Rebellion and Creativity: Contextualizing Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Author’s Note” to The Penitent

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REBELLION AND CREATIVITY: CONTEXTUALIZING ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER’S “AUTHOR’S NOTE” TO THE PENITENT

David Stromberg

Abstract: Within Isaac Bashevis Singer’s large body of work, the “Author’s Note” at the end of The Penitent (1983)—which only appears in the novel’s English edition—requires special attention. Not only is it the longest of Singer’s notes in this style, but its placement at the end of the novel, rather than at its beginning, sets it apart from other such notes published during his lifetime. In the note Singer uses his authorial persona to challenge positions set out in the novel’s fiction, not only framing its themes and ideas, but extending and adjusting them on a discursive level. The authorial persona thus enters into direct dialogue with its own creation, blurring the line between a standard framing “paratext” and a continuation of the novel through direct engagement with its fiction. In this article, I explore the discursive positions expressed in the note and suggest that the authorial persona that emerges, which expresses rebellion against the suffering of God’s world, represents a worldview that suppresses convictions that Singer put forth in other essays and introductions, where suffering is integrated into a philosophy of creativity. I argue that the note takes advantage of Singer’s previous use of this form for a specific readerly effect of enhancing ideological debate through discursive polyphony.

Structure and Reception

In Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short novel The Penitent (1983), the narrator Joseph Shapiro tells the story of his return to religion: he begins as a faithless Holocaust survivor, but after discovering his wife’s deceit, his mistress’s sordidness, his colleagues’ shallowness, and the extent of his own hypocrisy, he leaves everything behind to move
to Israel, where he eventually finds spiritual salvation by returning to orthodox Judaism in the ultra-religious Jerusalem neighborhood of Mea Shearim. The novel’s main discursive position—the position from which the central narrator speaks—is that of the penitent who recognizes an unnamed Yiddish writer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and asks to recount to him his personal story of returning to religion. The second discursive position is that of the unnamed Yiddish writer, similar to the historical author but never identified as such, who provides a narrative frame for the penitent’s storytelling and is presumed to later record what was said to him. The novel’s original Yiddish publication only included these two positions. The English edition added a third discursive position: that of the named historical author Isaac Bashevis Singer who, at the end of the short novel, extends its discourse into a so-called author’s note signed “I. B. S.”

The novel’s English edition, which presents its final form, features a triadic structure with three distinct first-person voices. In this article, I will suggest that Singer’s “Author’s Note” is meant less as a standard paratext, intended to contextualize the main text with additional framing information, and more as a contrapuntal continuation of a critical dialogue found in the novel’s fiction addressing religion, rebellion, and creativity. I will argue that the complexity of this slim novel stems in part from the dynamic between Joseph Shapiro’s story and the way its themes relate to each of its discursive positions. The novel can be read simultaneously from Shapiro’s internal perspective, the unnamed Yiddish writer’s perspective, or a more critical perspective implicit in the Yiddish but which Singer’s authorial intervention in English makes explicit. My suggestion is that the authorial persona in The Penitent’s author’s note does not necessarily share the same worldview that Singer puts forth in other essays and introductions, and that the position expressed in the author’s note appears for a specific effect: to enhance ideological debate through discursive counterpoint.

Of all of Singer’s novels, The Penitent has had the most controversial reception. Since the 1973 Yiddish-language serial publication of Der bal-tshuwe in the Forverts newspaper, there has been a steady and varied, but also limited, debate surrounding the novel, concerning both its merit as a literary work and its relationship to Singer. The novel’s early detractors included Yiddish literary scholars Ruth Wisse and Leonard Prager, who both criticized the novel’s artistic qualities. The novel also received negative reviews from Anatole Broyard, Peter S. Prescott, and Harold Bloom, who, reviewing the English edition of the novel in The New York Times, called it “a very unpleasant work, without any redeeming esthetic merit or humane quality,” and labeled

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1 Gérard Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, trans. Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). The term “paratext” was coined by narratologist Gerard Genete to describe any “verbal statements” that accompany the publication of a literary work—including an “author’s name, a title, a preface, illustration” (1).

it Singer’s “worst book.”

At the same time as some critics were disparaging The Penitent, a few others proclaimed its literary value. Khone Shmeruk called the novel “exceptional” within a year of its Yiddish publication, and Thomas Sutcliffe of the Times Literary Supplement praised the book after its English-language release. There eventually appeared a small number of scholarly articles devoted solely to this novel, all of which make an attempt to describe the interrelation between the novel’s various narrative agencies. But they all take the authorial persona of the author’s note to be identical to that of the historical author, never fleshing out the novel’s philosophical discourse in relation to Singer’s personal philosophy expressed elsewhere.

The question of the novel’s significance and its possible readings is further complicated by Singer’s documented attitudes to the novel, along with its unique publication history. The novel originally appeared in serial form over the first three months of 1973 in the Yiddish-language Forverts. On a May 1973 trip to Jerusalem, during which he received the Itsik Manger Prize in Tel Aviv, Singer assured students and professors at the Hebrew University that they could expect his new novel, The Repentant (as the Jerusalem Post reported its working title), to be released in book form within the next year. The Jerusalem Post even reported him calling the novel his favorite among all his works. By this time, Singer’s works usually appeared in book form in English before they appeared in Yiddish. But the only version to appear in 1974 was a Yiddish edition published by Y. L. Peretz Verlag in Tel Aviv.


