**Psychomachy in** **Bashevis Singer’s *Yarmy and Keila1***

Bashevis Singer’s work takes place during the period in which the old world of Jewish values is crumbling. It is undergoing profound external and internal transformations that threaten both the physical existence of the Jews and also their old, innocent faith. As in the era of the Reformation, cracks in the foundation of a certain faith are revealed, and maskilic—or, loosely, secular—ideas penetrate deep into these cracks, upending the spiritual and family lives of many. By nature, the world of external transformation is also a world of internal transformation, and the tearing apart of the protagonists’ selves, their bewilderment, the entanglement of their spirits: all of this is also a reflection of external transformations.2 Articulating this historical drama as a mental drama, and the focus on psychomachy and its affinity to theomachy, is one of the ways to highlight Bashevis Singer’s contribution to the literature of the 20th century, and I intend to do so by discussing the novel *Yarmy and Keila*,3 in which this connection is particularly conspicuous.

**Bashevis’ Writing: Biography and Psychomachy**

As the reader encounters the protagonist’s torments of the soul in Bashevis’ work, she is made to aspire, like the protagonist, to find relief, to seek the truth, to find a solution, to decide, whatever that decision may be: to long for decisiveness of some sort. But these are all stubbornly and consistently withheld from the reader, in complete contrast to their faith in baroque drama, in which psychomachy pulses. Herein lies an important difference between Baroque and Neo-Baroque: Baroque doubt is temporary, while in modernity, doubt is fatal. Indecisiveness is the focus of Bashevis, rather than a means for building tension leading to a relief. On this subject, Bashevis wrote in *The Certificate*: “A new literature must arise… though literature has always studies character, it has almost always ignored modern man’s characterlessness” (222).

The divided self, confused and indecisive, about which it would not be an exaggeration to state that it is the protagonist of Bashevis Singer’s entire corpus, has biographical-psychological roots. They are well known from the childhood chapter of Bashevis’ autobiography. As a child, Bashevis would often contemplate about the members of his family, their personalities and worldviews, and the contrasts between them: A Hassidic father with a mystical bent, and a mother from an anti-mystical Lithuanian Jewish family, and principally, his older brother who left the Jewish cultural and social insularity, renounced God, was drawn by the values of Haskalah, and thus, in many ways, paved the path upon which his younger brother would walk (*Young Man*). From this chapter of his autobiography, a portrait of a sensitive, empathic child arises, a child with a soul that is torn between identification and solidarity with people whom he loved, but who were nemeses of one another, and whose personalities and worldviews were so different: “I did not know with whom to side—I really loved them both” (*Young Man* 26).

This combination of a sensitive, contemplative, empathic character with worldviews that were at odd with each other resulted in torment and suffering in Bashevis’ mind. Those conflicts were implanted and formed within him even before any form of sexual desire awoke. But from the moment in which such desire did awaken, his “split personality” took on also the form of polygamy, of a multiplicity of lovers which both created and reflected the multiplicity of loyalties tearing him apart from within. Polygamy characterizes both his life and his writing,4 and for this, Bashevis has been harshly attacked by Yiddish authors and feminist critics. But the criticism not only did not debar him from this lifestyle and from writing about it, but rather, as one with an “ethics of protest,” it nourished him and prompted him to continue to grapple with what he dared to label “human nature”: “Rather than literature denying men’s laws, the laws had seized in trap and kept it there” (*Young Man* 135). This ethics of protest and provocation seeks to offer a radical critique of ethical imperatives whose source is religious but which persists within the secular realm as well; it is an ethics which holds as its ultimate goal the liberation of people from those imperatives, pointing out the “nature” underlying norms and culture, and, at the same time, highlighting human suffering and cruelty as provocative interrogations concerning God’s existence in an evil and corrupt world: This is an important (though not the only) characteristic of Bashevis’ modernism, of which the discussed novel is a clear embodiment.

This aforementioned biographical aspect is therefore closely related to psychomachic elements found in many of Bashevis’ work, and which is so conspicuous, as we shall soon see, in *Yarmy and Keila*. The fissure is in the world: between Lithuanian (“Litvak”) Judaism and Hassidism, between traditional Judaism and Haskalah, between men and women, and between traditional gender roles and gender equality. This is Judaism in the age of transformation. The fissure is present in the tormented soul, which seeks oneness and fusion but finds itself, once and again, divided. This is manifest in the characters of the two protagonists, Keila and Bunem,5 and despite the fact that this is a realist novel, devoid of the ghosts and spirits and fantastical elements familiar from other of Bashevis’ works, the dramatic beat of fate pulses within these characters, and it often appears to the reader and to the protagonists themselves that they are passive figures in the struggle between God and Satan over their souls.

Yet polygamy is not the only expression of Bashevis’ “split personality,”6 of his competing loyalties, and of his efforts to mend an internal fissure while simultaneously maintaining love for his mother, father and brother. First and foremost, this fissure is expressed in the question of faith, of loyalty to Judaism, which is the loyalty to one rather than to many, and which categorically rejects a multiplicity of loyalties: such a multiplicity is, to traditional Judaism, nothing other than heresy. The deliberation is between belief and blasphemy, Jewish law (Halakha) and enlightenment (Haskalah). In the novel *Yarmy and Keila*, the question of polygamy is intertwined with the question of faith: Monogamy is associated with monotheism, polygamy with a multiplicity of loyalties.

