

The Bilingual Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer: Novels, Translations, World Literature

1. Purpose and Aim

The project combines three research areas – the novel, translation studies, and world literature – in order to delineate the transformation of Singer’s works from their Yiddish source culture via American translations to worldwide circulation and their eventual status as world literature. It will present a broad approach to Singer’s literary corpus that encompasses interwar Warsaw and post-war New York. The project is the first critical study of Singer’s work in both Yiddish and English that examines its circulation, translation and reception. It will be based on archival research in the Singer collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin. This archive contains empirical material that has never before been examined. Additionally, I plan to assemble and publish an anthology that will reflect the full scope, content, and generic variety of the material collected in the Singer collection and the Yiddish press. The three parts of the critical study are:

1. Publications in the Yiddish Press: Journalism and the Novel
2. Bilingual Works: Translating Yiddish in America.
3. Storytelling and World Literature: Readings Removed from the Yiddish and American Source Cultures.

Firstly, the project will collect and map Singer’s journalism and serialized novels published in the Yiddish press, which to date have been examined by scholars only sporadically. This body of work will be used to analyze broader issues related to the origins and development of the Yiddish novel, and its relationship to the Yiddish press, which provided the first publication venue for Singer’s work.

Secondly, the project will address Singer’s translation practice in regard to the increasing importance of his bilingualism as both a Yiddish and an English writer from the 1950s.

Thirdly, I will examine Singer’s storytelling. More than any other aspect of his work, his storytelling has reached a worldwide readership, and achieved the status of world literature.

2. Survey of the Field

A steadily growing body of critical work about the Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer has accompanied his rise to international fame, beginning in the early 1960s. Bibliographies of Singer's work in Yiddish and English have been compiled, with the exception of that from the period between 1952 and 1959 (Miller 1979 and 1983, Salzman 2002). Yet much of his Yiddish work that was published in various newspapers and periodicals in Warsaw and New York has not been examined. Moreover, a significant portion of Singer's work has neither been reprinted in Yiddish book form, nor ever translated into English. David N. Miller estimates that Singer published 907 items between 1924 and 1949, including short stories, novellas, life-writing, three serialized novels, book translations and journalistic writing; only thirteen of these (the novel *Satan in Goray*, eleven short stories and one literary essay) have been translated into English.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, Singer scholarship was dominated by a focus on his English corpus. Starting in the mid-1980s, a new generation of Yiddish scholars began to study his Yiddish work in its Eastern European and American contexts. During the last twelve years, important essays about Singer's bilingual work have appeared (Wolitz 2001, Denman 2002, Sherman 2007, Adamczyk-Garbowska 2009). An edition of his short stories in three volumes published by the Library of America at his centennial in 2004 further added to his canonical status.

3. Project Description

In the first section, I will delineate the cultural context that characterizes Singer's work for the Yiddish press. Singer spent his long writing career as a journalist on the staff of a major Yiddish newspaper. He began as a Yiddish writer for various publications in Warsaw between 1925 and 1935. After immigrating to the US in 1935 until his death in 1991, Singer wrote for the daily *Forverts* in New York. Like other Yiddish writers, Singer made a living as a journalist working on weekly deadlines and writing articles on current issues, human interest, and literary criticism. I would like to investigate how Singer's journalism informed his serialized novels that appeared regularly in the *Forverts*. The Yiddish press is a belated twentieth century example of the creative interchange between journalism and the novel which originated in 18th century Britain and culminated in the hey-day of the serialized novel in the 19th century press in England and

France (Watts 1957, Davis 1983, Callagher, 2006). The centrality of Singer's journalism in shaping his literary vision and style will enable me to make larger claims about Yiddish fiction, similar to the contention about the creation of the British and American literary canon: "...I will be contending that journalists and journalistic values have played critically important roles in the creation of the British and American literary canon, and will describe the values and the experiences these writers gained from journalism and show that they played a vital part in the development of their literary visions." (Underwood, 2008:13-14)