4 Khone Shmeruk seized upon the novel’s significance within a year of its Yiddish publication and included it within Singer’s “group of monologues set in a streotypedor frame” of “confessions made to the author-narrator in the frame-story,” noting that he considered the work “exceptional in this series,” in “The Use of Monologue as a Narrative Technique in the Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer,” trans. J. Taglicht, in Der Shpigl (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975), v-xxv. Thomas Sutcliffe, a reviewer who defended the book in the Times Literary Supplement during its English-language release, recognized the “complexity [of] the layering of authors and voices” and called the novel an “honest and compassionate book, with its own complex hero,” in “Making the Leap into Faith,” in Times Literary Supplement, 24 March 1984: 311.

5 David Packman published a rather short but insightful response to Bloom, contending that the latter’s “major error . . . [is] reducing to the bare bones of its story the novel’s multivoiced and vertiginous plot,” in “The Problem of The Penitent,” Cross Currents 4 (1985): 375; Minna Herman Maltz took this position a step further and, through a more detailed textual analysis, sets out to describe why it is “a more complex work than is initially apparent,” in “Point of View in Isaac Bashevis Singer’s The Penitent,” English Studies in Africa 29.2 (1986): 132; Joseph Sherman (1988) argued that the “success of Singer’s narrative technique may perhaps be gauged from the negative responses aroused in readers by Joseph Shapiro’s diatribe,” in “Author Versus Narrator in The Penitent: Reconsidering Isaac Bashevis Singer’s Tirade,” Journal of Narrative Technique, 18.3 (1988): 254. These few defenders were joined over a decade later by Alan Astro, who offers a thematic treatment which focuses on the distance between “author and creature,” in “Art and Religion in Der bal-tshuve (The Penitent),” in The Hidden Isaac Bashevis Singer, ed. Seth L. Wolitz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 94.


Little was heard of *Der bal-tshuve* until Paul Kresh’s biography of Singer (1979), which recalls “one novel of Isaac’s that has been translated into English but published only in Yiddish.” Kresh spends a page and a half summarizing the novel that was still unavailable to English-speaking audiences and goes on to explain that “Isaac has decided so far to go along with the advice of some of his literary counselors and not have this sermonic novel published in English,” a sentiment which actually echoes Ruth Wisse’s critical position that the novel is better understood by its Yiddish audience. Yet Kresh, writing four years before the English edition was released, adds that “certain passages in *The Penitent* . . . might make even the most exasperated reader feel that maybe the book should have been published after all.” In some senses, this sentiment can contextualize Singer’s appending the “Author’s Note” in the English edition when it finally came out in 1983. It may have served to preempt the fears of his literary counselors. This decision also conferred upon the novel its final triple first-person form—in English but not in Yiddish.

The structural question of positions, voices, and narrators is anything but trivial when considering the readings that *The Penitent* has elicited. Hence the need, I believe, to speak of three discursive positions, with sometimes distinct and sometimes overlapping voices. The novel can be schematized as a triangle with nodes that represent each discursive position and sides that represent the crossover of one narrative voice into another. The nodes of the triangle are the three discursive positions, anchoring readers in specific personae, and the readers’ challenge is to tease out the different personae despite their overlapping voices. The various convictions and choices attributed to the unnamed Yiddish writer, Shapiro, and Singer have to be considered in relation to each other alongside the unfolding story. This is further complicated by one of them being a historical figure while the other two are fictional constructs—and the fact that neither the fictional Yiddish writer nor Singer make any reference to each other. This complex structure is part of what gives the novel a multi-vocal dynamic despite its seeming monologic tone.

In a previous article, I discussed one of the nodes of this triangle, exploring Joseph Shapiro’s discursive position in terms of autonomy and dialogicity within the context of what Roger Sell calls “genuine” and “distorted” communication, in which a speaker’s relation to a listener is compared to the relations represented within the narrative. There, I focus on two aspects: (1) the communicational relationship between the narrator-protagonist and his fictional listener, and (2) the text’s implicit call for a response from the reader. Putting forth a participatory Aristotelian response to the

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9 Ibid., 303.
10 Sherman, “Author Versus Narrator in *The Penitent*,” 243. He refers to the “publishers’ fear that the denunciatory tone this novel’s narrator, Joseph Shapiro, would tarnish Singer’s glowing reputation as a master storyteller whose enigmatic open-endedness appears to bespeak narrative objectivity. . . . The assumption might have been that the novel is a moral tract in which Singer’s personal voice is indistinguishable from the voice of his narrator.” Indeed, *The Penitent* was only published after Singer had secured the Nobel Prize, for which such a “reputation” can be seen as crucial.
novel, I suggest that disparaging readings of the novel often exhibit the very kind of reductivism of which they accuse the main character—and sometimes also the historical author. By focusing on the text’s multi-vocality, I recuperate some of the subtle and open-ended aspects of this powerfully distilled novel. Elsewhere in my research, I further delineate Shapiro’s “dialogue with the devil,” tracing the trajectory of his internal struggle as a creation responding to the voice of destruction inside himself. In this article, therefore, I will focus on the two remaining positions in the triangle: the unnamed Yiddish author’s and the historical author’s note. Ultimately, my purpose in this article is to discuss The Penitent’s author’s note in the context of Singer’s other texts and paratexts to determine the difference between the positions presented as the author’s in the novel, which are limited to notions of rebelling against suffering, and the historical author’s more complex positions on the same issues, which integrate suffering into the broader notion of creativity.

