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Writers Don't Write for the Drawer

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ESSAYS OF ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Isaac Bashevis Singer has long been acknowledged as a master storyteller. But his critical writings have been largely passed over. One underlying reason is the sheer volume of Singer's output. Starting in 1939, when he became a regular contributor to the Yiddish daily *Forverts*, he produced an incredible amount of text. He published his work under at least three pseudonyms, any number of which might appear in a single issue—sometimes on a single page—in a variety of genres: stories, novels, memoirs, essays, literary sketches, satires, dialogues, travel pieces, reviews, and even a popular media digest.

In the early 1960s, as his popularity grew, Singer's Yiddish-language production was increasingly accompanied by efforts to translate, edit, and adapt his work for English-speaking audiences. By then, he had accumulated untranslated material from nearly forty years of writing, and was still producing new material, including some of the works for which he would be best known. He also began to appear as a lecturer, traveling to universities, synagogues, community centers, and retreats all across the United States, giving talks on everything from literature, to Kabbalah, to his own concept of religion. It was, as Singer told *Harper's* in 1965, "a lot of work for a man of sixty." Indeed, it

seemed the literary and intellectual factory that became Isaac Bashevis Singer never stopped for breath.

Yet the amount that a given person can write is always limited—and not only by the number of days they are destined to live on the planet. Singer's creative process, which came to include a practice of writing, translating, and editing, was limited by how much English-language text he could prepare—especially since he often did the translations himself with a collaborator, or, less often, supervised and corrected translations made by others. He was also limited by the number of books his publisher could consider, print, advertise, and distribute at any given moment—in part because of the risk of saturating the market with his works. All these issues may seem superfluous where the noble issues of art and literature are concerned. But they are quite relevant in considering Singer, whose full career as a writer is traced only when taking into account all of his publications in the Yiddish press, and whose book publications—whether in Yiddish or in English, the two languages in which he worked with equal authority—reveal only a partial view of his artistic output.

This partialness becomes especially clear when considering Singer's essays. The way that these essays were written, translated, edited, and, in some cases, presented to audiences, reflects the central role they played in Singer's literary life. Many of them first appeared under the pseudonym Yitskhok Varshavski—Isaac from Warsaw, which Yiddish readers could have recognized as Yitskhok Bashevis, since he openly cited the real titles of his best-known works—and some under his other pseudonym, D. Segal. Yet after being translated, edited, and rewritten in English, they all appeared under the name Isaac Bashevis Singer. The final manuscripts left behind, as well as drafts used to prepare them, provide some of the clearest views into

Singer as a literary artist—one who is able not only to produce fiction that captivated readers, but also to discuss the aesthetic, spiritual, and moral vision undergirding all of his writing. The essays also reflect the ideas that drove his literary production. In this, they are an embodiment of his accomplishment twice over.

Singer was a writer. But he was also an intellectual. You can hear this in voice recordings, less so in English than in Yiddish, where all traces of sentimentality and schtick fall away. In Yiddish, Singer doesn't have a Yiddish accent. He doesn't sound like someone's grandfather—or great-grandfather—as he sometimes does in English. He sounds like a writer whose mind is constantly working and whose critical eye penetrates beyond everyday illusions into what drives human nature, no less than to what lifts the human spirit. The closest Singer got to leaving a record of this voice in English was when he presented ideas about art and literature, Yiddish and Jewish culture, and his personal experience and philosophy—all of which are at the center of these essays.

Bringing this material together requires a particular kind of attention. The fact that many of these works were not prepared for final publication by their author means that a myriad of editorial decisions have to be made along the way. This is especially true when, looking for the Yiddish material used to prepare the English-language essays, we see that Singer sometimes translated, edited, and incorporated materials from a number of articles, some of them published years apart. Many of these essays synthesize years of reflection on various topics and considerable editing and revising during the translation, creating final versions in English that no longer reflect any existing Yiddish original. Later, as Singer becomes more practiced, he brings this synthesis directly into the original versions, so that, at some point, some essays *do* appear as direct translations of the Yiddish. In yet other

cases, none of the original Yiddish material has been found, so that all we have are several corrected English-language drafts.