The novel *Yarmy and Keila* is a dramatic realist epic at whose center stands psychomachic agon in its interplay with theomachic agon. The mental struggles of the two characters is examined through their multitude of affinities. Part of the uniqueness of this novel comes in the manner in which psychomachy is formulated, both in the questions of polygamy and in questions of faith. The novel deals with the relationship between Keila and Bunem, and with the external and internal disruptions they each undergo—and those they undergo together—in Warsaw and in New York. In the beginning, it seems that there is not much in common between the two protagonists. She is a prostitute seeking to reform her ways, though it appears that higher powers are preventing her from doing so and that she is trapped in her circumstances. He is a Rabbi’s son who revolted against his Jewish tradition and was pulled into the values of Haskala, wherein he found himself in trouble due to his connections to socialists and anarchists persecuted by the government. However, over the course of the novel’s plot, it becomes clear that there is an affinity between each of their struggles: Keila seeks to be saved from prostitution and to find “one man and one God,” while Bunem tries to turn his back on the principle of “one God and one woman,” and his struggle is epitomized by his desire to get out from under the yoke of Jewish tradition and faith, and by his inability to decide between his love for two different women.

I will focus on the spiritual mental struggle of these two protagonists, Keila and Bunem, and the poles between which their souls are pulled and will also demonstrate how, even if implicitly, a theomachic layer is shaped in the text; one that appears to apply to the characters, though without violating the conventions of realistic literature. This spiritual struggle has a bodily manifestation: the oscillation between loyalty and treachery is manifested also within the body. I will conclude with a discussion of Bashevis’ literary modernism.

**Keila: Sin and Impurity, Commitment and Promiscuity**

Keila’s struggle for her soul is the internal struggle of a person in the process of rehabilitation: in this case, a tortured prostitute trying to return to normative life. While there is a part of her that abhors the muck of prostitution, that genuinely wishes to be rehabilitated and to lead a life of dignity, there is also a part of her (of which alcohol is, as we will see, the emblem) that seeks to tumble back down to the bottom, to lust, to enslavement, to being controlled. The difficulty also concerns external circumstances: grappling with stigma, the loss of occupation, and deteriorating surroundings. But it appears that reality provides Keila with trials which she is forced to undergo, and summons unto her miracles, both in the form of seductive satanic characters, and in the form of redemptive angelic characters. All of this is structured in the novel in a delicate enough way so as not to cross the boundaries of realism. As we will see in the following section, the two characters—the “destroyer”: the pimp, “Gimpy Max,” and the “redeemer”: Bunem the Rabbi’s son, who lends a hand to help her—are structured in the constellation of the novel as satanic and angelic characters, respectively, and are conceptualized thus by Keila, as well. At the beginning of the novel, it seems that Keila is on the right path: she has been married for two and a half years to Yarmy, a former thief and pimp, and they seem to lead a life of true love, over the course of which he has succeeded in weaning her from drinking, “with rage and with goodness” (57).

Their love and Keila’s redemption from prostitution leave the couple in dire straits, and make them vulnerable (she lost her occupation, and he—out of responsibility to his wife’s fate—is afraid of continuing with his illegal activity. Things really start to deteriorate with the reappearance in their lives of Gimpy Max, who senses their vulnerability, and knows all too well how to exploit it to his advantage. Max is a tricky pimp, a local boy who left for America, where he made a fortune in women trafficking. Now he has come back to the homeland for a visit. The renewed entanglement with Gimpy Max takes place in a theatre, during an American play entitled “Uncle Sam.”

Max is characterized, both by his ways of acting, and by his manner of thinking, as a satanic character, as an evil demon. As such, he is first and foremost an unfettered cynical manipulator. He understands well the misery and hardship of Keila and Yarmy’s situation, and knows precisely how to exploit their woes to his benefit. Keila and Yarmy both know Max from the past. Yarmy and Max spent time together in jail, and Keila knows him well from her time as a prostitute. When he reappears in the couple’s life that night at the theatre, Keila recognizes the danger immediately, saying to Yarmy, “This Max will turn out to be our Angel of Death” (55).

In the beginning, Yarmy still has the ability to comprehend that Max is a threat: “Keila, you can’t go anywhere without being accosted. We’ll have to leave Warsaw once and for all” (26). Max speaks down to Yarmy, reminding him of the poverty and muck in which he lives, belittling him. He brings back from the Americas the scorn and dismissal that the Western Jews already settled in America felt toward the Eastern European Jews. Yiddish-speakers were the bottom of the bottom; they were not only marginalized by the regimes in Poland and Russia, but they were also mocked and scorned in the Jewish world.

In Bashevis’ fiction, as in Baroque allegorical dramas, the dominant satanic forces are full of personality.7 These personifications of evil, their ways of being in the world, and their relations to God are magnificently and skillfully developed.8 This is also done with respect to the satanic character of Max, to whose thoughts and dreams a lot of space is devoted. In the spirit of great folk and literary tradition, Satan’s son is a talented manipulator, a sophisticated champion of rhetoric, logical, smart, knowledgeable, and a passionate debater. He knows how to persuade, and—no less importantly—how to camouflage and tempt.9

Yarmy feels threatened by Max, the wealthy and multi-talented man who returned from America, and he feels immediately that Keila has a weakness for Max. Keila is, above all, afraid of herself, and indeed, the first disaster takes place only a few hours after this encounter at the theatre. Keila and Yarmy go, as though blinded and hypnotized, as though against their will, to drink and celebrate their reunion with Max. There, Keila’s mental pendulum swings to the other side, to the side of lust and the desire to tumble to the bottom, to the lowest possible place. There, as in many other stations along her way, when Keila drinks schnapps, she returns to being a promiscuous prostitutegladly, and there even awakens within her a joie-de-vivre, a vitality, a lightness, a sense of humor and self-confidence, all of which are absent from her character while she is “dry” and rational. Max drags her back into the muck, brings her down. He pushes her into behaviors that disgrace both her and Yarmy:

(Keila): “You keep me like an animal in a cage. You don’t even give me food… All I have is love, love, love! I’ll go with Max to Buenos Aires and start a new life. If you want to be a saint, find yourself a respectable girl. I was a whore and a whore I’ll already stay. Ain’t that so, Maxie?” (39-40)

Keila apologizes the next morning, however, and Yarmy forgives her. But her fate has been inscribed, and that evening which began in the theatre and continued into the tavern is just a sign of what is to come. Max has plans for both of them. He wants to bring them into his women trafficking business. The entrance of Max into their lives dramatically changes the balance in the relationship between Keila and Yarmy, as well as their faith in their selves and in their path. Max tries to seduce Keila by seducing her husband, which becomes a sort of agent of Satan: “America is a new World. Slobs left Poland and became millionaires in America” (44-45). Yarmy is weaker than Keila, who finally rebels: “No, no, a hundred times no! She, Keila, no longer wanted others. She wanted only one God and one Yarmy” (44).