A 2002 bibliography of Singer's works between 1960 to 1991 (Salzman, 2002) lists Singer's un-translated Yiddish serialized novels and other fiction published in the *Forverts*: 11 novels, 11 novellas and 56 short stories. These works are only accessible on microfilm in a few research libraries. A particularly interesting example among them is the historical novel *Der man fun khaloymes* (The Man of Dreams) (*Forverts*, September 11, 1970 to April 17, 1971), which addresses the same anti-normative trends in Polish Jewish history as *Der zindiker meshiekh* (*The Sinful Messiah*), *Forverts* Oct.5, 1935 to February 22, 1936). Like Singer's first novel published in book form *Der sotn in Goray* (The Satan in Goray, 1935), these two historical novels exemplify his employment of subversive and apocalyptic themes inspired by two historical figures, the "false messiahs" Sabbatai Zevi (1626-676) and Jacob Frank (1726-1791). Through close readings of these works, I will examine Singer's innovative contribution to the historical novel, a popular genre of the Yiddish press (Kellman 2000, Schwarz 2013 and 2012).

The project's first aim is to examine and contextualize Singer's work in the Yiddish press in order to delineate the ideological, aesthetic and cultural specific relationship between his journalism and serialized novels in the *Forverts*. How does Singer's professional work and identity as a journalist shape and inform his serialized novels in terms of theme, style and narrative? How does Singer's journalistic writing as commodity published on a deadline and paid by the word influence the content and form of his serialized novels? How do the serialized novels published next to news and human-interest items that in some cases were written by Singer under various pseudonyms impose a contextual frame, a "horizon of expectations" for its primary readership? How were Singer's serialized novels reworked and re-contextualized when published in book form in Yiddish and English?

The archival research that I have conducted at the Singer collection at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas in January 2012 and January 2013 has provided a preliminary outline of the writing and editing process that Singer's work typically underwent: from the handwritten Yiddish manuscript, serialization in the Yiddish newspaper, to, in some cases, publication in Yiddish and English book form. The almost 2,500 copies of manuscripts, correspondence, tear sheets from newspaper serialization and excerpts from book versions that I collected during my two research visits to the HRC in January 2012 and January 2013 will serve as the empirical data for a discussion of the relationship between journalism and the novel in Singer's work.

In the second part of the project, I will situate Singer's English translations in the broader context of translating Yiddish in America (Shandler, 2006, Seidman 2008). The letters that I collected in the HRC between Singer and his translators, publishers and family demonstrates the pressure to conform to a certain translation and editing policy determined by commercial market interests and normative ways of translating Yiddish fiction into English established by Singer's older brother, the novelist Israel Joshua Singer (1893-1944) and the novelist Sholem Asch (1880-1957). The American novelist Saul Bellow's English translation of Singer's short story "*Gimpel tam*" (*Gimpel the Fool*) in 1953 opened the door to an American readership. There is a significant critical literature about what were lost and gained in Bellow's translation of this seminal story which I will use to discuss broader issues of translating Yiddish in America (Rosenwald 2008, Roskies 2008).

Singer's artistic versatility as a professional Yiddish writer was established during his first decade in Warsaw. He published literary criticism, short stories, novels, life writing, and translated into Yiddish 11 books by writers such as Knut Hamsun, Thomas Mann, and Stefan Zweig. His four-volume translation of Mann's *Der Zauberberg*, 1924 (Yiddish translation 1929-1930) was praised as a major contribution to Yiddish letters. Singer's work as translator has yet to be systematically analyzed; something I intend to do in this project. Particularly important to elucidate is how his apprenticeship as Yiddish translator at the beginning of his career provided him with the tools that he would later utilize to translate his Yiddish work into English after 1950.