Envy and Faith

I have argued elsewhere that the narrative of The Penitent presents not only a dialogue between two authorial personae but also a structural call for readers to join the debate through a response to those aspects of Shapiro’s discourse that are left unanswered in the text—an invitation to “compare notes” with the author or other addressees. In the novel’s original Yiddish version, a hint at this dynamic already appears when the unnamed Yiddish writer, at a single point in the narrative, engages Shapiro on the discursive level by responding to one of his stated positions. In the English version of the novel, this dynamic is made more prominent through the “Author’s Note,” in which the voice of the historical Singer is now recruited to emphasize a potential response to Shapiro. Just as Shapiro’s dialogue with the Devil represents a model for our potential dialogue with the destructive elements of his voice, so these incursions into dialogue with Shapiro can represent models for further intervention on the reader’s part, raising engagement with the text yet another degree.

Aside from the centrality of Shapiro’s discourse, the unnamed Yiddish writer and the historical Singer present two additional and distinct discursive positions, resulting in what I refer to as the novel’s discursive triad. The positions espoused in Singer’s name in the author’s note do not necessarily represent those which the historical author developed in other essays. Indeed, Singer wrote numerous texts related to topics and themes raised in The Penitent. Teasing out the unnamed Yiddish writer’s position is more difficult. David Neal Miller has admitted that that though the unnamed writer “resembles ever more the actual Isaac Bashevis Singer . . . there are infrequent but persistent reminders that this central character is not to be identified with the historical Isaac Singer tout court.” Miller concludes that it “would be both difficult and unprofitable to explore this Singer-like character in particular detail.” He may be right. This character is difficult to analyze in part because he does and says so little and seems to function as a stand-in to approximate a situation readers can imagine as plausible

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12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
and thereby provide an inviting narrative frame. But in the English edition of *The Penitent*, the historical Singer’s appearance at the end of the novel, extending the themes and ideas of the fiction, makes the gap between the authorial persona and the fictional unnamed writer more prominent. Indeed, the defining element of his few words is his envy, making it distinct from the historical Singer’s positions found either in the “Author’s Note” or in other texts.

The Yiddish writer explicitly engages Shapiro’s discourse only once. In this single instance, the earlier narrative modulation to Shapiro’s voice is interrupted, and the narrative agency returns to the unnamed writer, with the “I” again standing for the writer and Shapiro again speaking within quotation marks. This is the only utterance, aside from the prologue, that gives readers some sense of the unnamed writer’s position on the topics discussed in the novel.15 Addressing the unnamed writer directly, Shapiro claims that, based on his published work, the writer “know[s] all the faults of modern man” but does not “want to elaborate on the consequences of [his] knowledge.”16 This is a place where the Yiddish writer and Singer diverge: in Singer’s oeuvre, but apparently not in that of the anonymous Yiddish writer, one can actually find characters that resemble Shapiro in different ways. One is Hertz Dovid Grein who, in the epilogue of Singer’s *Shadows on the Hudson*, first serialized in the *Forverts* in 1957-1958, writes a short letter from the same Mea Shearim neighborhood where Shapiro lives, the text of which shares discursive elements with Shapiro’s narrative. Another is the protagonist of *The Magician from Lublin* (1960), who comes to be known in the epilogue as Yasha the Penitent, is often analyzed alongside Shapiro by critics. The final extra-textual self-referential play is that Shapiro can himself be considered a fictional attempt at the “elaboration on the consequences” of the “faults of modern man”—and if the unnamed Yiddish writer has not done this, Isaac Bashevis Singer has done so in *The Penitent* itself.

In nearly the same breath, Shapiro challenges the unnamed writer about his own Jewishness: “If you took one step forward, you’d become a full-fledged Jew” (ibid.). The fictional writer reacts by rejecting Shapiro’s claim that the writer knows enough about the faults of modern man to become a “real Jew.” He does this by interrupting Shapiro’s narrative flow and pointing out, in his own voice, that “know[ing] faults isn’t enough” and that, to be religious, one “must have faith that everything stated in the holy books was given to Moses on Mount Sinai” (ibid.). This statement is linked with sentiments that appear in other fictional works as well as in interviews with Singer. A similar sentence is uttered in the first person by Grein in *Shadows on the Hudson*, who admits to his friend in a letter that sometimes “it occurs to [him] that the Torah is a work of the imagination and that Moses did not stand on Mount Sinai.”17 About ten years after

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15 There is a second interruption in the narrative, which comes when Shapiro realizes that the hour has gotten late and offers his listener to return the next day to tell the rest of his story (94). But in this instance there is no engagement of Shapiro’s discourse on the unnamed Yiddish writer’s part. The interruption merely expresses his readiness to go on listening to Shapiro, suggesting his sustained interest in hearing this tale of repentance.