The devil’s camouflaged ploys and his temptations do not work on Keila, but they do on Yarmy: “Keileshe, Max isn’t the Angel of Death as you say, but Elijah the prophet. He’ll bring us luck. We’ll take trips with him. He’ll take us abroad. […] He’s got a rare gift, everything he touches turns to gold. He is educated too. A real lawyer” (100).

What motivates Max is not only a mundane desire, a desire to sate his lust, or a longing to amass money and power: his pleasure is the pleasure of a blasphemer, and his desire for power is a challenge to God himself: “The marriage to Yarmy had been the greatest thrill of her life, but Gimpy Max had spoiled everything. He wasn’t content to merely indulge his illicit urges, but somehow strove to spite God” (105). These efforts are embodied by the rape of Keila on Yom Kippur, an unparalleled defiling of holiness, precisely satanically timed. Max wants to defile Keila’s soul, and he knows that this timing will drag her deep into the bowels of impurity, will destroy her and enable him to make her into a tool once more. (“Keila” in Yiddish sounds like the Hebrew word for tool, “kli.”) Keila prepares the house for the holy day, abstaining from sex with her husband and fasting, but Yarmy leaves the house in order to clear the way for Max. Keile says: “Where’s Yarmy, what do you want?”

“A little holiday sin,” Max says to her, before raping her (90).10

[…]

No. This wasn’t only his strength but her weakness too, the urge to sink so low that she could never again try to lift herself out of it. “You are doomed anyway,” a voice within her said. She lay still and let him have his way, ready to die for the sin or accept whatever punishment was visited upon her (…) She closed her lids and as if surrendered herself to the darkness and the detachment as if she were already dead and lying not in a bed but in a grave. (…) ‘If you want to live and enjoy, you’ll do what we tell you. Bitch! Slut! Tramp! Whore!’ And he spat on her hot saliva that burned her cheek.” (91-92)

Max does not forget to blurt out, “Happy Holyday! We’ll see each other tomorrow” (92).11 This is the most crass provocation the devil can fling upon God. In his conversation with the madam Bertha Bastard the next morning, Max says: “‘I am always awake, like God who never sleeps or dozes and watches over his people Ishmael’ (…) ‘How was your Yom Kippur?’ ‘The Polish ham is delicious. I visited Red Keila.’ ‘May you have earned a good year anyhow’” (94).

If Max is the devil, a satanic demon, evil manifested, who appears in Keila’s life as though in order to forcibly drag her into the muck or to compel her to undergo trials, then Bunem, the son of the teacher, appears as a good angel, reaching out a hand to help her: “You and your father are angels, not people,” Keila will say to Bunem (129). When his father helps her mend her ways in order to be redeemed, he sends her to do the good deed (“mitzvah”) of visiting the sick, to tend to Shmerl the Tailor, who is stricken with typhus. On her way there, she meets Bunem again, who greets her, answers her questions, and speaks “so confidently” (121) with her as though he is speaking with a person, and not with a prostitute, “Within a few minutes he had told her things she had never heard of before” (121). Afterwards, Bunem is witness to how Shmerl, convalescing in his bed, is filled with renewed might when he realizes that Keila is a prostitute, and roughly sends her away from his home.

It is precisely then—upon meeting Bunem, a sort of “angel” who reaches out a hand to help her, offering her solace following Shmerl’s harshness, and a place to sleep in the atelier he tends to visit—that Keila begins to drink schnapps. She drinks when she is insecure and her self-worth nearing zero. Upon drinking, her self-worth returns to her, her sexuality awakens, and her sense of worth—which derives from her sexuality—is renewed. While the rape heightens within her the feeling of impurity and guilt and thus moves her toward a place of reform, the moment that the “angel” reaches his hand out to help her, the exaggerated gratitude that she feels causes her to fall in love with him, to commit herself completely to this person who acted humanely toward her, but also to corrupt and impurify him. She moves once again toward promiscuity and sin. Thus, sexuality is also the source of her deep trouble; it is the sin that leads her toward disaster, toward abjection. From the abyss, she seeks to be lifted out, but no one reaches out a hand to help her, and when, eventually, someone does reach out a hand, she cheerfully drags him into the depths too. Bunem is the son of a Rabbi, he is young and sexually inexperienced. She pounces upon him, consumes him, and he, who has renounced his faith, completes his process of renouncement, and is consumed with great enthusiasm.

“‘Well I am already lost anyhow!’ He mused. An urge to laugh came over him. ‘If father were to find out! And mother! And Cirele! And Solcha! I am already like [Jeroboam son of Navat], like Elisha son of [Abuya]’…The watch that he had been given, for remembering the fifty pages of Gemara had fallen and stopped. Bunem picked it up and heard himself say: ‘You came to father to perform a good deed.’ Keila’s eyes sparkled with drunken malice. ‘This for me is the greatest good deed.’” (137-38)

Bunem recognizes Keila’s oscillating: “Now she babbled about her late parents, her fear of sickness, about God’s punishment, about demons, evil spirits and hobgoblins, and soon afterwards she spewed obscenities that would have made a Cossack blush” (139).

