

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 42

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Isaac Bashevis Singer lives with his second wife in a large, sunny five-room apartment in an Upper Broadway apartment house. In addition to hundreds of books and a large television set, it is furnished with the kind of pseudo-Victorian furniture typical of the comfortable homes of Brooklyn and the Bronx in the 1930s.

Singer works at a small, cluttered desk in the living room. He writes every day, but without special hours—in between interviews, visits, and phone calls. His name is still listed in the Manhattan telephone directory, and hardly a day goes by without his receiving several calls from strangers who have read something he has written and want to talk to him about it. Until recently, he would invite anyone who called for lunch, or at least coffee.

Singer writes his stories and novels in lined notebooks, in long-hand, in Yiddish. Most of what he writes still appears first in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, America's largest Yiddish-language daily, published in New York City. Getting translators to put his work into English has always been a major problem. He insists on working very closely with his translators, going over each word with them many times.

Singer always wears dark suits, white shirts, and dark ties. His voice is high but pleasant, and never raised. He is of medium height, thin, and has an unnaturally pale complexion. For many years he has followed a strict vegetarian diet.

The first impression Singer gives is that he is a fragile, weak man who would find it an effort to walk a block. Actually, he walks fifty to sixty blocks a day, a trip that invariably includes a stop to feed pigeons from a brown paper bag. He loves birds and has two pet parakeets who fly about his apartment uncaged.

—Harold Flender, 1968

INTERVIEWER

Many writers when they start out have other writers they use as models.

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

Well, my model was my brother, I.J. Singer, who wrote *The Brothers Ashkenazi*. I couldn't have had a better model than my brother. I saw him struggle with my parents and I saw how he began to write and how he slowly developed and began to publish. So naturally he was an influence. Not only this, but in the later years before I began to publish, my brother gave me a number of rules about writing which seem to me sacred. Not that these rules cannot be broken once in a while, but it's good to remember them. One of his rules was that while facts never become obsolete or stale, commentaries *always* do. When a writer tries to explain too much, to psychologize, he's already out of time when he begins. Imagine Homer explaining the deeds of his heroes according to the old Greek philosophy, or the psychology of his time. Why, nobody would read Homer! Fortunately, Homer just gave us the images and the facts, and because of this the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are fresh in our time. And I think this is true about all writing. Once a

writer tries to explain what the hero's motives are from a psychological point of view, he has already lost. This doesn't mean that I am against the psychological novel. There are some masters who have done it well. But I don't think it is a good thing for a writer, especially a young writer, to imitate them. Dostoyevsky, for example. If you can call him a writer of the psychological school; I'm not sure I do. He had his digressions and he tried to explain things in his own way, but even with him his basic power is in giving the facts.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think of psychoanalysis and writing? Many writers have been psychoanalyzed and feel this has helped them to understand not only themselves but the characters they write about.

SINGER

If the writer is psychoanalyzed in a doctor's office, that is his business. But if he tries to put the psychoanalysis into the writing, it's just terrible. The best example is the one who wrote *Point Counter Point*. What was his name?

INTERVIEWER

Aldous Huxley.

SINGER

Aldous Huxley. He tried to write a novel according to Freudian psychoanalysis. And I think he failed in a bad way. This particular novel is now so old and so stale that even in school it cannot be read anymore. So, I think that when a writer sits down and he psychoanalyzes, he's ruining his work.

INTERVIEWER

You once told me that the first piece of fiction you ever read was the *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*.

SINGER

Well, I read these things when I was a boy of ten or eleven, and to me they looked so sublime, so wonderful, that even today I don't dare to read Sherlock Holmes again because I am afraid that I may be disappointed.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think A. Conan Doyle influenced you in any way?

SINGER

Well, I don't think that the stories of Sherlock Holmes had any real influence on me. But I will say one thing—from my childhood I have always loved tension in a story. I liked that a story should be a story. That there should be a beginning and an end, and there should be some feeling of what will happen at the end. And to this rule I keep today. I think that storytelling has become in this age almost a forgotten art. But I try my best not to suffer from this kind of amnesia. To me a story is still a story where the reader listens and wants to know what happens. If the reader knows everything from the very beginning, even if the description is good, I think the story is not a story.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about the Nobel Prize for literature going to S. Y. Agnon and Nelly Sachs?

