submission is a central theme of the story of the gullible yet wise Gimpel: "the wisdom of Gimpel the Fool dictates that surrender often requires greater strength than self-reliance" (Buchen 145). Like Gimpel, the reader of translation cannot rely on himself alone, but must rely on the guidance of the
translator; unlike Gimpel however, for the reader this submission is not a conscious choice.

The difference between translation strategies in "Gimpel the Fool" and Singer's other stories can be seen in terms of the conflicting translation strategies termed "naturalisation" and "foreignisation." In her essay entitled "Isaac Bashevis Singer's Works in English and Yiddish: the Language and the Addressee," Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska explains that:

"in translation theory one often speaks of two extreme tendencies: naturalisation and foreignisation. Naturalisation consists in adapting a source text for the target reader by making it familiar to him and protecting him against any obstacles in communication. Foreignisation is based on forcing the target reader to make some effort at receiving a source text notwithstanding difficulties that arise in the process of introducing him to an alien tradition and language" (28-9).

I indeed find that most of those critics who have carefully compared the Yiddish texts to the English ones agree, some of them quite emphatically, that Singer, together with his translators, preferred a strategy of naturalisation. Joseph Sherman essentially argues for 30 pages that "the English versions...surrender their Yiddish stylistic mastery to trite American clichés," and this is because of "Singer's determination to present in English Yiddish works reshaped to please a predominantly non-Jewish readership largely ignorant of Jewish customs" (my emphases, Sherman 63). David G. Roskies maintains that the "sententious folk speech... is absorbed by the rambling newspaper copy of Yitskohk Warshawski, and before too long – thanks to a stable of translators working overtime to simplify and even bowdlerize the stories and monologues set in eastern Europe – folk speech and news speech become the
undifferentiated English of one "I.B.Singer" (my emphasis, Roskies 304). Bellow's translation makes "Gimpel the Fool" an exception to the general rule, for as a whole the Yiddish in the stories, although traces are found, is concealed as much as possible.6

Singer's attempt to accommodate the English reader as much as possible, far from contradicting everything said above regarding the literary functions of translation operating significantly in his stories, I feel this strengthens the fact that those traces that are "visible" have all the more significance. Furthermore, as discussed, it may be the translator or even the reader, rather than Singer, who "activates" the literary functions of translation in the texts. Regardless of the source (which, after Barthes and Derrida, should be irrelevant) I hope I have shown that translation in Singer's short work is far from transparent, and is an integral part of the interpretation process and thematic vision of the stories. Singer's texts in translation fulfill the desire to read into another world in so many ways - through foreign language, culture and religion, devils, imps, sexual depravity, the lost world of the shtetl – and the submission to translation. As much as Singer may have wanted to adapt his texts to the comfort of his English audience, he could not escape the losses and gains of translation, nor protect his reader from surrendering to the translator.

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6 In her biography of Singer's life, Janet Hadda recounts an interesting interaction between Bellow and Singer regarding the translation of this story: "Long after the success of "Gimpel," when the two met at a social gathering, Bellow asked Singer why he had never been invited to translate additional stories. Bashevis replied that if the works were greeted with acclaim, "they'll say it's you, not me" (130-1).