The challenge for an editor collecting these essays is to treat each work on its own terms, to take into account its specific provenance, and yet to give the volume coherence as a whole—all this while adhering to the author's own articulated artistic vision. As such, this collection is itself a *synthetic* work, in that it aims to bring together essays published or presented in a variety of venues, but also to create a single, cohesive volume. Since this editorial effort is itself grounded in both historical and literary concerns, it seems prudent to set out two of the central circumstances that have guided this work: first, Singer's own aborted efforts to publish a collection of essays, and second, the complex translation and editing process that some of these essays underwent.

Singer's earliest English-language publication in the United States, an epic historical novel titled *The Family Moskat* (1950) and published by Alfred A. Knopf, was a misadventure in translation, editing, and marketing that ended with the publisher's losing interest in his future works.* Singer's next publisher, Noonday, was founded by Cecil Hemley—a writer, editor, and translator whose wife, Elaine Gottlieb, also translated Singer's work. Noonday published three of his books—*Satan in Goray* (1955), *Gimpel the Fool and Other Stories* (1957), and *The Magician of Lublin* (1960)—before being acquired by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG), which published *The Spinoza of Market Street and Other*

* Singer's translator, A. H. Gross, died before completing the translation, and Singer undertook the rest of the work with Gross's daughter, Nancy Gross, as well as Maurice Samuel and Lyon Mearson. For a history of Singer's experiences with Knopf, see Paul Kresh, *Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Magician of West 86th Street: A Biography* (New York: Dial Press, 1979), 184, and the Knopf papers at the Harry Ransom Papers Center, including the increasingly acrimonious relationship between Singer and his editor.

Stories (1961) and *The Slave* (1962). By 1963, FSG had acquired Singer's second large historical epic, published in English in two parts as *The Manor* and *The Estate*, which Gottlieb was then translating. In June, a memo from Roger Straus to Robert Giroux and others described what Straus called the "Singer editorial story." With this major translation effort in the works, FSG was planning a three-book deal: a first-person novel, likely *A Ship to America*, which Singer was publishing that year in Yiddish; a memoir collection, which later appeared as *In My Father's Court*; and an untitled collection of essays. Straus describes the collection as pulling from "a wealth of essays, nonfiction, prepared over the past thirty years and never translated, but from which Isaac Singer will someday wish to select a volume. These essays are on philosophy, literature, and include some lectures." In August 1963, Singer again mentions this idea in his own letter to Straus, but appears to hedge against the possibility. "I would like to call your attention," Singer writes, "to the fact that a collection of essays is still a remote possibility, since very few of them were translated until now." The next year instead saw Singer's third collection, *Short Friday and Other Stories* (1964), while all discussion of either the first-person novel or the essay collection ended.

In his letter, Straus had referred to Singer's essays written over the previous thirty years, suggesting that, regardless of the possibilities discussed, Singer considered including his two Warszawa essays—"Verter oder bilder" (Words or Images) and "Tsu der frage vegn dikhtung un politik" (Toward the Question of Poetics and Politics)—written well before his 1935 arrival in New York.* At this point, it seems, both Singer and his publishers

* Singer, "Verter oder bilder" (Words or Images), *Literarische Bleter*, August 26, 1927, 663–65; "Tsu der frage vegn dikhtung un politik" (Toward the Question of Poetics and Politics), *Globus* 1, no. 3 (Sept. 1932): 39–49.

considered building his career according to the European intellectual tradition, as an author who produced both literary and philosophical writings.* But it seems that, as his understanding of the cultural landscape around him grew, Singer changed course, building his path to critical recognition through the role of an old-fashioned storyteller with a devilish streak. His commercial success coincided with his shedding of the intellectual aspect of his public persona, and his cultivation of a new image, that of a translated old-world transplant. In reality, he was a modern writer, well versed in the various streams of world literature, and working between two languages—composing and publishing first in Yiddish, and translating himself into English with the help of collaborators and editors.