SINGER

About Nelly Sachs, I know nothing, but I know Agnon. Since I began to read. And I think he's a good writer. I wouldn't call him a genius, but where do you get so many geniuses nowadays? He's a solid writer of the old school, a school which loses a lot in translation. But as far as Hebrew is concerned, his style is just wonderful. Every work of his is associated with the Talmud and the Bible and the Midrash. Everything he writes has many levels, especially to those who know Hebrew. In translation, all of these

other levels disappear and there is only the pure writing, but then that is also good.

INTERVIEWER

The prize committee said that they were giving the Nobel Prize to two Jewish writers who reflected the voice of Israel. That leads me to wonder how you would define a Jewish writer as opposed to a writer who happens to be Jewish?

SINGER

To me there are only Yiddish writers, Hebrew writers, English writers, Spanish writers. The whole idea of a Jewish writer, or a Catholic writer, is kind of far-fetched to me. But if you forced me to admit that there is such a thing as a Jewish writer, I would say that he would have to be a man really immersed in Jewishness, who knows Hebrew, Yiddish, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Hasidic literature, the Cabbala, and so forth. And then if in addition he writes about Jews and Jewish life, perhaps then we can call him a Jewish writer, whatever language he writes in. Of course, we can also call him just a writer.

INTERVIEWER

You write in Yiddish, which is a language very few people can read today. Your books have been translated into fifty-eight different languages, but you have said you are bothered by the fact that most of your readers, the vast majority of your readers, have to read you in translation, whether it's English or French. That very few writers can read you in Yiddish. Do you feel that a lot is lost in translation?

SINGER

The fact that I don't have as many readers in Yiddish as I would have liked to have bothers me. It's not good that a language is going downhill instead of up. I would like Yiddish to bloom and flower just as the Yiddishists say it *does* bloom and flower. But as

far as translation is concerned, naturally every writer loses in translation, particularly poets and humorists. Also writers whose writing is tightly connected to folklore are heavy losers. In my own case, I think I am a heavy loser. But then lately I have assisted in the translating of my works, and knowing the problem, I take care that I don't lose too much. The problem is that it's very hard to find a perfect equivalent for an idiom in another language. But then it's also a fact that we all learned our literature through translation. Most people have studied the Bible only in translation, have read Homer in translation, and all the classics. Translation, although it does do damage to an author, it cannot kill him: if he's really good, he will come out even in translation. And I have seen it in my own case. Also, translation helps me in a way. Because I go through my writings again and again while I edit the translation and work with the translator, and while I am doing this I see all the defects of my writing. Translation has helped me avoid pitfalls which I might not have avoided if I had written the work in Yiddish and published it and not been forced because of the translation to read it again.

INTERVIEWER

Is it true that for five years you stopped writing entirely because you felt there was nobody to write for?

SINGER

It is true that when I came to this country I stopped writing for a number of years. I don't know exactly if it was because I thought there were no readers. There were many readers. Coming from one country to another, immigrating, is a kind of a crisis. I had a feeling that my language was so lost. My images were not anymore. Things—I saw thousands of objects for which I had no name in Yiddish in Poland. Take such a thing as the subway—we didn't have a subway in Poland. And we didn't have a name for it in Yiddish. Suddenly I had to do with a subway and with a shuttle train and a local, and my feeling was that I lost my language and

also my feeling about the things which surrounded me. Then, of course, there was the trouble of making a living and adjusting myself to the new surroundings . . . all of this worked so that for a number of years I couldn't write.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that Yiddish has any future at all, or do you think that very soon it will be a dead language completely?