Bunem himself is torn. He is in love with Solcha, but Keila sparks his lust and casts a spell on him. He leaves Keila, who continues to struggle alone in her efforts to be rehabilitated, and finds work as a servant, but they meet again, as though by accident—“God himself ordered you to come down” (205)—and they are together again.

Keila says to him: “‘I would want it to be always tonight and that you should already remain with me. I would become a decent Jewish daughter and forget everything that happened before.’ ‘You can’t forget.’ ‘You can. I had already begun to forget, but Gimpy Max came along and turned everything topsy-turvy. Where do they drag themselves to in such weather? Max has maybe a dozen women here in the sticks. He has children too. He has drawn Yarmy into such deep slime. Six oxen wouldn’t pull him out of it. The moment I clapped eyes on him I said: Yarmy, he is our angel of Death. When I saw you sitting in the kitchen glancing into the book, and earlier when you came in to pick up the inkwell, I thought to myself: this is an angel from heaven.’ ‘Keila, I am not an angel’” (208-9).

Bunem is indeed no angel, but she does manage to flee Warsaw with him. Bunem’s relationship with Solcha complicates matters, and when he understands that the law is after him, he leaves quickly, with only one thing in his mind's eye: America. He takes Keila with him.

They leave for America, and live there as pitiful immigrants, barely able to put up with their struggles to earn a living, with their hunger. They undergo these trials together, and it seems that they are on their way toward adapting to their new life. But precisely when Keila appears to have been saved from the inferno, once again, the pendulum swings back. This happens with the appearance of Max—the devil, champion of rhetoric, champion of manipulation—in New York. He waits for Keila outside her house, and forces her to come with him to a saloon.

There, he reminds her that she is still married to Yarmy. This is a weighty consideration, for it relies on legality and morality which, though Max himself rejects, Keila accepts. He mocks her: “What are you now, a Rebbetzin?” (281-82). He reminds her that there is no future for her and Bunem, and that everyone will immediately know who she is and where she came from. He casts doubt on Bunem’s integrity: “If he is a rabbi’s son and a teacher, why did he run away with a slut who is married besides?” (282). He likewise casts doubt on Keila’s return to the light, and reminds her that she is a prostitute: “… across the way is a Bordello. (…) you doing a little work on the side, eh?” (283). He plays with her conscience: “You left and made a fool out of Yarmy. And of me too. Yarmy became a drunk on your account. He went into such a funk, he wanted to take his life” (283). He belittles Bunem: “Why did you get involved with a Rabbi’s son and such a mollycoddle?” (283). He threatens her in order to compel her to join him at the saloon for conversation: “Come with me this minute or you’ll soon see some red sauce!” (284). And he reminds her of who she is and where she’s come from: “Blind Itche sends his regards” (285).

He takes her to the “saloon” in which everyone is a prostitute; everyone there recognizes her as a prostitute and interacts with her accordingly. Things reach the height of their absurdity when the lawless, immoral Max presents himself as a learned scholar, there to point out her immorality and her violation of the laws of religion and state by reminding her that she is married and that, according to the Talmud, her husband has the right to do with her as he wishes: “It says in the holy books that a husband can do the same with his wife as with a meat he buys at the butcher’s” (90).12 He doesn’t merely remind her that she is violating God’s law, but also summons state law to bolster his case: “For living with a man in sin, you can easily get thrown in the can” (287). Keila is unable to summon counterarguments from the Talmud, from national law, or from philosophy the way Max does, but she feels nauseated, and remains firm in her refusal to eat or drink alcohol or to submit to his suggestions. Max, as expected from a devilish figure fond of dressing up as an angel, does not forget to paint himself as a good man, there to defend her: “He [Yarmy] wanted to come with me and give you what you deserved, but I stopped him” (287). Finally, he makes the point explicit: “Keila, if you won’t go peacefully, you’ll go by force” (287). He tries a strategy of temptation: “You have the chance to be happy, to travel, to be dressed like a princess” (289). He plays up what she will obtain if she does as he asks, and plays down what she already has: “What is he, that Bunem of yours? Such an expert in bed?” (289). And when she answers him, “He is a Person” (289), Max replies, “When you catch a bullet in the skull, you stop being a person” (289).

This is a dramatic struggle between Keila and the “Angel of Death,” and despite the fact that Keila does not possess strong counterarguments, she listens to some internal voice, to her conscience, that allows her to resist. With that, she also understands that there is a grain of truth in Max’s words. That same night, she stands firm in her refusal, and steadfast in her conviction to continue to live with Bunem and turns her back on what she hopes to be able to see as her past: On Max, and Yarmy, to whom she is still married. But doubt has already wended its way into her heart, and her fate has, in fact, been written. Max and Yarmy are now in New York, and she understands that the clock is ticking, and it’s only a matter of time before she succumbs to her fate, as though she was being controlled by external forces stronger than herself. Back at home, she begins to drink again and, “all of a sudden, the savage was roused within her” (296-97). She acquires a hammer and knife that she intends to use if Max or Yarmy come.. Bunem’s terror is so great, that he, who has renounced God, recites a prayer, “… he prayed silently to the Lord of the Universe that he, Bunem, should survive the night without a scandal and that God might keep Keila from committing a violent act” (297).