17 Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 547. In many ways, Grein and his letter are paradigms for Shapiro and his storytelling in *The Penitent*. Indeed, numerous aspects of
Shadows on the Hudson, and four years before the original Yiddish publication of Der bal-tshuvve, the historical Singer made a comment on this topic to Cyrena Pondrom in an interview: “I don’t believe that God came down on Mount Sinai.”18 The formula then appeared in a similar comment to Richard Burgin (1978), after the publication of Der bal-tshuvve in Yiddish but before its English version, explaining that Singer’s father had demanded of him “to believe that [every little Rabbinical dogma] were all given to Moses on Mount Sinai” and that Singer “could never believe in that.”19 What emerges from these instances, which resonates with the position of the unnamed Yiddish writer, is a basic concept of the bond between faith and the Jewish religion: an unbreakable bond between belief in the revelation of the Torah as given to Moses at Mount Sinai and the practice of all the rabbinical laws claim to stem from this singular event. Regardless of the tone in which this model is delivered, it is at the crux of Singerian orthodox Judaism.

Singer’s conception of Jewish orthodoxy as faith in the continuity between Torah and the Talmudic tradition extends to his conception of the structuring role religion can play in the relationship between individual and society. In The Penitent, after his first interaction with Priscilla, Shapiro describes the need for religious garb in military terms: “I realized at that moment that without earlocks and a ritual garment one cannot be a real Jew. A soldier who serves an emperor has to have a uniform, and this also applies to a soldier who serves the Almighty. Had I worn such an outfit that night, I wouldn’t have been exposed to those temptations” (84). Grein uses the same parallel in Shadows: “A soldier must wear a uniform and live in a barracks. Whoever wants to serve God must wear God’s insignia, and must separate himself from those who serve only themselves. The beard, the sidelocks, the girdle worn during prayer, the fringed ritual undergarment—all these are the uniform of the Jew, the outward signs that he belongs to God’s world, not to the underworld. . . . That’s why Tolstoy finally put on a peasant blouse. That piece of clothing was his attempt to separate himself from the corrupt world.”20 And in a Harper’s Magazine article “The Extreme Jews” (1967), written between Shadows and The Penitent, Singer discussed the role of ritual garments in a generalized social context: “A rabbi in a long cloak, a beard, and sidelocks is not likely to dally with a girl on the street corner. Tolstoi—by donning the peasant smock—forever precluded his attendance at the elaborate balls of the aristocracy that he described so well in his novels. Gandhi’s attire kept him from becoming a man of the world.”21 The words and references are nearly identical, but while Grein’s and Shapiro’s tones are somewhat similar in their religious fervency, Singer’s journalistic tone is restrained and expository, outlining a more universal claim. The fictional Grein and Shapiro express themselves in prescriptive terms in relation to what they call being “real Jews,” while the journalist Singer tries to explain the practices of the Jewish orthodox community to New Yorkers by referring to analogous social phenomena with which they are familiar. In all

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20 Singer, Shadows on the Hudson, 546-47.
three cases, the speaker express similar conceptions of the social role of orthodox practices.

Singer’s article on “The Extreme Jews” gives readers of The Penitent some insight into his ability to treat the novel’s themes from a different perspective. Historically, this article was the first piece of English-language writing that Singer published on contemporaneous Jewish orthodoxy as opposed to the orthodoxy of his childhood. As a journalist, Singer referred to modern social movements to contextualize the Jews of Brooklyn: “what about the beatniks in New York and in all the European cities who seem to have responded simultaneously to some silent command to grow long hair and beards, to neglect their clothes, and to associate with girls as sloppy as they themselves? Is this nothing more than a fad or does such attire disguise some idea?” (56). Singer focuses here on the sociological aspect of any collective dress code, connecting it to a choice of social or ethical ideas. Presented in the by-line as “the son and grandson of rabbis,”22 Singer describes the moral background of the social choices made by Hasidic Jews without assuming the moralistic tone with which he endows Grein or Shapiro. Though Singer, Grein, the unnamed writer, and Shapiro all share a common definition of fundamentalist Judaism, each relates to its implications differently.