SINGER

It won't be a dead language because Yiddish is connected with five or six hundred years of Jewish history . . . of important Jewish history. And whoever will want to study this history will have to study Yiddish. In a joke I say that I have a special comfort for Yiddish and this is that now we are having as a world population only about 3.5 billion people, but one hundred years from now we will have most probably 100 billion people, and every one of them will need a topic for a Ph.D. Imagine how useful Yiddish will be for all these students looking for a topic. They will bring out everything that was connected with Yiddish and analyze it and write things about it, articles and these things that you write for universities—theses. So, I don't think it will be forgotten. Take such a language as Aramaic. It's already two thousand years that the Jews didn't use Aramaic, and the language is still here. It has become now a part of Hebrew. Aramaic is used now in certificates and in divorce papers. Jews never forget really anything, especially a language which has created so much and has played such a part like Yiddish.

INTERVIEWER

When one thinks of contemporary writers writing in Yiddish, one thinks immediately of you. But then it is hard to come up with any other names. Are there any other writers writing in Yiddish whom you consider highly?

SINGER

There is one writer whom I consider highly. Really, he is a great writer. He's a poet. His name is Aaron Zeitlin. This man, he is my friend, but I don't praise him because he's my friend. He's really a great poet. I consider his writing of the same value as the poetry of Thomas Hardy, and I have a high opinion of Thomas Hardy. The others . . . there are a number of other Yiddish writers . . . some of them are well known, like Sholem Asch. There was David Bergelson. There was one very strong prose writer called A.M. Fuchs who is really a strong writer, but he wrote always on the same topic. He had only one story to tell with a million variations. But I would say that there is something about Yiddish writing which is very effective and yet very old-fashioned—because the modern Yiddish writer does not write about real Jewish things, though it happens he is the product of enlightenment. He was brought up with the idea that one should get out of Jewishness and become universal. And because he tried so hard to become universal, he became very provincial. This is the tragedy. Not with the whole of Yiddish writings but with a lot of it. And thank God when I began to write I avoided this misfortune. Even though I was discouraged all the time. They told me why do you write about devils and imps. Why don't you write about the situation of the Jews, about Zionism, about socialism, about the unions, and about how the tailors must get a raise, and so on and so on. But something in me refused to do this. They complained to me that I am obsolete. That I go back to the generations which have already vanished. That I'm almost a reactionary. But young writers are sometimes very stubborn. I refused to go their way and I was later glad that I had the character not to do what they wanted me to do. This type of writing has become so obsolete and so stale that it's not a question of getting translators in Yiddish, but really that we have very little to translate.

יקר משה
 קראתי את המכתב שלך והוא היה לי
 מרגש מאוד. אני מודה לך על
 המאמץ והעניין שהקדמת לי
 בפרוייקט הזה. אני מקווה
 שיהיה לך פירות רבים.
 אני מודה לך על המכתב
 והאמון שהקדמת לי. אני
 מקווה שיהיה לך פירות
 רבים. אני מודה לך על
 המאמץ והעניין שהקדמת
 לי בפרוייקט הזה. אני
 מקווה שיהיה לך פירות
 רבים. אני מודה לך על
 המכתב והאמון שהקדמת
 לי. אני מקווה שיהיה לך
 פירות רבים. אני מודה לך
 על המאמץ והעניין שהקדמת
 לי בפרוייקט הזה. אני מקווה
 שיהיה לך פירות רבים.

תודה רבה לפרופסור משה שרת
 על המכתב והאמון שהקדמת לי

A manuscript page from "The Professor's Wife."

INTERVIEWER

When you say “this type of writing,” you mean writing about unions and . . .

SINGER

About unions, about immigration, about progress, about anti-Semitism. This kind of journalistic writing in which one had the desire to create what they call a better world. To make the world better, to make the Jewish situation better. This kind of writing was very much in fashion in the twenties and I would say that the Yiddish writers never got out of it really.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you believe in a better world?

SINGER

I believe in a better world, but I don't think that a fiction writer who sits down to write a novel to make a better world can achieve anything. The better world will be done by many people, by the politicians, by the statesmen, by the sociologists. I don't know who is going to create it or if there will ever be a better world. One thing I am sure is that the novelists will not do it.

INTERVIEWER

The supernatural keeps cropping up in practically everything you write, particularly your short stories. Why this strong concern with the supernatural? Do you personally believe in the supernatural?