Keila continues to oscillate, bouncing here and there, with satanic Max at one pole, and angelic Bunem at the other. The plot is structured as a great battle between good and evil, waged over the souls of the characters, who appear as passive figures placed in the midst of this storm, and who are forced to undergo trials. The two poles between which Keila’s soul is pulled are monogamy and the Jewish belief in the oneness of God, and polygamy and promiscuousness: prostitution. Keila very much wants to make amends, to change her ways, to live with one man and to be faithful to him. But there is, inside her, a part that desires prostitution (an unbridled lust for enslavement and inferiority). This part of her awakens when she drinks. The difficulty here is that both desires has a common ground: commitment stands at the base of her wishes; the oscillation is between devotion to one and devotion to many, devotion that manifests in both soul and body.

**Bunem: Monogamy and Monotheism, Polygamy as Secularization**

Bunem, of course, is no angel, and he knows it well. When his character appears in the novel, he has already left his father’s fold, and for him, God exists but is silent, uncommanding, and indifferent to humanity’s suffering, or perhaps even responsible for it. Bunem’s position on this matter does not change much over the course of the novel. In truth, he turns his back precisely on the world for which Keila longs, such that their characters are in opposition. He is not pulled between good and evil, between promiscuity and decency, but rather between women—between Solcha, his educated, liberal, anarchist girlfriend, and Keila, and in this sense, his character preempts the character of Herman in “Enemies, a Love Story.”13 He does not know what is true, he is skeptical and critical, and as such, he genuinely does not know how to act. He is passive, empathetic and compassionate, and for that reason finds himself torn between loyalties, rejecting loyalty to one—either to God or to one woman—and choosing not to choose.

Polygamy is the expression of secularization in Bunem’s soul. But it is not the case that secular assuredness has replaced religious assuredness, but rather that the latter has been replaced by a lack of sureness, grim skepticism, and anguish and torment of the soul of one who is unable to decide, for he eternally sees the validity of all sides of things. As such, Bunem feels closeness to Keila, not only lust. He recognizes in her the pendulum and the poles of impurity and purity, which work their magic on him, and with which he identifies. He says to her: “You have a pure soul” (222), and wonders “How could she have gone through all this and remained pure?” (224).

Keila seeks to be rehabilitated from a life of multiple commitments and liaisons with many men and masters, and to move herself into the realm of commitment to one master only. The novel has her encounter Bunem, of all people, who, in his rebellion against and critique of the old world of values has chosen to reject monogamy. His arguments with his friends at the atelier, and particularly with Solcha, his girlfriend, serve to emphasize this stance. It is revolutionary Solcha who advocates for a conservative approach to the subject, at least in Bunem’s opinion. True, Solcha rejects the formal institution of marriage, and “says in every opportunity that the institution of marriage is stale, old-fashioned, false, hypocritical” (153). But what is the value of Solcha’s anarchism if she is unwilling to reject monogamy—“the biggest lie of all” (158), thinks Bunem. Solcha has sound logical, moral, well-formulated views against polygamy, despite her liberalism: she is unwilling to commit to a man who will not take responsibility for a child who might be born as a result of these relations. “One side should bear the whole burden, and the other should only have the pleasure?” (154). Free love—yes, but cheap promiscuity—no. In the atelier, “The conversation now went over (…) to the subject of polygamy and monogamy and Bunem argued with Solcha: ‘Since you constantly speak of abolishing all sentences, what about the worst sentence and the biggest lie of all – monogamy? The whole notion that a man can love only one woman was thrust upon mankind by the Christians. How is it neither Bakunin nor Kropotkin had the guts to come out against this falsehood?’” (158).

The rejection of monogamy is connected to the rejection of both loyalty and commitment to one God and the secular versions of religion, ideology, and other “isms” that Bunem rejects and criticizes with the same fervor with which he criticizes Judaism, arguing that “not everything that’s written there in true” (127), and “The fact that a lie lives long is no proof that it’s true” (153).

**Psycho-sexual allegories of Judaism in times of changes**

In comparison to Keila, Bunem is a privileged person who searches for truth and liberty, while she only wishes to “get out of the muck.” Keila knows that work as a servant in the morning and as a bagel peddler in the evening is the highest she might climb. For her, there are two poles: prostitution and respectability, impurity and holiness, and on the psychological level these poles are related to subjugation and enslavement: to the commitment to one or to many. Keila’s spectrum does not fluctuate between enslavement and freedom, but rather between one sort of enslavement and another. The novel dwells on unravelling the family dynamics in Bunem’s parents’ home, and particularly the mother’s discrimination against her daughter, highlighting the role of the family in gender education: its role as a major social agent in implanting in the girl’s soul disdain, rejection, subjugation, neglect and even exploitation. This is the basis of the frustration and psychosis of the character of Rokhl’e in *Satan in Goray* (Singer, *Satan in Goray*).14 There, her character was constructed as an extreme example of the frustration and psychosis caused by emotional degradation and exploitation, and there, too, as we will soon see, the character of the young girl is also an allegorical expression of the character and essence of Judaism itself (108-9). The focus on gender education, and on the gender differences in the family and community which emphasize a girl’s role as being that of a servant, is woven decisively into the description of Bunem’s relationships with his family, and into the description of the life of the community, for example in the unique depiction of the holiday of Sukkot through a gender lens:

“As meagerly as they lived here all the year, so lavishly did the people prepare for the holiday in order to impress the neighbors with the portions carried out to the man, with a clean tablecloth, with the best china and cutlery. The women deplored the fact that Succoth was a time of deprivation for females – all the good things accrued to the men. Well, but when the women came out at night to bless the candles in the Succah, they dressed in all their finery and wore whatever jewelry hadn’t yet been pawned or sold.” (104-5)

It is not surprising that Khela, “the house prostitute” of the café belonging to the *Literarn Farayan*, the Yiddishist authors organization of Warsaw in which Bashevis was a member, expressed her worldview, which would be formulated a few decades later in Simone de Beauvoir’s work, that the married woman is the slave of one man, and the prostitute is the slave of many. Khela was a phenomenon whose unusual attributes affected life at the Writers’ Club. Khela was beautiful and independent—she scorned the idea of a pimp and worked only in the afteroons—(…) and she was outspoken, claiming that all women were in fact prostitutes for their husbands; she could quote extensively from the Bible to bolster her argument that men were historically adept at exploitation and betrayal” (Hadda 69).