The years between the early 1960s and the mid-1980s saw an increasingly hectic schedule of writing and translating—especially upon the publication of *Zlateh the Goat* (1966), his first collection for children, after which he produced seventeen more children's books—and more traveling for lectures. Singer's personal philosophy was funneled into stories, interviews, and, after receiving the 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature, a book titled *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1985), coauthored with Richard Burgin, who recorded and organized Singer's ideas. The next mention of Singer's essays appears in a proposal, submitted by his secretary Dvorah Menashe Telushkin in the fall of 1986, to collect his untranslated essays. The proposal re-

* For detailed histories of Singer's years as a writer in Warsaw, as well as his first two years in America, see David Stromberg, "Your Papers for a Tourist Visa': A Literary-Biographical Consideration of Isaac Bashevis Singer in Warsaw, 1923–1935," in *The European Journal of Jewish Studies* 15.2 (2021): 256–84; and "'Don't Be Hopeless, Kid': A Literary-Biographical Consideration of Isaac Bashevis Singer's First Years in New York, 1935–1937," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 40.2 (2021): 109–39.

fers to “over . . . 800 essays” that appeared “under three pseudonyms . . . in Yiddish newspapers in Poland and in the United States,” and concludes that “the only reason these works have not been previously translated is that they had been forgotten, and relegated to the archives of a few libraries and Yiddish research organizations.”* Roger Straus appears to refer to this proposal in a letter to Singer dated July 1987, saying he would speak to Singer when they next met about a book called *First Steps in Literature*, which appears to correspond to the first volume of the proposal. There is also a mention, in an unsigned handwritten memo from July 1987, of a manuscript titled *Broken Tablets*, possibly referring to the third volume, which is also mentioned in a memo from May 1988 describing it as an English-language “collection of nonfiction and articles.” None of these efforts appears to have ever materialized—very likely because both Telushkin’s proposal and Straus’s letter are dated from around the time that Singer began to suffer the onset of dementia.

Israel Zamir, Singer’s only child, records in his memoir of his father that, in 1986, “the last year his mind was still clear,” Singer “was still making abundant plans” that included writing “a popular children’s book about the chronicles of philosophy throughout the world.”† Lester Goran, Singer’s last literary collaborator, recalls in his own memoir about working with the aging Yiddish author that this period was especially difficult. He mentions

* Telushkin proposes a three-volume collection, selected with Professor Chone Shmeruk of the Hebrew University, the first volume titled *Early Stories, 1924–49*, the second titled *From the Old and New Home*, a memoir published by Singer in the *Forverts* in 1963–65 as *Fun der alter un nayer heym*, and the third titled *Literary Meetings, Essays, and Critiques, 1939–1949*.

† Israel Zamir, *Journey to My Father: Isaac Bashevis Singer*, trans. Barbara Harshav (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1995), 231.

