Niki Kuipers
Yiddish Literature
Justin Cammy
May 2, 2022

The Last of the Persuaders (found poem from “The Last Demon”)

Bear witness: there are no demons left.

But Asmodeus bids and
Man himself is already convinced
by pablum and duck’s milk.
I don’t have to tell you that I am a Jew.
What else, a Gentile?

These letters draw sustenance
from the days before the great catastrophe.
Now the cemetery is still,
and in the ritual bath house,
there is no sign of even the shell of a fly.

I, the last of the demons,
was sent. I am here.
Not so easily frightened, but
our trade is taken:
a hundred reasons why
a rat must be kosher,
sin beyond capacity,

Neither judge, nor judgment.
What’s the point?
Nevertheless, the letters are Jewish;
as long as a single one remains,
I have something to sustain me.

I sit there.
I eat dust.
Sabbath pudding cooked in pigs fat:
blasphemy rolled in piety.

For the first time in a thousand years,
I, the master of speech,
have lost my tongue.
There is no further need for demons.

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Devil's Are a Man's Children (Found poem from "Taibele and Her Demon")

Before Taibele knew the deceased did not go straight to Heaven
she was small and fair and still smiled,
the women's prayer book in Yiddish in front of her,
but she had no one else to cook for.

Neither prayers, nor spells, nor potions
drove grief away.
It was nature–whooping cough, scarlet fever, diphtheria–
to which all three children returned, and
her husband deserted
wherever his eyes would take him.

All she had left was the monster of mischief
Hurmizah, the teacher's helper
a widow and not a demon,
his feet not goose feet, but human.

He stole into her bed in the darkness so thick, and
told her of her own secret thoughts,
invoked the names of angels and devils,
demonic beasts and vampires,

persuaded her to let her hair grow under her cap
so he could weave it into braids.
She knew a woman must not lust after a demon,
but soon she longed for him.

All the habits and frailties of a man,
with a mouth of devil's tales.
One winter his breath in her bed was sour.
Though she knew it was sinful to pray for the unclean,
she cried out to God for him.

On the following Sabbath,
the day began, dark as evening.
She recalled how his breath had come rasping.
She waited for him in vain.

Nothing was left to her of the past
except a secret that the heart cannot reveal to the lips.
She had followed a corpse on a stretcher
and cried out at the Kaddish.

The gravestones converse silently,
in the language of stone. The dead will awaken one day
but that secret will abide with the Almighty and His judgment
until the end of all generations.

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Thou Shalt Kill Adultery (Found poem from “Blood”)

The cabalists know
the passion for blood and the passion for flesh
have the same origin.

Risha, corpulent and strong as a man,
got up from the bed she shared with her husband
to bring fowl to the butcher.
Full of desire, she asked him to slaughter her.

Her thirst to watch the cutting of throats
and the shedding of blood
so mixed with carnal desire
she built a slaughtering shed.

When her aging husband slept early,
she went there to gave herself to the butcher,
both whetted by thought of dying creatures.
Risha kept after the butcher constantly,

alternating threats and bribes.
She took such pleasure in the killings that
before long he was merely her assistant.

Devoted entirely to the flesh,
souls sold for the vanities of the world,
Risha and her butcher grew prematurely old.

She sold horse and pig as Kosher beef
and became rich from her deception.
She said, if one committed sins,
one should get as much enjoyment as possible.

But Heaven and earth have sworn
that no secret can remain undivulged.
A hired spy bore witness,
and the town was thrown into turmoil.

Housewives broke their pottery in the marketplace,
the pious tore their lapels,
strewed their head with ashes,
sat down to mourn.

The end of a thief is the gallows, Risha knew.
The butcher was always a coward, and ran away,
but Risha stood in front of the mob,
calling the Jews cursed Christ-killers

crossing herself, already a Gentile.
The Jews turned around, unwilling to anger the Christains.
Now, though free to do as she pleased,
Risha no longer took the same pleasure.

The truth was, now she had no one
to betray, to pity, to mock.
She sang in Polish and Yiddish
and invented the songs as she went along.

She was far from repenting, but
something inside of her was mourning, and
filling her with bitterness.
She cried out for God's punishment.

She became a werewolf the next winter.
One dark night the other butchers
buried a hatchet in her back,
making for the outskirts of town.

The Jews refused to bury her in their cemetary
and the Christians were unwilling to plot her in theirs,
so she was buried in a ditch on a hill.
It soon became covered in refuse,

and schoolboys danced on it,
mocking her. Before they left,
they spat on the grave, reciting:
Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

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Clarity Through Abstraction–an artist's statement

IB Singer was often criticized for selling out, commodifying, and therefore cheapening, the ancient and mystical traditions with which he engaged. His near blasphemous approach reminds me of Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, but Singer went beyond Ansky by narrating from demonic perspectives. He is, as William Blake once said about John Milton in *Paradise Lost*, "of the Devil's party." Not that he portrayed sin or demons as positive things (in fact, the opposite), but taking their view allowed him to explore foundational and uncomfortable parts of human nature through the mysticism of religious metaphor. He was fascinated with the occult, and very much grew up in a world that blended with the 'other side,' deeply driven by familial stories. Ironically, he grew up in a Hasidic and traditionally Jewish community to which the subjects he wrote of were taboo (Kirsch). Yet (at least in the 3 short stories I read for this project) he never seemed to be advocating for turning away from this traditionalism; rather, he seemed to lament its loss. Singer often used magical realism, a sense of portraying the supernatural as natural, folktale as reality, to recreate this lost world (Mishkin). More importantly, his work is very much in conversation with the struggles of the Yiddish language, and its fractured echo of an identity in the twentieth century.