The education of girls to be servants paves the way, in large part, for the appropriate functioning of good and righteous Jewish women and mothers, as well as for the “appropriate” functioning of prostitutes. This issue was hinted that at more than once in Bertha Pappenheim’s controversial speeches (Pappenheim 112). Through this gendered perspective, which the novel emphasizes again and again, the good Jewish woman and the prostitute are two sides of the same coin. It is one path that leads to both destinations, as Khela the mythological prostitute of the Writers’ Club well understood, and as the modern Simone de Beauvoir well understood as well.

Keila’s pendulum is thus between two forms of enslavement, devotion and subjugation, as expressed both on the spiritual level and on the erotic level. She explains, again and again, in her simple language, her rehabilitation from prostitution and her returning to society’s good graces as a transition from many commitments to one. She recognizes this return as a return to both monogamy and monotheism. She says to Bunem:

“Bunem, I’ve made one solemn oath – never again to become what I’ve been. From now on, there is just one God and one man for me and that man is you. You can have your wife, but I can no longer have any other man but you. If I break this vow may an unnatural death befall me and may I enjoy no peace in my grave. God, heaven and you are my witness.” (222)

In this context it must be recalled, of course, that the Jewish man, the Jewish person, like the entire pious Jewish public, conceived of himself as a slave. He is also commanded to be subjugated. Israel was ordered to obey God’s commandments, to do as God pleased, without dissenting, protesting or rebelling. The Nation of Israel must serve and obey God, and the ideal of the man who is a true believer is that of “God’s slave.” First and foremost, Israel was commanded to be committed and loyal. Disobeying the commandment “You shall have no other God before me,” i.e., a betrayal of God by following other Gods, angers God again and again, and the words of the prophets are filled with metaphorical analogies between the Nation who follows other Gods and an unfaithful woman, a prostitute (Hosea being the most blatant example of this). Simultaneously, the relationship between God and the People of Israel is presented as one of lovers. This is particularly conspicuous in the Song of Songs, but the Bible is filled with descriptions of the relationship between God and Israel as a relationship between man and woman, as a relationship of love, marriage and even eroticism. In other words, Israel is a woman and God is a man, and the expected relationship of Israel to God is one of loyalty, obedience and servitude.15 A daughter educated in this community, is, in this sense, the slave of a slave. Or, as Evelyn Torton Beck framed it: “Men are also burdened with role expectation, but the formula seems to read: women serve men; men serve God” (Beck 112-13).

The application of the relationship of loyalty and subjugation (the relationship of a slave to his God) to the relationship between a woman and her husband (or between an unfaithful prostitute to her master) and to relationships between people in general, is in and of itself a transgression of the commandment not to worship other Gods – it is a kind of idol worship. As such, when Keila falls in gratitude at the feet of Bunem’s father, a Rabbi, in appreciation of the fact that he “permits” her to make amends and return to the religious fold, he recoils:

“‘Holy Rabbi, I want to kiss your feet!’ Keila threw herself on the floor. She seized Reb Menahem Mendel’s foot with unusual haste and began kissing his slippers. Reb Menahem Mendel trembled. He tore away from her hands, gazed at the door as if about to flee, and exclaimed: ‘What are you doing? This isn’t Jewish! We Jews are the slaves of the Almighty, not slaves of slaves…. Stand up! Stand up!’

‘Holy Saint, step on me! Spit on me!’

‘No, no, no! That’s not the way! Stand up this very minute!’ Reb Menachem Mendel ordered.” (115-16)

As noted, the application of such a relationship of enslavement, subjugation, and even self-debasement, humiliation and masochism to other human beings is blasphemy to Judaism, for such relations are reserved for God alone (and this is the essence of the Rabbi’s response). With that, on the psychological level, in a patriarchal system (such as the traditional Jewish system) this application is carried out by women almost inevitably, for they are commanded and explicitly ordered to be loyal and obedient not only to God, but also to their husbands, and to be a servant to his hand (“Ezer KeNegdo”). The explicit commandment for a woman in this patriarchal system is to serve her husband. The primary and essential relation to God as to a man (who must be served and obeyed) easily transforms into the relation to man as a God; God is soldered unto the human man and projected onto the psycho-sexual plane. It is the prostitute who embodies utter enslavement, lowliness and masochism in the most profound sense. This is the central provocative, critical element of this novel, in which Bashevis went further than in any other of his novels, both in its forceful metaphorical portrayal of traditional Judaism itself as a prostitute, and also in its presentation of traditional Judaism as a powerful patriarchal agent.16

It is thus not surprising that this relationship of indebted gratitude, of a slave and master in a system of vassalage, of masochism, of the desire to be humiliated and debased, which Keila expresses toward the Rabbi, appears once again in its erotic form on the same night in Kliatchko’s atelier, with the Rabbi’s son, Bunem:

“He had already had her, but he still wasn’t sated. A strength was aroused within him, such as he had never imagined himself capable of. Keila clasped her arms around his neck and clung to him: ‘Don’t leave me! My brute! My emperor! I love you, love you, love you! Spit on me! Kill me! Choke me! Tear me to pieces!’” (137)

This same expression of desire for defilement, desire to be dominated, masochistic desire, appears at first on the spiritual level with Bunem’s father, when what is in the balance is Keila’s return to faith, and then later on the erotic level, when she submerges herself with unfettered relish. In both instances, it is an expression of exaggeratedly indebted gratitude toward one who only gave her little more than a bit of basic human decency, to which she was unaccustomed.