SINGER

Absolutely. The reason why it always comes up is because it is always on my mind. I don't know if I should call myself a mystic, but I feel always that we are surrounded by powers, by mysterious powers, which play a great part in everything we are doing. I would say that telepathy and clairvoyance play a part in every love story. Even in business. In everything human beings are doing.

For thousands of years people used to wear woolen clothes and when they took them off at night they saw sparks. I wonder what these people thought thousands of years ago of these sparks they saw when they took off their woolen clothes? I am sure that they ignored them and the children asked them, "Mother what are these sparks?" And I am sure the mother said, "You imagine them!" People must have been afraid to talk about the sparks so they would not be suspected of being sorcerers and witches. Anyhow, they were ignored, and we know now that they were not hallucinations, that they were real, and that what was behind these sparks was the same power which today drives our industry. And I say that we too in each generation see such sparks which we ignore just because they don't fit into our picture of science or knowledge. And I think that it is the writer's duty, and also pleasure and function, to bring out these sparks. To me, clairvoyance and telepathy and . . . and devils and imps . . . all of these things . . .

INTERVIEWER

Ghosts?

SINGER

Ghosts and all these things which people call today superstition are the very sparks which we are ignoring in our day.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think they will be able to be explained scientifically, just as sparks can be explained today as electricity?

SINGER

I think the notion of science—what is scientific and what is not—will change in time. There are many facts which cannot be worked out in a laboratory, and still they are facts. You cannot show in a laboratory that there has ever been a Napoleon, you can't prove it as clearly as you can an electric current, but we know there *was* a Napoleon. What we call today ghosts and spirits and

clairvoyance is also the sort of fact which you cannot just prepare and cannot make experiments with. But this doesn't mean that the fact is not true.

INTERVIEWER

How about the devil? In many of your writings the devil is the main character.

SINGER

Naturally, I use the devil and the imps as literary symbols. True, but the reason I use them as symbols is because I have a feeling for them. If I didn't have a feeling for these entities I would not use them. I still live with this idea that we are surrounded by all kinds of powers and I've been brought up with it and I still cling to it. Not that I try to, but they cling to me. If you extinguish the light at night and I am in a dark room, I am afraid. Just as I was when I was seven or eight years old. I have spoken to many rationalists who say how illogical that is, but when I ask them if they would consent to sleep a winter's night in a room with a corpse, they shiver. The fear of the supernatural is in everybody. And since we are all afraid of the supernatural, there is no reason why we shouldn't make use of it. Because if you are afraid of something, the very fact that you are afraid means that you have admitted that it exists. We aren't afraid of something which doesn't exist.

INTERVIEWER

You are the only Jewish writer who writes about the devil. Even Hebrew literature avoids the theme of the diabolical.

SINGER

It is true that Yiddish and Hebrew literature are both under the influence of the Enlightenment. They are both in a way modern kinds of literature. Writers were brought up with the idea that they had been sunk in the Middle Ages long enough, and that since modern literature should be rational and logical, they should deal

with the real world. To them, when I began to write, I seemed a most reactionary writer, a writer who went back to the dark ages. But, as I was saying, young writers are sometimes very stubborn. What is to you *dark* is to me *real*. They all condemned me for it. But today, since this kind of writing has had a certain degree of success, they began somehow to make peace with it. Because you know how it is in this world: if something works it works. In fact, I didn't expect that anybody would be interested in my kind of writing. I was interested, and this was for me enough.

INTERVIEWER

Being as interested as you are in ritual and superstition, do you have any about yourself—in particular connected with your work and work habits?

SINGER

It is true that I believe in miracles, or, rather, grace from heaven. But I believe in miracles in every area of life *except* writing. Experience has shown me that there are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work. It's impossible to write a good story by carrying a rabbit's foot in your pocket.

INTERVIEWER

How do you come to write a story? Do you observe all the time, like a reporter? Do you take notes?

SINGER

I never go out to look for a story. I take notes, but never like a reporter. My stories are all based upon things that have come to me in life without my going out to look for them. The only notes I take are notes on an idea for a story. But it must be a story with a climax. I am not a slice-of-life writer. When such an idea comes to me, I put it down in a little notebook I always carry around. Finally the story demands to be written, and then I write it.