It was the English translations of Singer's work that enabled him to become a bestselling author and the prime literary voice of the destroyed world of Polish Jewry. Singer's

English *oeuvre* has become the final version of many of his works. This, in turn, is used as the definitive version of his work for translations into other languages (including Swedish). In contrast, Singer's Yiddish works serialized in the Yiddish press during a period of almost sixty years have been buried on microfilm in research libraries inaccessible to Singer's large readership. In 2007, the late Joseph Sherman, a Singer scholar from Oxford University summarized the state of Singer's bilingual oeuvre:

“Of his enormous output in Yiddish, Singer permitted only nine books to be published in his lifetime; the rest of it is effectively buried in sixty years of *Forverts* archives. His English work, however, include more than forty volumes. This disparity is further compounded by the fact that Singer himself carefully selected specific works, from large numbers of others that he wanted translated into English, and then collaborated with his translators and editors in preparing these English versions. Close examination of these two sets of texts – when these can be located – reveals that Singer consciously addressed two different readerships with widely differing sets of expectations and concomitantly different attitude of receptivity.”¹

In order to outline how the various reader responses differ in Yiddish and English, I will examine the translational methodologies that Singer developed in collaboration with a number of translators. Singer's continued involvement in translating his work into English from the mid 1950s is key to understanding his work's unique status and successful branding as world literature. So far my archival research at the HRC has provided ample evidence of the various translation strategies that Singer developed while collaborating with his English translators. I have collected a sample of correspondence between Singer and his editors and translators at publication venues such as *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Magazine* that reveal the commercial, aesthetic and cultural specific expectations and strictures that determined his translation practice (Sherman's article in Denman, 2002). Singer's work in English became highly influential in shaping a distinctly Jewish American literary sensibility for a younger generation of Jewish American writers. The aim is to use an in depth study of Singer's translational practice to discuss broader issues of transmission of minority cultures and literatures in a globalized world (Venuti 2013). How are literary works in minor languages such as Yiddish reconceived and packaged to respond to a global readership in English?

¹ Joseph Sherman, *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Yiddish Literature*. Vol.333. Ed. Joseph Sherman (2007):309.

The final part of the project will examine Singer's storytelling that more than any other genre has turned his work into world literature. I will map the three main genres of Singer's short fiction: supernatural/ghost, shtetl and children stories. These subgenres are not clearly demarcated; in some cases a story might be characterized by one, two or three of them. Yiddish storytelling that originated in the pre-modern period in the form of moralistic and religious stories and went through various permutations during the rise of modern Yiddish culture in the nineteenth and twentieth century created the cultural and literary paradigms that Singer drew from and reacted against in his uniquely nihilist stories (Roskies, 1998). Singer stories such as "*Gimpel the Fool*" and "*Taibele and Her Demon*" as well as the children stories he began writing in the 1960s articulates a contradictory vision of the storyteller as modernist and traditionalist (Benjamin 1936). The aim is to explore how and why Singer's storytelling achieved the status of world literature. How are Singer's stories read as world literature in e.g. German and Hebrew situated among a whole new set of literary texts, contexts and readerships removed from their Yiddish and American source cultures? (Miron, 2011, Damrosch, 2003)

4. Significance for the Field

The significance of the project lies in its potential to develop original new readings and interpretations of Singer's novels and stories, and his particular form of literary bilingualism in post-war America. While contributing significantly to the field of Singer scholarship through archival research of material never before examined by scholars, the project will add innovative insights to the current scholarly inquiries about the novel and journalism, translation studies and world literature.

The theoretical discourse and tools that will be used in the project's examination of Singer's works derive from recent work by theoreticians of translation studies (Venuti, 2013), world literature (Damrosch 2003) and the novel (Moretti 2008). In my close readings and interpretations of Singer's works, I will develop a hermeneutics that is particularly relevant for this archive based project and its focus on the cultural specific aspects of literary bilingualism (Rosenwald 2008). Rethinking and re-contextualizing Singer's contribution to Yiddish, American and world literature, will enable me to contribute innovative theoretical insights to the three fields in which the study is theoretically embedded. Finally, the project would enable me to

fulfill the scholarly mandate as the only Docent in Yiddish studies at a Swedish university by carrying out cutting edge scholarship in literary and cultural studies.