This is a strong expression of masochism: neither of the two of them, the father and his son, spit on her, but rather treat her with dignity and compassion, and the only one who truly spits on her in the novel is Gimpy Max, the satanic pimp, who rapes her and tries to drag her back into prostitution, and from whose claws she tries to free herself.

Keila’s sexuality is connected to subjugation, to defilement, and has an element of masochism to it: she wants to be debased, humiliated, controlled:

“‘My dearest, my God, my lord and master, spit on me… When I croak in America, throw me to the dogs.’ ‘What kind of talk is this?’ Bunem asked. ‘You’re holy and pure, and I’m a hunk of slime. It’s revolting for me to eat a bite of bread.’” (219)

Bashevis spoke about Judaism in this way more than once: “I remember calling those who flatter God and kiss the rod with which he smites them ‘religious masochists’” (Singer, *Young Man*, 132). And he sees a relationship of sado-masochism in the erotic aspects in which the relationship between God and humanity is described in the Kabbalah:

“One receives great love from the Shekhina, God’s feminine side, Seraphim, the cherubim, the Arelim, the holy sheels and holy beasts, from the countless worlds and souls, but this wasn’t enough for him and He also demanded love from insignificant man, the weakest link in the divine chain whom he exhorted: ‘And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thine might.’” (Singer, *Young Man*, 135)

It is clear that Keila is the strongest metaphor that Bashevis ever employed in order to describe the masochistic aspects of pious, faithful Judaism, with the non-mutual connection between humankind and God that this version of Judaism maintains. But Keila is also a manifestation of God’s love in its maximalist form, and of the way in which this maximalist love is emulated on the inter-human level. Thus God also cursed Eve, when he fated her to love the one who controlled her. And it is Judaism’s fate to be this woman. Bunem’s apostasy is precisely against this: He refuses to be a masochist, he refuses to love one who is cruel to him: “Yes, there was a providence, Bunem told himself, but it wasn’t merciful. It didn’t even take pity on innocent children. All the wars, famines, and plagues wouldn’t have erupted without the will of this providence” (213).

Bunem seeks for himself liberty, rather than blind obedience: “He [God] exists, but I won’t pray to Him. If he wants to destroy me, let Him. I’ll live in a shame and degradation and beg no favors of Him!” (214). Thus the deep connection between the characters is clarified: Great battles are being waged inside both characters, but their willpower is weak. They are both frail characters, Bunem is a sovereign subject who decides not to decide, and Keila, seemingly against her will, is forever dependent and subservient, either to one or to many. It is thus, in an absurd manner, with all of the differences between them, that the souls of Bunem and Keila align. In order to understand this, one must understand their spiritual struggle as the pendulum of will that swings between loyalty and treachery, between commitment and rebellion, between choice and indecision, while this struggle is made up of both the spiritual and the erotic, deeply entangled within one another. As Bashevis wrote, he “discovered then that sexual urge is intrinsically connected to spiritual force, and not necessarily to the body. Love and sex are functions of the soul” (Singer, *Young Man*, 63).

**The neo-baroque Perspective: Psychomachy and Indecisiveness**

The novel concludes with a moment of confusion between Staten Island and Coney Island. Bunem asks how to get to Coney Island. In Staten Island, Bunem can carry out his plan to commit suicide, and in Coney Island he can begin a new life with Keila, but it is not clear where is he going, and the novel ends with indecision. Bunem’s separation from Solcha too represents the transition from the era of ideologies to the era of human emptiness. Solcha still believes that it is possible to change the world, and she is determined to do so. Bunem is entirely passive, he wanders and wonders: how could he repair the world if he cannot find repair and rest for himself; if his self is nothing but conflicting personalities.

Secular certainty does not replace religious certainty, but rather it is the lack of certainty that replaces certainty. Doubt is not a method on the way to finding truth, as with Descartes, or a manner with which to reach a decision, but rather is the unbearable constant state of affairs. Bashevis Singer endorsed a religious conviction that there is freedom of choice, but there is nothing to do with this freedom of choice, since knowledge is impossible. Humanity, according to Bashevis Singer, unlike for Sophocles, is destined not to arrive at knowledge; humanity’s doubt and unknowingness are not temporary, but rather people are destined to die in such a state, and that is humanity’s great tragedy.

Bashevis Singer, as he often said about himself, is a man of the Middle Ages: conversation with God, the emphasis on free will, the schism of humanity and God between good and evil. But he implanted the Middle Ages inside the modern world, just as traditional Judaism did, and in the eyes of many continues to do. He did not render the vertical axis a horizontal axis; he did not trade the upward-facing gaze for focus on the human world and the historical world; he did not exchange, as many others did, the Bible for socio-political ideologies like socialism, communism and Zionism. Unlike his brother, Joshua, these ideologies never drew him in, and he criticized them as ideologies that fail to lessen human suffering: his interest remained in the mystical and ahistorical. The main question for Bashevis Singer was not what truth is, but rather what the meaning and purpose of suffering in the world is. His modernism is embodied in the lack of resolution, the same indecisivness that another Jewish mystic of the 20th century, Martin Buber, identified as the essence of evil. This indecisiveness characterizes his protagonists and their drama when it is structured in an ambivalent manner, psychomachic and theomachic, such that it is not clear and not possible to determine whether the historical and individual drama is a psychological one or a divine one: psychomachic or theomachic. The transformation of angels and demons, Satan and evil spirits, to internal, mental, psychological phenomena would make Bashevis Singer into a standard modernist. But Bashevis Singer had one foot in the Middle Ages, in which Satan and angel struggle over the individual soul,

and one foot in the skepticism of the Early Modern Age, the radical 20th century version of which figures prominently in his writing.