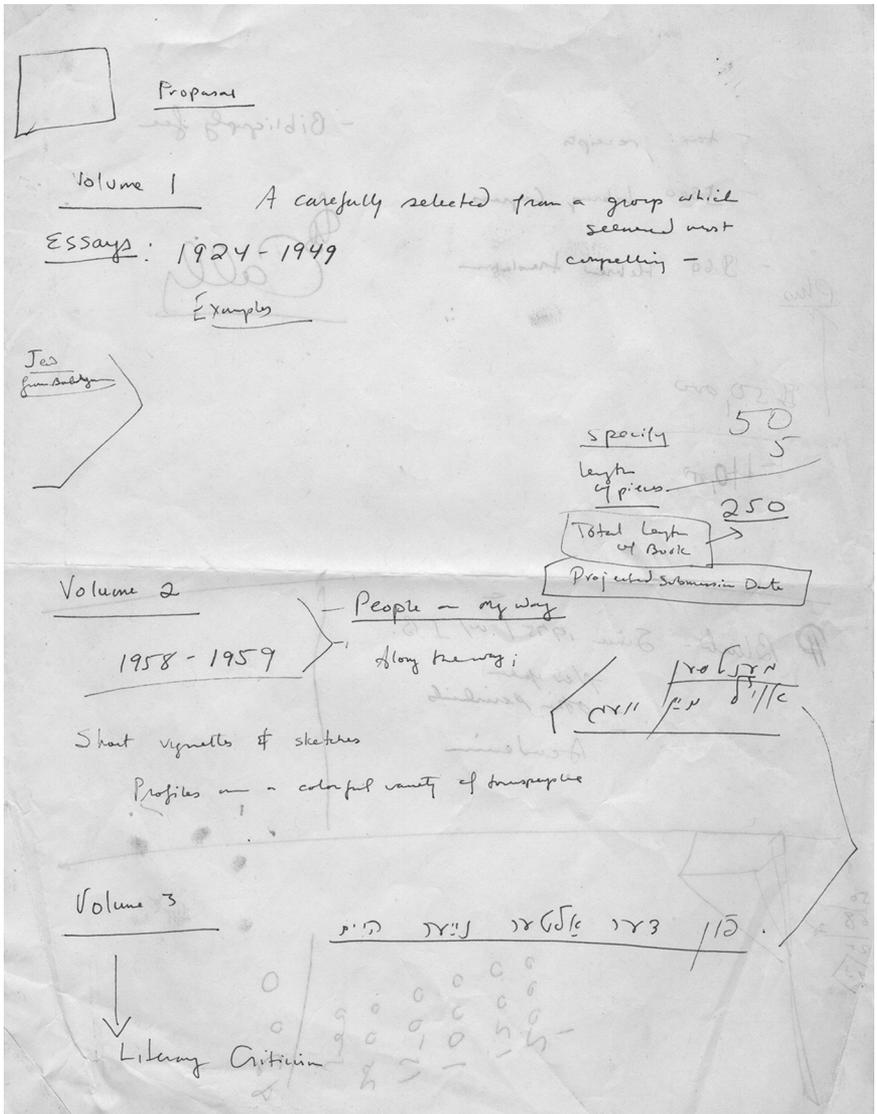


FIGURE 1. A draft proposal for a three-volume collection of Singer's nonfiction in Dvorah Menashe Telushkin's handwriting. Dvorah Telushkin Collection of Isaac Bashevis Singer Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Singer's fantasies about their writing a "master work" that would make them both wealthy. "Singer told me one morning the time had come for the two of us to finally write a great book together," writes Goran. "The book was to probe the depths of what he truly believed. . . . His genuine philosophies would be revealed. . . . It would be a work that would change people's minds about him."* Singer was serious enough about this work, Goran reports, to involve the former regional manager of Doubleday, Gordon Weel, in trying to sell the proposed book to publishers, some of which expressed interest. The book even acquired a working title: *God's Fugitives*. In April 1987, over breakfast, Singer told to Goran they would start writing the book that instant. Intending to hand him a pencil, Singer instead handed him a fork. When Goran pointed this out, Singer said he was losing his mind, and handed Goran another pencil—this time in the form of a butter knife. When Goran finally procured a pencil from a waitress, Singer began to tell him the same life story he had told countless times. As Goran writes, "*God's Fugitives* was the last gasp of the impossible."[†] And Singer's final plans for a nonfiction collection dissipated yet again.

While he was alive, Singer's American career was dominated by both literary principles and publishing pragmatics. When opportunities presented themselves, he pursued them, prioritizing those that were most realizable. In rare cases did he insist on publishing a work that was deemed unmarketable by his literary consultants, as was the case with *The Penitent* (1983), the translation of which was completed ten years before it was published—and which only appeared once Singer had secured

* Lester Goran, *The Bright Streets of Surfside: The Memoir of a Friendship with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), 139.

[†] Goran, *The Bright Streets of Surfside*, 152.

the Nobel Prize.* But his vision for a literary career did not always overlap with his publisher's plans. In some cases, he invested time and money in translating his works, only to have his agent or publisher suggest setting the manuscript aside.

This did not slow Singer down: between 1955 and 1988, he published ten novels, eleven short story collections, and four autobiographical works, as well as eighteen books for children. But his public activity revealed only part of the work that he was producing in English. In his archive lie numerous novels, stories, and memoirs, many of them corrected in his own hand, all of which he deemed publishable, but which were set aside for practical reasons. And among those carefully wrought materials, a mini-corpus of essays is revealed: a collection of material implicitly prepared by Singer, piece by piece, through his choice for which works to translate. These essays, along with other unpublished work, accumulated in Singer's "chaos room"—the walk-in closet where he kept manuscripts, clippings, notebooks, certificates, diplomas, awards, letters, and many other documents and objects connected with his literary and personal life.

Singer knew his work would be left undone when he passed away. His son recalls, during the last visit when his mind was clear, Singer going into the chaos room and saying, "Oh, my God, I've got to live another hundred years to edit the stories, translate them into English, and publish them"—and he did produce enough material to translate, edit, and publish books for several more decades.† In 1993, two years after his death,

* For a discussion of this novel's publication history in Yiddish and English, see David Stromberg, *Narrative Faith: Dostoevsky, Camus, and Singer* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2018).