5. Preliminary Results

During my two research visits to the Singer collection at the Harry Ransom Center (January 2012 and January 2013) and to the National Library in Jerusalem (July 2012), I have collected a great deal of material: copies of Singer manuscripts of published and unpublished stories, articles and novels mostly in Yiddish and a smaller portion in English; correspondence between Singer and his publishers, translators, writers and family members; tear sheets of serialized short stories, novels and memoirs published in the *Forverts* in Yiddish, and in the *New Yorker Magazine*, *Harpers* and other journals in English. I am thoroughly familiar with the organization, content and additional smaller archives of Singer's biographers, translators and publishers located at the HRC: Elizabeth Shub Collection, Paul Kresh Collection, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux Collection, Alfred A. Knopf Collection, Harper & Row Collection and Lescher Literary Agency Collection. I have collected approximately 2.500 digital copies of material from the above archives. This material needs to be transcribed which in the case of Singer's hand written manuscripts will be a time consuming task. Particularly important for the critical study and assembling of texts for a Singer anthology are the following archival material:

- 1) Singer manuscripts of short stories, novels, memoirs, essays and lectures never published in the Yiddish press or in book form. This is the most exciting material that potentially would add significant artistic works to Singer's oeuvre.
- 2) Correspondence from Singer's family and writer colleagues. Particularly important are the extensive collection of letters from the Yiddish poet Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973) that covers a period from the 1930s to the early 1970s, and a handful letters from his brother the novelist I.J.Singer.
- 3) Translations of Singer stories and novels in the author's own hand and typewritten, and by a number of translator. These translations provide detailed, concrete evidence of the ways in which Singer and his translators made stylistic, semantic and structural changes in the English translations.

- 4) Correspondence between Singer and his publishers, translators and editors that address their commercial, aesthetic and cultural specific requirements and expectations in connection with the translation of the author's Yiddish works into English.
- 5) An audio archive of Singer interviews, appearances at public events and radio programs.

My recent articles about Singer (2012 and 2013, see below) are partly based on the preliminary examination of the archival material I have collected and transcribed so far. Materials related to Singer's children stories will be presented at the Oxford University conference in August 2013 about Yiddish Children's Literature. I plan a third visit to the Singer collection at the HRC (one month), and a visit to the Center of Jewish History in New York (two months) during the summer of 2014. The latter archive holds the world's most extensive collection of the Polish Yiddish press during the interwar period, the *Forverts*, Singer manuscripts and correspondence between Yiddish writers and Singer, and other Yiddish language material.

In my book on the Yiddish literary autobiography (Schwarz 2005), I examined Singer's contribution to it. In two recent articles I contextualize Singer's work in English and Yiddish in post-war American literature (Schwarz, 2010 and 2012). I am completing a book length study *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* that analyzes the works of eight Yiddish writers, including Singer. They began their literary careers in Eastern Europe in the interwar period and became the vanguard of the 1945 generation of Yiddish literature after relocating to the US, Canada, Israel and Argentina before or after the Holocaust (forthcoming Wayne University Press 2014). My forthcoming article (2013), a literary historical analysis of Joseph Opatoshu's seminal novel *In poylishe velder* (In Polish Woods, 1921) delineates the generic, thematic and stylistic features of the origin of the Yiddish historical novel that influenced Singer. In a study of Singer's serialized novels for *Axess Magasin*, I will summarize the preliminary results from my archival research at the HRC. I am scheduled to give a paper on Singer's children stories at Oxford University's conference on Yiddish Children Literature in August 2013. In addition to my work on Singer and the historical novel, I translated a classical work of Yiddish fiction, Scholem-Aleichem's *Tevye der milkhiger* (Tevye the Dairyman) into Danish (2009), and published an article comparing Hebrew, English and Danish translations of this work informed by current methodologies in translation studies (Grossman 2010, Schwarz 2012).

I am well prepared to implement the project in three years. After the planned three months research visits during the summer of 2014, I intend to organize and transcribe manuscripts, correspondence and other materials during the fall of 2014. In 2015, I will write the first draft of the critical study, and select and translate the materials for the Singer anthology. After completing each of the three parts of the study, I will request feedback from colleagues in the field. In 2016, I will use this feedback to rewrite the study and complete the Singer anthology including a critical introduction and notes and (Kondrup, 2011).

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