What ultimately distinguishes the unnamed Yiddish writer in The Penitent from other utterances, made by the historical Singer or other fictional characters, is his emotional response to Shapiro’s challenge: rather than continue any kind of intellectual engagement which might support or dispute Shapiro’s position, he expresses a personal sentiment: “I envy those that do” have faith in the continuity between Mount Sinai and Talmudic Judaism (14). This admission gives the novel’s readers nearly the only textual clue as to the unnamed writer’s motivation in hearing out the penitent. It also puts the unnamed writer in a different relation to Shapiro’s discourse from that which appears in the author’s note. While the “Author’s Note” distances Singer from Shapiro by insisting on his refusal to accept the religious man’s “solution” (169), the unnamed writer expresses a subtler sense of dissociation through his envy of Shapiro’s ability to make such a choice despite his doubts. He expresses a sense of alienation from the continuity that he identifies as maintaining Jewish culture, knowledge, and tradition throughout history. With all his understanding of the social role that religious orthodoxy plays, and all the faults of modern life that he recognizes no less than Shapiro, the unnamed writer’s doubt leaves him exiled to a degree that he is envious of those who must enough faith to participate in such a community of strict religious observance—which also results hin him being alienated from modern society. Shapiro suggests that the unnamed writer can make the necessary step to religion himself but the unnamed writer seems to have resigned himself to exile from his religious inheritance—at least as far as observance is concerned. Like David Miller, I argue that this position of envy cannot be transposed tout court onto the historical Singer, but unlike Miller I do believe it has some significance: as one potential reaction to the doubts that Shapiro raises in regards to the role of religion in modern society. An ambiguous position emerges, between Shapiro’s affirmation of orthodoxy and the authorial persona’s rebellion against God, which expresses yearning at the same time that it recognizes its limits. Beyond this

22 Ibid., 56.
Discursive significance, however, the unnamed writer’s response also functions structurally as a model for regaining just enough narrative faith to warrant a response to the narrative doubt that Shapiro’s discourse raises through its rage and bigotry. The content of that response is specific to the unnamed Yiddish writer, but it also opens readers to the possibility responding on their own. Still the scantness of this response, together with the concerns of his literary counselors, may have led Singer to intervene more boldly in the English version by including a supplemental discourse under his own name. In the final version of The Penitent, the unnamed writer’s position emerges as one among three that establish interconnected ways of relating to orthodox Judaism—a discursive triad in which no position is clearly favored or condemned, and all convey different consequences drawn from similar materials.

From Paratext to Text

Within Singer’s body of work, the “Author’s Note” in The Penitent requires special attention for at least two reasons. First, its placement at the end of the novel sets it apart from every other author’s note and introduction that Singer published during his lifetime. Second, the note challenges positions set out in the fiction, not only framing the fiction’s themes and ideas, but extending and adjusting them, on the discursive rather than diegetic level.23 Whereas Singer’s various author’s notes developed in form and style over time into a discursive genre, this particular note contrasts with his usual practice in that here the authorial persona enters into direct dialogue with his own creation—blurring the line between a standard framing paratext and a continuation of the novel’s text by directly engaging with the fictional discourse.24 As such, it takes advantage of Singer’s previous use of this form in order to extend the novelistic effect in a subtle yet distinct way.

Until the mid-1960s, Singer’s paratextual author’s notes were fairly conventional and, except for his thanks to translators or personal references to his brother’s memory, lacked discursive content that related either to the author’s themes or personal views. The first English-language book publication in which Singer used the “author’s note” as a platform to frame the thematic content of his stories was the autobiographically

23 Genette references “the Platonic categories of mimesis (perfect imitation) and diegesis (pure narrative)” in discussing his use of the term “diegetic” to refer to story in Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method, translated by Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Jonathan Culler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 30. I distinguish between the “diegetic” or story level and the “discursive” level of the words or ideas that appear in the text.

24 The use of notes by authors and editors, historical or fictional, to frame or complicate the significance of a narrative has been used in fiction for centuries. Modern and especially postmodern literature increasingly saw the self-conscious use of such notes to blur the lines between text and paratext. Vladimir Nabokov, for example, made extensive use of the author’s note to frame both his fiction and nonfiction. While Philip Roth used the convention to question the boundary between fact and fiction by asking his fictional creation, Zuckerman, for input on his own autobiographical manuscript – published as The Facts (1988) despite the fictional Zuckerman’s advising Roth not to publish. Leo Tolstoy’s novella The Kreutzer Sonata (1889), which The Penitent closely resembles as the sermonic confession of a man with extremist religious views, was so controversial upon its publication that Tolstoy followed it with a letter clarifying in his own voice what he had tried to suggest through fiction. What distinguishes this from The Penitent is that Singer puts forth a position in his own voice that contradicts his narrator.
inspired *In My Father’s Court* (1966), which he calls a “literary experiment” combining “two styles—that of memoir and that of belles-lettres,” suggesting that though the basis is autobiographical there is just as much fiction in the work.25 Under the pretext of explaining the Jewish *beit din* (rabbinical court) to the general American reader, in this author’s note he actually professes a personal belief that extends beyond the reaches of the anecdotal stories themselves: “It is my firmest conviction that the court of the future will be based on the Beth Din, provided the world goes morally forward and not backward. . . . The opposite of the Beth Din are all institutions that employ force, whether of the right or the left.” He continues: “At times I think that the Beth Din is an infinitesimal example of the celestial council of justice, God’s judgment, which the Jews regard as absolute mercy” (8). Singer here presents his own take on the meaning of the *beit din*, which reflects his personal connection to the institution as well as his view on its universal ramifications outside of the specifically Jewish context.