† Zamir, *Journey to My Father*, 231–32.

these materials were all acquired by the Harry Ransom Center, and the essays were sent, along with everything in the chaos room, to Austin, Texas, where they were catalogued with the help of the late Yiddish scholar Joseph Sherman. I arrived at Singer's archive on the trail of an unpublished Yiddish booklet titled "Rebellion and Prayer, or The True Protester," which he says in *The New York Times* was written during the Holocaust.* Sitting in Jerusalem and scouring the online finding aid, I discovered that the most similarly titled entry, "To the True Protester," was an English-language poem—written on the back of a letter from his German publisher dated August 13, 1980—which now closes this collection. I eventually made it to the archive itself, and there, scattered among his papers, found his translated but uncollected essays. Straus had written, in his 1963 memo, that Singer would "someday wish to select a volume" of essays from his critical writings. His choice of which works to translate reflects this selection.

Singer's essays found their main audience on the lecture circuit. And while he solicited translators and collaborators—paid and unpaid, credited and uncredited—to help render first drafts in English, he did all of the editing and revising himself. Singer was a seasoned translator, having brought authors such as Thomas Mann, Knut Hamsun, and Erich Maria Remarque into Yiddish. And though he never openly admitted to translating himself into English, he addressed the issue at a 1964 lecture on literary

* Richard Burgin and Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer*, p. 52. For a discussion of Singer's reference to this essay in his author's note to *The Penitent*, where he also engages in a philosophical dialogue with his character's stated positions, see David Stromberg, "Rebellion and Creativity: Contextualizing Isaac Bashevis Singer's 'Author's Note' to *The Penitent*," *In geveb*, June 2016.

method. In response to a question about translation, he responds, “I used to have translators, but now I do a lot of the translation myself. I translate word by word, and I have a collaborator who helps me organize the sentences so that they should sound more English. Because in my case I know the words, but I don’t know the construction of the English sentence so well as a man who was born here.”* Still, even this admission is partial because, as the draft essays demonstrate, his literary efforts involved much more than translation. Singer’s authorial hand is evident on the typescripts, not only in the ideas expressed, but also in the editorial cuts and corrections he made. Once he had working drafts, he took out his pen and, in his own hand, began to pick the essays apart—cutting, rewriting, and sometimes restructuring them directly in English.

Like much of Singer’s writing, his long-form essays appeared as installments, each marked as a continuation of an earlier one. But, unlike his fiction or memoir work, the installments sometimes appeared weeks apart, and the essays lacked the plot element to ground their content from one installment to the next. This made it challenging for readers, especially anyone who did not follow the *Forverts* regularly, to connect the pieces and understand their conceptual breadth or scope. Published as they were, these pieces were perceived—by both general readers and Yiddish critics—as throwaways used to fill up a weekly quota of text. Even those who followed Singer’s work closely, including Yiddish scholars, tended to consider anything not published

* Singer, lecture on literary method, January 29, 1964 (sound recording, 7” sound reel, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin).

under the Bashevis pseudonym to have lesser literary quality.* And as David Neal Miller has suggested, Yiddish scholars are often tempted “to regard Segal as a less conscientious Varshavski, much as Singer has characterized Varshavski as a less conscientious Bashevis”—not least because Singer perpetuated these distinctions.† But what Miller says of Segal holds for Varshavski as well: “the opposite is true.”‡ Singer deployed these pseudonyms strategically: they allowed him to treat a variety of topics under different guises, and, perhaps more importantly, to publish prolifically without having his name appear all over the paper. Most importantly—and this relates to his essays no less than to his works of fiction and memoir—Singer had recourse to all the Yiddish writing that he produced under each of these names as potential material for translating, editing, and rewriting in English, always publishing this material as Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Singer rarely produced material he did not intend to publish. Indeed, the second installment of “Who Needs Literature?” was originally titled “Writers Don’t Write ‘for the Drawer’”—a conviction he bore out to the end of his life. Singer did not write for the drawer, and the fact that his essayistic work was an important facet of his oeuvre is further evinced by his placement of some of these works, from the early 1960s until almost the end of his life, in a variety of newspapers, journals, magazines,

* This tendency has extended into criticism of Singer’s work in later decades, as, for example, when Jan Schwarz writes that “Singer’s best work was published under the name Yitskhok Bashevis in Yiddish journals and newspapers” (*Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust*. [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015], 231).