Even before that heart of the Yiddish world was destroyed by the Holocaust, some more progressive (Maskilic) Jews distanced themselves from Yiddish, considering it "jargon" and dialect, rather than a fully formed beast of its own. But because the majority of people (women, children, poor men) did not have access to Hebrew outside of synagogue walls, Yiddish was impossible to avoid. It was always a language rooted in earthly life, which made it near akin to temptation, to the sinfulness of the every-day. By performing through the mouths of demons,

such as in “The Last Demon,” Singer depicted this tension that Judaism has with the language of Yiddish, the language of everyday struggles. But then, after the Holocaust, “after the religious tradition had been disrupted, demons and Yiddish writing appear to have lost their force…When the community no longer recognised the threat of temptation, this development signified the loss of an entire worldview and form of language” (Frieden).

In “Taibele and Her Demon,” Singer explores the struggles of widowhood (or of being an aguna– a chained woman) and the different ways in which we allow demons to exist, both personally and societally, the way she allowed her own religious fantasy and grief to deceive her. I took the quote in the last paragraph of the story, and the titular line of my found poem, “Devil’s are a man’s children,” as an overall realization: that devils are born from the human imagination while we are living. In contrast to “The Last Demon” and “Blood,” (where Risha turns into a werewolf at the end due to her utter corruption) this one is not magical realism, as the audience is aware the entire time that the demon is not, in fact, a demon, but a man. However, because the protagonist believes it, and Alchonon does such a rich job with his devilish character, the magical realism is nevertheless evoked. In my found poem, I wanted to emphasize the tenuousness of this belief, though in the story Taibele ostensibly never finds out. Therefore, in my version, I insinuate by the way I organized pieces from the funeral scene that her grief was from understanding this loss, in fact, was her very human “demonic” lover. Although I did not feel the details of his retellings of folk tales concise or relevant enough to the core of the piece to put them in (and I certainly did not want to take those myths out of their context), I believe it is a huge part of why Singer was so successful. Those moments of dialogue are like a written catalog of folklore, an oral artifact of the “old world” finally tangible. “Blood,” successfully does this as well, illustrating Jewish customs and folk beliefs by showing someone who did it all wrong.

The title that I chose for the found poem of "Blood" prefaces the extreme morality of the story: Thou Shalt Kill Adultery. Risha's sinfulness increases as time goes on and literally transforms her into a mythical beast, almost reading as a cautionary tale. I say almost because it feels too detailed to be cautionary; it is not the kind of story one would read to children. Rather, it might make an adult look more deeply at the ways they have let sin build on sin, the ways they might have contributed to betraying their community.

This was a difficult project, honestly more difficult than I was expecting. Normally when I do found poetry, it's about me, what parts of myself I can pull out of a completely irrelevant text. But I wanted to keep these stories intact–IB Singer's writing is already so magnetic, poetic, engrossing–and of course the project is about the Yiddish literature class I just took, not my own conceptions of the world. I am a deeply amatuer scholar on this topic, and there are no doubt a multitude of things that I still don't understand. Deconstructing to the extent I was anticipating felt…disloyal to the text. To that end, I decided to stick to found poems as distillations of the originals, expanding my analysis of these as translations rather than trying to compete with Singer's mastery. I know I included original poems in my rubric, but I hope this change can be considered flowing with the project.

I think they got a bit more summary-like as I went along; "The Last of the Persuaders," is far more refashioned than "Thou Shalt Kill Adultery," but that's also because of the difference in length, and wanting to honor the entirety of Risha's journey. What I tried to do in all of these found poems was to really pare down the characters and the themes to what I interpreted (and slightly researched) as their bare essentials. For example, Risha's blood lust (both for the kill and sexuality) is of the deeper importance to the story's karmic ending, so I avoided expanding on the butcher's perspective. Similarly, in "The Last of the Persuaders," I had to let go of

characterizing the imp and the rabbi; although their dialogues and personalities were essential to the development of the prose, I sensed the far more important, underlying foundation was, rather, the immobility of the demon narrator, as he himself clarifies on the opening page: “I speak in the present tense as for me time stands still.” The story begins with the Yiddish storybook and ends with it too, giving the sense of being trapped inside. In my version, I do not actually mention the Yiddish storybook, allowing the reader to see the “words” being discussed as the ones before them on the page.

To me, poetry is all about clarification through abstraction. I.B. Singer uses this technique in his prose with religious metaphor, and so it was both surprising, satisfying, and frustrating to put into the other form. I had to put my own worldly conceptions aside to focus on the authentic cultural connotations with which Singer worked. However, having creative liberty with the arrangement gave me an opportunity to make their poetic form reflect those connotations in ways that made sense to me in my own cultural moment. I feel like I learned so much about the quality and archetype of not only Singer’s work but Yiddish literature itself, and could feel the echoes of his predecessors and contemporaries bubbling through the translated text. Most of all, I hope I was able to use his words to demonstrate my understanding of our class.

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