The subjects of religion, mysticism, morality, Judaism, and belief in God—which are raised in the introduction to *In My Father’s Court*—reappear in Singer’s introduction to *A Little Boy in Search of God* (1976), the first of three volumes of personal autobiography.26 There, he continued to map out aspects of his childhood which first appeared in the *beit din* stories while continuing to treat his personal history in a fictional mode, shifting the focus from his father to himself. His introduction to this volume also clarifies aspects of his own personal stance that relate directly to issues refracted through Shapiro’s voice in *The Penitent*. In the introduction, Singer speaks on religion and faith in his own voice, distinguishing himself as an author from the narrative voice we find in the rest of the text:

> If there is a difference between religion and mysticism, it consists of the fact that religion is almost completely dependent upon revelation. . . . The mystic never completely relied upon the revelations of others but sought God in his own fashion. . . . *E*very mystic is a doubter . . . [and yet] the fire of faith that burns within [him] cannot coexist for long with the ice of skepticism. . . . Every mystic believes in Divine Providence . . . [that is,] God’s deeds and the fashion in which He guides the destiny of man and the world.27

At the end of this introduction, considerably longer than any of his previous ones, Singer explains that he is someone “who considers himself a bit of a mystic both in his life and in his literary creations.”28 This text was released after Singer was already a candidate for the Nobel Prize but before he received it, and it strikes an appropriately universal tone: “since the character of the mystic is alike in Jew, Christian, and Moslem, a kinship exists among all mystics.”29 Harold Bloom would have had this text available for perusing at the time of his review in 1983, and had he noted the fact that it was published *after* the writing of *The Penitent*, he may have had reason to pause before accusing Singer of regressive neo-orthodoxy and of identifying him with Shapiro.

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27 Ibid. vii-x.
28 Ibid., xi.
29 Ibid., ix.
The introduction to *A Little Boy in Search of God* in some ways serves as an authorial counterweight to the sense of ambiguity that the central narrative voice in *The Penitent* aroused in Singer’s readers—the “sermonic” voice cautioned against by his “literary counselors.” The point with which Singer concluded his introduction can also give us some insight into the essence of what interests him in Shapiro’s character: “God bestowed upon man the greatest gift in His treasury—free will,” writes Singer. “[Man] can oppose God or Satan and take upon himself the consequences of this resistance.”

The morality of any given kind of behavior is connected with the human potential for choice. And the process of choice is itself bound up for Singer with the dialogue between God and Satan, good and evil—a dialogue which leads to the choice of one kind of behavior or another. The “true” mystic which Singer seems to consider himself to be “must believe that there is a God and an anti-God . . . [and that] God had to create him for some purpose.”

And while this purpose may be larger than humanity can fathom, insofar as it pertains to human behavior, the existence of an “anti-God” makes possible a “certain autonomy” for humankind: in the form of good and evil inclinations which make choice and the exercise of free will possible.

This is the point that Singer repeatedly dramatizes in his literary works, and the point that he eventually makes in his “Author’s Note” to *The Penitent*. This note runs a total of four pages, considerably more than the one- or sometimes two-page notes Singer usually included as forewords to his fiction books. Singer opens this “note” in a way similar to others, remarking that the work was first serialized in the *Forward* in the early months of 1973 and that it was “published in book form in Israel by the Peretz Verlag a year or so later” (167). He then dives into a discourse which engages the novel’s themes from his own authorial position—creating the third node of the discursive triangle of the novel. This authorial Singer is the figure whose opinions and remarks were published under his own name, but he is still not identical to the historical Singer. Rather, he is a personification of a system of values combined with a representation of the historical author that Singer invokes for the sake of discursive counterpoint.

Singer begins this authorial discourse by invoking an ideal “devoted” reader “who follows everything [he has] published, even things said in interviews” (167). Singer then mentions a 1979 *New York Times* interview with Richard Burgin in which he claims to have “expressed ideas which may seem to be the opposite of what the protagonist of *The Penitent* is saying” (168). Singer’s use of Burgin here is neither random nor irrelevant. Burgin, who in 1985 published a book of conversations with Singer, had met him in 1976. “After our first meeting,” Burgin writes in his introduction to that volume, “I decided to read everything he’d published in English” (ix). In some senses, then, Burgin appears to be the reader about whom Singer “nurtures an illusion” (167). But no one can ever read everything, for the simple reason that not everything is available at all times to any single person, so that perhaps the only “reader who has read everything” Singer has ever written is Singer himself. In this way, then, Singer compensates for the gap between the ideal reader he describes and actual readers who may encounter his novel by providing the information that an ideal reader would know. At the same time, he also takes into account the possibility that real readers may identify an overlap between his

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30 Ibid., xi.
31 Ibid.
own voice and Shapiro’s, and the possibility that they may compare the two. Readers who recognize this structural complexity can appreciate it as an aesthetic criteria or at the very least experience this complexity on the discursive level by nature of the dialogue in which the historical Singer engages with his fictional character. The author’s note can thus be understood as a way of instigating a critical perspective on the part of his readers while also hedging against the concerns expressed by his literary consultants that his readers will not understand the distance between himself and Shapiro as well as the inappropriateness of the “sermonic” orthodox voice for a writer who came to stand as the symbol for old-world Jewish tales and fables. By adding the afterword he also implicitly admits that such confusion is built into the text.