† David Neal Miller, *Fear of Fiction: Narrative Strategies in the Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 58.

‡ *Ibid.*

pamphlets, and anthologies. And though, during his lifetime, he constantly gave interviews in which he summarized many of his ideas, no source expresses them as directly as his essays.* That he did not have the chance to collect them into a single volume means only that the work was left for others to complete.

In many cases, the Yiddish publication history of these essays, appearing in the *Forverts* under various pseudonyms, undermined their significance within Singer's corpus. The only essays to receive critical attention during his lifetime were those published in Yiddish literary journals, but they were no more or less central to his development as an author—or to the theoretical framework driving his literary production—than what appeared in the newspaper. Singer's emphasis on translating his own writing, for example, was grounded in the concepts and methods of a modern author working in the context of world literature. Yet members of the Yiddish literary community rarely acknowledged the deliberateness of these efforts. This left many of them ambivalent about his position as the unofficial spokesperson of Yiddish literature in America—a circumstance so prominent it was parodied by Cynthia Ozick in "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" (1969).† In addition, with his English-language publications focused on fiction, he and his publisher continued to cultivate his image as an old fashioned storyteller rather than a modernist writer with intellectual leanings like Albert Camus or Vladimir Nabokov, promoting his persona as a worldly sage. Finally, while

* For a collection of Singer's interviews, see Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Conversations* (1992).

† For discussions of Ozick's story, and its place in American literary history, see Leah Garrett, "Cynthia Ozick's 'Envy': A Reconsideration," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 24 (2005): 60–81 and Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Envy of Yiddish: Cynthia Ozick as Translator," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 31, no. 1 (2012): 24–47.

several critics working in American literary studies discussed the philosophical themes driving his work in the early 1960s, most had no access to Yiddish, leaving his critical ideas beyond the scope of material they could consider in their research.* The scholarly trajectory set out in the 1960s has stuck for decades—and, to this day, few critics deal seriously with Singer's essayistic writings.

Despite his authorial persona being increasingly bound to his image as a storyteller, and the prospects of releasing an essay collection being repeatedly put off for the sake of more fiction, Singer never abandoned his intellectual pursuits. After receiving the 1978 Nobel Prize in Literature, he gained new authority as a writer on the world stage and was invited to lecture with increasing frequency. In this context, he returned to a number of his core essays, many of which were written in the 1960s, translating and revising them for new audiences. In the spring of 1979, for example, he was invited by the Gallatin Division of New York University to speak in a lecture series titled "The Writer at Work," and turned to an essay on the nature of divinity and religion first published in 1966—a moving reflection on the nature of faith in modern times titled "A Personal Concept of Religion"—which he now translated and rewrote in English. Two versions of the essay appeared in English in Singer's lifetime, the first in excerpts from the NYU lecture in *The New York Times* under the title "What Is God to Do—Discuss His Book with Every Reader?" and the second as a pamphlet, published by the University of Southern Louisiana as the 1980 Flora Levy Lecture in the Humanities. But unless someone happened to have read section A, page 29, of *The New York Times* Friday edition, or to have been in Lafayette on the night of his lecture, it

* See especially the articles collected in *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (1969).

is unlike they would have noticed this essay—which not only has value as a window onto Singer’s intellectual foundation as a literary figure, but also serves as a testament of faith for anyone struggling to find meaning in the modern world.

Singer never had the opportunity to publish a volume of nonfiction writing during his lifetime. But the essays he translated offer readers insight into the issues that preoccupied him as an author—and how his personal beliefs regarding the world’s societies and cultures directly informed the development of his public persona. And while he never fully integrated his intellectual concerns into his popular image as a storyteller, his essays bring to light the web of artistic convictions and Jewish traditions at the base of his fiction. They also offer an unobstructed view onto his attitudes toward, among many other topics, sexuality, vegetarianism, the supernatural, and the unique spirit of Yiddish.

Above all, as a collection, *Old Truths and New Clichés* lays bare Singer’s belief in literature’s ability to portray those moments when what we think we know collides with what is beyond our understanding.

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