INTERVIEWER

In addition to writing stories and novels, you spent many years of your life in journalism. You still work as a journalist for the *Forward*.

SINGER

Yes. I am a journalist. Every week I write two or three journalistic articles. Journalism in Yiddish is quite different from journalism in other languages, especially in English. In America, a journalist is a man who either deals completely with facts, or he is a commentator on the political situation. In a Yiddish newspaper, even if it's a daily, it's actually a daily *magazine*. I can write articles in the *Forward* about life making sense or not, or that you shouldn't commit suicide, or a treatise on imps or devils being in everything. Our readers are accustomed to get the news mostly from the radio and television or from the English newspaper which comes out in the evening. When he buys the newspaper in the morning, he is not after the news; he wants to read articles. So if I am a journalist, I am not exactly the same kind of journalist who works for let's say *The New York Times*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think working as a journalist for such a paper as the *Times* is a good background for somebody who wants to write novels and stories?

SINGER

I think that any information a human being gets, especially a writer, is good for him. I don't think that being a journalist can do any damage to a writer.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know any other writers?

SINGER

Very few, because here in America I find there is no place to meet them. When I lived in Poland, I used to hang out at the writers' club. I'd be there every day. But there is nothing quite like that in America. I know practically no other writers. Once in a while I meet some writers at a cocktail party, and I like them; they are very fine people. But somehow it never goes beyond a superficial meeting. I am sorry about this. I would like to be friendly with more writers.

INTERVIEWER

Many contemporary writers are affiliated with the universities. What do you think of teaching as a way of making a living while writing?

SINGER

I think that journalism is a healthier occupation for a writer than teaching, especially if he teaches literature. By teaching literature, the writer gets accustomed to analyzing literature all the time. One man, a critic, said to me, "I could never write anything because the moment I write the first line I am already writing an essay about it. I am already criticizing my own writing."

It's not good when the writer is both a critic and a writer. It doesn't matter if he writes a review once in a while or even an essay about criticism. But if this kind of analyzing goes on all the time and it becomes his daily bread, it may one day become a part of his writing: it is very bad when the writer is half writer and half critic. He writes essays about his heroes instead of telling a story.

INTERVIEWER

Could you tell me something about the way you work? Do you work every day, seven days a week?

SINGER

Well, when I get up in the morning, I always have the desire to sit down to write. And most of the days I *do* write something. But then I get telephone calls, and sometimes I have to write an article for the *Forward*. And once in a while I have to write a review, and I am interviewed, and I am all the time interrupted. Somehow I manage to keep on writing. I don't have to run away. Some writers say that they can only write if they go to a far island. They would go to the moon to write not to be disturbed. I think that being disturbed is a part of human life and sometimes it's useful to be disturbed because you interrupt your writing and while you rest, while you are busy with something else, your perspective changes or the horizon widens. All I can say about myself is that I have never really written in peace, as some writers say that they have. But whatever I had to say I kept on saying no matter what the disturbances were.

INTERVIEWER

What do you consider the most difficult aspect of writing?

SINGER

Story construction. This is the most difficult part for me. How to construct the story so that it will be interesting. Easiest for me is the actual writing. Once I have the construction set, the writing itself—the description and dialogue—simply flows along.

INTERVIEWER

The hero of most Western writing is the Superman, the Prometheus character. The hero of Yiddish fiction, Jewish writing, seems to be the little man. He's a poor but proud man always struggling. And your own classic example of the little man would be Gimpel the Fool. How do you account for the fact that in so much of Yiddish fiction the hero is the little man?