Rather than merely remind his readers that the narrator and author are not the same, Singer goes on to describe specific differences between positions held by himself and by Shapiro: while Shapiro “berates men and women who have forsaken God,” Singer “voice[s] a severe protest against creation and the Creator” (ibid.). One difference, of course, is in the target of the protest. Shapiro makes mankind his target and believes that faithlessness is what leads to immorality and even evildoing. Singer makes his target “all possible variations of suffering” and “the calamity of existence” (169). Moreover, if we again consider the different targets of protest represented by the fictional Shapiro and authorial Singer persona, someone like Singer is implicitly not included in Shapiro’s attack because anyone who is protesting or against God has clearly not forsaken the divine but enters into a kind of ongoing dialogue with it. Singer assures his “imagined reader” that while Shapiro may have “made peace with the cruelty of life” the author himself has not. Singer’s protest against God extends into a protest against Shapiro’s “permanent rescue” (169). When taken together, however, the positions attributed to Singer and Shapiro make up a more complex moral position than either one taken separately: human beings can choose to take on the responsibility to act morally at the same time as they can be outraged by the suffering that is immanent “[a]s long as we dwell in the body” (ibid). The novel does not make this case explicitly. Rather, it keeps the two discourses separate—challenging readers to make this connection on their own.

Singer already said much on this topic in his introduction to A Little Boy in Search of God, specifically making a distinction between religious observance and mystical revelation. To be sure, Singer does not repeat himself on any of those points at the end of The Penitent. Rather, in his “Author’s Note,” he places himself altogether outside the mysticism-religion dialectic and, instead, focuses on another element of his relationship to God: rebellion and protest. Invoking his “unpublished essay, ‘Rebellion and Prayer, or The True Protestor’” (168), he re-articulates a position vis-à-vis God and religion. “To me,” he writes, “a belief in God and a protest against the laws of life are not contradictory. There is a great element of protest in all religion” (169). Singer’s basic belief, then, is radically different from Shapiro’s: making no mention of faith in Moses’s revelation, he directly asserts faith in God, and moreover presents his “protest”—which Alan Astro has argued is his artistic practice—as religious practice.32 Hence he claims “that there is no basic difference between rebellion and prayer” (169).

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32 See Astro, “Art and Religion in Der bal-tshuve (The Penitent).”
Singer calls Shapiro’s orthodoxy “a final escape from the human dilemma,” one he does not believe exists (ibid.). Singer further observes that “[t]hose who dedicate their lives to serving God have often dared to question His justice, and to rebel against His seeming neutrality in Man’s struggle between good and evil” (ibid.). The criticism of Shapiro, then, seems actually to be related less to his religious observance than to the way that religion has seemed to free Shapiro of his doubt, leading to “a total solution [that] would void the greatest gift that God has bestowed upon mankind—free choice” (ibid.). These words, finally, echo sentiments already present in the introduction to A Little Boy in Search of God, and again point us in the direction of one of Singer’s core concerns: less which choice is made than the very existence of choice itself. Thomas Sutcliffe, moreover, seemed to find in Shapiro’s final assertion of faith “the faintest echo of a doubt, a concession that more than one choice still exists,” something which, in Singer’s terms, might even imbue the religious man’s character with a spark of redemption.33

Unlike Shapiro’s polemic voice—through which he expresses his bigotry and anger at nearly everyone and everything except the unnamed Yiddish writer—Singer’s authorial tone is consistently universalist in the application of its philosophical ideas. And while Singer may set himself apart from Shapiro’s specific religious choice as a solution to the world’s ills, he makes it clear, through the rhetorical stumbling blocks that implicate the reader, that he identifies with the “agonies and disenchantments” that constitute “the nature of the sickness” (170). While Singer may not make the same choice as Shapiro, he too is moved to concern by what he sees around him.34 Singer told his son during their last conversation, when the latter presented his translation of The Penitent to his father, “I understand Joseph Shapiro’s heart, but his way isn’t mine.”35 The specific choice of religious orthodoxy is the concrete example through which Singer dramatizes the potential of choice itself—whatever it may be. As an author, it would seem, his way is ultimately to offer his own literary creation.

**From Rebellion to Creativity**

The discursive function of Singer’s “Author’s Note” in The Penitent escaped readers like Bloom, who seemed not to have considered the possibility that there was more to the note than met the eye. In his next two author’s notes, however, Singer expressed positions that went beyond protest as prayer. In The Image (1985), he made a direct link between faith in God and literary practice: “belief in God and His Providence,” he wrote, “is the very essence of literature.”36 He also bound together his faith in God with his concern for free will: “[Man] has free choice, but he is also being led by a mysterious

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33 Sutcliffe, “Making the Leap into Faith,” 311.
34 In an interview with Nathan Gardels, Czeslaw Milosz mentioned The Penitent in reference to his own “sensit[ity] to the negative sides of life in America or Europe, the so-called West” (1986). He made the further distinction, however, that those who, like Shapiro, search for absolute moral security may find themselves living in a totalitarian state.
hand.” And in Gifts (1985), in a very limited edition released by The Jewish Publication Society of America, he included a lengthy introduction which amounts to one of the most articulate treatments of his own intellectual development, one which complicates some of the positions raised in the “Author’s Note” of The Penitent while developing others.