Bashevis Singer is, of course, not a modernist in many important senses. He believed that a novel should be, first and foremost, a story, and that this story must be told properly; he did not believe at all in the death of plot as did Joyce, Proust, Musil and Woolf. From this perspective, he was a “moderate” modernist, or even a conservative modernist, and his realism was deeply rooted in the literary tradition of the 19th century. But in his construction of the modern subject, empty and confused, with an endlessly confused soul, a “lack of character,” Bashevis Singer articulated anew—even if unknowingly—a dramatic literary element from the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era. With this, the differences between Baroque and “Neo-Baroque” stand out in Bashevis’ work: While the torn Baroque soul succeeds in the end, after undergoing trials and torments, after falling into the trap of lies and undergoing countless masquerades and plots and scams, in determining what is true, in distinguishing between truth and lies, between good and evil, and in choosing the righteous path—and thus the Baroque inheres the middle age’s substantialism—the modern, Neo-Baroque soul remains, at the end of the drama, indecisive and passive. The Baroque drama was historically conditioned by the contra-reform, when the religious theatre sought to fortify faith in the hearts of believers and to overcome doubt by means of incorporating it and employing it rhetorically (Benjamin 168-82). It is not surprising that agonal dramatic structures appear in Yiddish literature written in an era in which innocent faith was challenged by persecution, which raised once again the question of theodicy, an era which saw the crumbling of the world of values of traditional Judaism, an era of doubts that seeped deeply into the mental life of individuals, and created a Baroque polarization: secularism and radicalization, passion and purity, devils and angels. In this novel Bashevis Singer went farther than in any other of his novels in terms of a Baroque aesthetic, bordering on kitsch, that portrayed both a mental struggle and a struggle between good and evil in the world as it is connected to gender and sexuality.

Notes

1. [acknowledgments]

2. Such reflection of historical reality in the mental realm should be understood in the a Foucauldian sense as well: History and culture are inscribed upon the mind so deeply that, over the course of many centuries, and through the frameworks of various ideologies, they could be understood as “nature.”

3. The novel was published in installments in the Yiddish newspaper, *Forverts*, between 1976 and October 7, 1977, under the title *Yarme un Keyle*. In the published journal version, the author changed the title to *Red Keila*. This article will use the title *Yarmy and Keila*. The novel was translated into Hebrew (*Yarma VeKeyle*, Tel Aviv, Yediot Achronot, 2011), into German (*Jarmy und Keila*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2019), into French (*Keila la Rouge*Paris: Stock 2018), and into Italian (*Keyla la Rossa*, Milano: Adelphi 2017). The second chapter was translated into English by Josef Sherman, and was published as part of a series of articles edited by Seth L. Wolitz. On the circumstances of the novel’s not being published in English, see Sherman, “A Background Note.”

4. See for example, the trigamist hero of the autobiographical chapters of *A Young Man in Search of Love*, and of *Lost in America*, *The Certificate*, *Enemies, a Love Story*, and *Shadows on the Hudson*, and the bigamist hero of *The Slave*, *Shosha*, and *The Magician of Lublin*.

5. The two central characters in this novel are Keila and Bunem. While the novel, in installments, was called *Yarmy and Keila*, in the final compiled version, the Singer changed the title to *Red Keila*, and it is likely that he did so after ascertaining, by the end of the novel, that the focus of the novel is Keila herself, and not her relationship with Yarmy, and the editors of the French and Italian versions were right to remain loyal to this change, and thus also to the essence of the novel itself.

6. “In some book or magazine, I had stumbled upon a phrase: ‘Split personality’ and I applied this diagnosis to myself. This was precisely what I was—cloven, torn, perhaps a single body with many souls each pulling in a different direction” (Singer, *Young Man*, 34).

7. See, especially, Spilka; see also Mishkin; Wolkenfeld.

8. Fernández. On satanic characters in Baroque drama, see Cilveti.

9. On the character of Satan in Jewish folklore see, Bar-Itzhak and Patai.

10. In the original: “Yom Kippur sin.”

11. In the original: “Happy Yom Kippur”

12. Here, the learned Max is paraphrasing the Talmudic tractate of Nedarim in which it is written that, “Anything a man wishes to do with his wife, he should do. As an allegory, there is meat from the butcher shop. If a man wants to eat it salted, he may do so. If a man wanted to eat it roasted, he may do so. If he wants to eat it cooked, he may do so.” More on this from Singer’s translator, Dr. Bilha Rubenstein.

13. Here, the learned Max is paraphrasing the Talmudic tractate of Nedarim in which it is written that, “Anything a man wishes to do with his wife, he should do. As an allegory, there is meat from the butcher shop. If a man wants to eat it salted, he may do so. If a man wanted to eat it roasted, he may do so. If he wants to eat it cooked, he may do so.” More on this from Singer’s translator, Dr. Bilha Rubenstein.

14. See also Cohen 76-86.

15. Evelyn Torton Beck has examined the stereotypes of femininity in Singer’s writing and pointed out that one of the central aspects of women characters in his work is unfaithfulness. Here, too, despite Keila’s declarations about her return to faithfulness, she oscillates between Yarmy and Bunem, and the declaration is made in similar words to each of them. However, it seems that this novel indeed examines the cultural context through a critical gender prism, and this is something which many of Bashevis Singer’s feminist critics fail to see: the narrator is empathetic toward Keila’s character, and she is presented in relation to Bunem, who also oscillates in his loyalties. The two mirror one another. Unfaithfulness characterizes Singer’s unrepentant male bigamist and trigamist protagonists, as well.

16. To a large extent, Singer, in criticizing Judaism through an investigation of the connect between the erotic plane and the religious plane, dared to do with Judaism what the Marquis de Sade did some centuries earlier, in the 17th century, with Christianity.

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