SINGER

Well, the Yiddish writer was really not brought up with the idea of heroes. I mean there were very few heroes in the Jewish ghettos—very few knights and counts and people who fought duels and so on. In my own case, I don't think I write in the tradition of the Yiddish writers' "little man," because their little man is actually a *victim*—a man who is a victim of anti-Semitism, the economic situation, and so on. My characters, though they are not big men in the sense that they play a big part in the world, still they are not little, because in their own fashion they are men of character, men of thinking, men of great suffering. It is true that Gimpel the Fool is a little man, but he's not the same kind of little man as Sholom Aleichem's Tevye. Tevye is a little man with little desires, and with little prejudice. All he needed was to make a living. If Tevye could have made a living, he wouldn't have been driven out of his village. If he could have married off his daughters, he would have been a happy man. In my case, most of my heroes could not be satisfied with just a few rubles or with the permission to live in Russia or somewhere else. Their tragedies are different. Gimpel was not a little man. He was a fool, but he wasn't little. The tradition of the little man is something which I avoid in my writing.

INTERVIEWER

If most of your writing deals with a people without power, without land, without statehood, political organization, or even a choice of occupation, and who yet have a great moral response and an intensity of faith, are you in effect suggesting that the Jews were better off when they were restricted and discriminated against?

SINGER

I think there is no question that power is a great temptation and those who have power will sooner or later stumble into injustice. It was the good fortune of the Jewish people that for two thousand

years they didn't have any power. The little bit of power that they did have they have certainly misused like anyone else who has power. But we were blessed for almost two thousand years with a complete lack of power, so because of this our sins were never as great as those who really had power over the life and death of other people. But I bring this up not to preach. I never really knew people who had a lot of power. Except when I describe Poles or when I describe once in a while a rich man whose power was in his money. But even so, these people were not really rich enough to wield much power.

INTERVIEWER

I can't help but get the feeling from your writing that you have grave doubts about the sufficiency of knowledge or even wisdom.

SINGER

Well, in a way it is true. Yiddish writing was all built on the ideas of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment, no matter how far it will go, will not bring the redemption. I have never believed that socialism or any other *ism* is going to redeem humanity and create what they call the "new man." I have had many discussions with writers about this. When I was young, when I began to write, people really believed that once the means of production belonged to the government, the "new man" would result. I was clever enough or maybe foolish enough and skeptical enough to know that was a lot of nonsense; no matter who owns the railroads or the factories, men will remain the same.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything that you think will save humanity?

SINGER

Nothing will save us. We will make a lot of progress, but we will keep on suffering, and there will never be an end to it. We will always invent new sources of pain. The idea that man is going to

be saved is a completely religious idea, and even the religious leaders never suggest that we will be saved on this earth. They believe that the soul is going to be saved in another world, that if we behave here well, there is a hope that our soul will go to paradise. The idea of creating a paradise here on this earth is not Jewish and certainly not Christian, but a completely Greek or pagan idea. As the Jews say, from a pig's tail you cannot make a silk purse. You cannot take life and suddenly turn it into one great delight, one ocean of pleasure. I never believed in it, and whenever people speak about a better world, while I admit that conditions can be made better and I hope that we can do away with wars, still there will be enough sickness and enough tragedy so that humanity will keep on suffering more or less in the same way as it always has. Being a pessimist to me means to be a realist.

I feel that in spite of all our sufferings, in spite of the fact that life will never bring the paradise we want it to bring, there is something to live for. The greatest gift which humanity has received is free choice. It is true that we are limited in our use of free choice. But the little free choice we have is such a great gift and is potentially worth so much that for this itself life is worthwhile living. While I am in one way a fatalist, I also know that what we have reached up until now is largely because of free will, not because conditions have changed, as the Marxists believe.

INTERVIEWER

Many readers look upon you as a master storyteller. Others feel that you have a far more significant purpose in your writing than merely to tell stories.

SINGER

Well, I think that to write a story *well* is the duty of a storyteller. To try with all his might that a story should come out right. What I call right is that the construction should be right, the description right, that there should be equilibrium between form and content, and so on. But this is not everything. In each story,

I try to say something, and what I try to say is more or less connected with my ideas that this world and this kind of life is not everything, that there is a soul and there is a God and there may be life after death. I always come back to these religious truths although I am not religious in the sense of dogma. I don't keep to all the rules of organized religion. But the basic truths of religion are near to me and I always contemplate them. I would consider myself more of a Jewish writer than most of the Yiddish writers because I am more a believer in the Jewish truths than they. Most of them believe in progress. Progress has become their idol. They believe that people will progress to such a degree that the Jews will be treated well, they will be able to assimilate, mix with the Gentiles, get good jobs, and perhaps be president one day. To me all these hopes are very little and very obsolete and very petty. I feel that our real great hope lies in the soul and not in the body. In this way I consider myself a religious writer.