This document is as compelling for its content as it is for its philological value: though it was published for the first time in English in 1985, the nearly identical text exists as the typescript of a public talk under the title “Why I Write as I Do” with the dates “4/10/62 (copied 2/21/67).” The essay purports to give Singer’s personal philosophy of art. In it, Singer outlines his own position between faith and faithlessness: “One could as easily question the validity of reason as the existence of God” (5), he writes, adding that suffering “did not arouse admiration in me for human or divine reason. . . . Neither human reason nor God’s mercy seem to be certain” (5). When he was young, he writes, he came upon the understanding that “[t]he problem was creation itself” (6). Yet he did not see philosophy as an alternative to religion: “the power of philosophy lay in its attack on reason, not in the building of systems” (7). He again expresses his determination to avoid anything, whether religion or philosophy, that claims to solve existential or metaphysical problems. Eventually, he claims to have developed “a new Weltanschauung . . . a sort of kasha of mysticism, deism, and skepticism” (10). This worldview consists precisely of the unresolved, the ever-forming, the latent, the conflicted:

Instead of a concrete universe of facts, I saw a developing universe of potentialities. The thing-in-itself is pure potential. In the beginning was potentiality. What seem to be facts are really potentialities. God is the sum of all possibility. Time is the mechanism through which potentiality achieves sequence. . . . [T]he universe is a series of countless potentialities and combinations. . . . [T]he basic substance of the world was potentiality seen as a whole. (10-11)

This personal worldview was applied mainly to literary practice: “I would say that it was more a philosophy of art than of being” (11). He began to understand that “God was creativity, and what He created was made of the same stuff as He and shared His desire: to create again” (ibid.). Whereas in the “Author’s Note” to The Penitent Singer still uses the authorial voice to protest against suffering, here he assigns to suffering a different purpose: “The evil host makes creation possible. God could not have His infinite works without the devil. Out of suffering creativity is born” (12). He continues: “Since the purpose of creation was creation, creativity was also the criterion of ethics and even of sociology. There was a place only for those social systems which could advance creativity. Freedom was nothing but the freedom to create” (13).

Singer’s thinking in this essay brings him to a complex position: if “out of suffering creativity is born” and “there was a place only for those social systems which

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37 Ibid.

38 Singer, “Why I Write As I Do” (1967 [1962]), Isaac Bashevis Singer Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. Facsimiles of this and all other unpublished text by Singer, all appearing as appendices, were ordered from the Isaac Bashevis Singer papers at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin.
could advance creativity” then the implication is that there is “only place” for those social systems which do not claim to eliminate suffering. Yet this kind of worldview in fact begins to accommodate those aspects of “the laws of life” which draw protest alongside those which may elicit praise. And insofar as potentiality is connected with the possibility of choice, it also marks an emergence in the authorial Singer’s discourse of the complex system which comprises both a protest against suffering and the ability to exercise free will. In some sense Singer arrives, finally, at a conclusion which, without making peace with suffering, dialectically combines protest with the sense of its higher purpose: to propagate creativity.

While the “Introduction” to Gifts exposed English readers to Singer’s personal views on philosophy and creation in 1985, the positions sketched out in the text had actually provided the foundation for Singer’s thought and writing for over two decades. The gap is important in thinking about the difference between Singer’s actual philosophical development and the way he made his personal convictions public. This suggests that every one of Singer’s published utterances has a specific purpose, sometimes associated with his previous history of publication and reception, and often chosen for a specific effect. If, in The Penitent, Singer did not present a more holistic authorial position on questions of God and suffering, it was not because he had not yet developed them. It was because he opted for discursive limitations in order to create a certain effect in the English edition, resulting in a dialectical or dialogical reading experience. This effect is not merely polyphonic: it is a call for readers to respond with a consolidated reply of their own. The arc of Singer’s philosophical and theological thought as it appears in the chronology of publication is not identical with the arc of his thought’s development. While he made use of his authorial voice to instigate dialogue and reflection, he also limited the dissemination of his most personal beliefs.

In Singer’s thought, then, God and His providence are reinstated in creativity without unquestionably requiring recourse to organized religion. This understanding is nevertheless reached through an engagement with religion, even if religion ultimately teaches those things which are beyond its own boundaries. This conclusion is developed, in ever more precise terms, in The Death of Methuselah (1988), which features Singer’s final author’s note. Here, the author who has rebelled and protested against nature and God through his literary works takes a more inclusive final position. “Art must not be all rebellion and spite,” Singer writes, “it can also have the potential of building and correction.” This “correction” had already been discussed in previous author’s notes, first in connection with mistakes in the Yiddish versions which Singer “corrected” during the translation processes in A Friend of Kafka, and then extended in The Image to the notion of tikun: “I always remember the saying of the Cabalists that man’s mission is the correction of the mistakes he made both in this world and in former reincarnations.” In his final stated position, Singer represents as a collective human

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41 Singer, The Image and Other Stories, viii.
goal the improvement of the world into which we are born: “[Art] can also in its own small way attempt to mend the mistakes of the eternal builder in whose image man was created.”42 Creativity and creation—which religion has the potential to facilitate—become for Singer the source, the consequence, and the treatment of human suffering.

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42 Singer, *The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories*, viii