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes reading you I think of certain Far Eastern philosophers, such as the Indian philosopher Krishnamurti. Were you at all influenced by Buddhist or Hindu writings?

SINGER

I read these writers too late to have been really influenced by them. But when I read them in my later years, a short time ago, I said to myself I have thought these same thoughts without having read them. When I read the Bhagavad Gita, it looked to me so very near, and I almost wondered if I had read this in a former life. This is true also about the sayings of Buddha and other Far Eastern writings. The so-called eternal truths are really eternal. They are in our blood and in our very essence.

INTERVIEWER

Some commentators on the current scene, notably Marshall McLuhan, feel that literature as we have known it for hundreds of

years is an anachronism, that it's on the way out. The reading of stories and novels, they feel, is soon to be a thing of the past, because of electronic entertainments, radio, television, film, stereophonic records, magnetic tapes, and other mechanical means of communication yet to be invented. Do you believe this to be true?

SINGER

It will be true if our writers will not be good writers. But if we have people with the power to tell a story, there will always be readers. I don't think that human nature is going to change to such a degree that people will stop being interested in a work of imagination. Certainly, the true facts, the real facts, are always interesting. Today nonfiction plays a very big part . . . to hear stories about what happened. If people get to the moon, journalists will tell us, or films will tell us, what happened there, and these will be more interesting stories than anything a fiction writer can produce. But still there will be a place for the good fiction writer. There is no machine and no kind of reporting and no kind of film that can do what a Tolstoy or a Dostoyevsky or Gogol did. It is true that poetry has suffered a great blow in our times. But not because of television or because of other things, but because poetry itself became bad. If we are going to have numbers of bad novels, and bad novelists imitate each other, what they write will neither be interesting nor understood. Naturally, this may kill the novel, at least for a time. But I don't think that literature, good literature, has anything to fear from technology. The very opposite. The more technology, the more people will be interested in what the human mind can produce *without* the help of electronics.

INTERVIEWER

So you would encourage young people today to think of serious writing as a way of life?

SINGER

When it comes to business, to the finances of writing, I really don't know. It may be that a time will come when the novelist will get such small royalties that he will not be able to make a living. I just cannot tell you about this. But if a young man would come to me and I can see that he has talent and he asks me if he should write, I would say go on and write and don't be afraid of any inventions and of any kind of progress. Progress can never kill literature, any more than it can kill religion.

INTERVIEWER

It's hard to keep from noticing that among the most widely read and respected authors in the United States today there is a large percentage of Jewish authors—yourself, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Henry Roth, Bernard Malamud. Even non-Jewish writers are writing on Jewish themes and producing best-sellers, as, for example, James Michener with his novel *The Source*. How do you account for the post-World War II popularity of Jewish writers and Jewish themes?

SINGER

I think that for many centuries the Jew was completely ignored in literature. They wrote about the Jew always in the way of a cliché. Either the Jew was a usurer, a bad man, a Shylock, or he was a poor man, a victim of anti-Semitism. In other words, they either scolded him or they pitied him. And because of this the Jew's way of life, his way of love, was a secret to humanity. It's only a short time ago that Jewish writers began to write about Jews the same way as Americans write about Americans and English writers about Englishmen. They tell everything about them, the good and the evil. They don't try to apologize for them. They don't try to scold them. And I would say that since there was a lot of curiosity about Jewish life, I am not astonished that Jewish literature is now in vogue. This doesn't mean that it is always going to be so. I believe that sooner or later things will even out. How many Jews

are good writers or bad writers I don't know. I don't think that we are producing as many good writers as people think. We have a lot of able, gifted writers, and able people, but I see as few great writers among us as there are few great writers among other people! There are a very few great writers anywhere.

§