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FREEDOM AND LITERATURE

by

ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

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Parameters' readers are accustomed to seeing freedom considered mainly in relation to the arms which secure it. Here, in a departure from its usual fare, Parameters presents Isaac Singer's reflections on freedom in a different context--its expression through the work of our unfettered creative writers.

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We are living in a time when artists are experiencing deep disappointment in themselves and in their muse. Science and technology are progressing in a fantastic way. Every day brings new triumphs. Flying to the moon was an unbelievable feat. How poor and retarded art appears in comparison with those achievements! The poetry of our time cannot measure up to the poetry of Homer, who lived some three thousand years ago. The works of Cervantes and Rabelais perhaps were better than anything that is being produced in modern prose. Since progress is the highest ideal of modern man—actually his God—the contemporary artist feels himself being cut off from God. He has no choice; he is compelled to repeat emotions and images which were already described thousands of years ago. A number of despairing artists tried to find an outlet in pornography. But even here there is nothing new to be said. Pornography is almost as old as the human species.

Many writers feel guilty and humiliated

by this state of things. True, there is an explanation: The human character, the human personality, remain more or less the same. If an evolution takes place, it is a very slow one. But explanations don't make anyone happier.

Many experiments have been made to avoid this dead end. Some tried to connect literature with exact science. One of the results is science fiction. In our time, Lord Snow in England attempted to make a blend of these two elements. Other writers cling to Freud and his theories. For sixty years now the Russians have tried to link art to sociology. But in all these cases the results are almost nil.

Two kinds of knowledge exist in man and in many living creatures. The first is the knowledge that comes from learning, studying, experimenting. Man is not born with a language. He has to learn it. Often he pays a high price for this education. To know that certain mushrooms are poisonous, men had to eat them and die. Intellectual knowledge is an idol demanding many efforts and countless sacrifices.

But there is a kind of "knowledge" that does not demand any learning. The stomach does not need to study chemistry. Our eyes make good use of optic science. The semen-cell of the male and the egg of the female do not need to study biology or embryology to form a new being. Spinoza expressed the idea that matter thinks. Von Hartmann believed

that the unconscious is never mistaken. Many philosophers and thinkers maintained that behind the little ideas of the human brain there is an ocean of cosmic thought, of cosmic consciousness. The bird that flies thousands of miles from the north to the south and in the jungle finds the nest which it abandoned the year before is not in need of geography, photography, or a compass. This kind of knowledge has been called instinct, but no one knows what instinct is—just as we don't know how the genes carry the countless items of heredity. In comparison with cosmic knowledge our human knowledge is like a drop in the sea. However, this drop seems to grow, to become two drops, ten drops, one hundred drops, while the ocean of instinct appears to be static, always the same. It takes a long time to realize that the oceans are not as unchanging as we imagine. They change continents. All the rushing little streams spill into them and are swallowed up.

Art emerges directly from those oceans. Kittens and puppies are able to stand on their feet almost at birth. So art from the very beginning showed instinctive rightness. It touched on truths which psychologists and sociologists may discover centuries from now.

Modern science seems to have refuted, once and for all, the beliefs of the supernatural, of folklore. It is rare that someone today believes in demons, hobgoblins, imps, and other such spirits. But literature, even modern literature, still cannot rid itself of these entities. They pop up again and again. Emile Zola's attempt to create a rationalistic and scientific novel never succeeded. Literature still teems with the old beliefs, the ancient symbols, and the dreams of the mystics. The Soviet critics failed completely to make literature out of Marxism and Leninism. There is resistance in Russia and a longing to return to folklore and to mysticism.

When I began to write, my colleagues and critics scolded me for dealing with topics which were both obsolete and refuted. My editor, Abraham Cahan, said to me, "Who, nowadays, cares about devils and dybbuks of two hundred years ago?" The so-called

progressive reviewers contended that what I wrote was opium to put the masses to sleep so that they would forget their struggles for a better system. A number of Zionist-minded critics complained: "Wouldn't it be better if you would describe the struggles of our pioneers in Palestine? A Jewish homeland is being built before your eyes and you are caught up in spider webs."

I myself thought that from a logical point of view they were right. But a power stronger than logic attached me to what they called spider webs. I knew that the very fact that the Jewish homeland was coming to be after two thousand years of exile had much to do with folklore, fantasy, and instinct.

Science itself is becoming more and more mystical. The atom, which used to be the cornerstone of materialism, became a phantom in our time. Gravity today is as much a riddle as it was in the time of Newton. The electromagnetic waves are even greater mysteries today than they were in the time of Faraday and Maxwell. The universe, which goes on expanding and exploding like a cosmic bomb, can no more be understood through the theories of Kant and LaPlace. A part of the old magic became science, and science itself becomes more and more magical. How ridiculous it is to read that the rocks that are brought back from the moon will, once and for all, make clear how the universe has arisen! Besides, just as the honey produced by a bee is as much a part of nature as the bee itself, so are all human achieve-

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ments just as much a part of nature as the people themselves. We are all bubbles of the cosmic sea and the cosmic thought as well. Even rationalism, human pride, and boasting are mysterious powers.

It is the misfortune of modern literature—with few exceptions—that it has forsaken the sea of instinct and has begun to draw from the rivulets and ponds of intellect. Many factors contributed to this situation. The liquidation of illiteracy and the spread of education have produced multitudes of writers. Many of those writers are people with little talent, which is the same as saying that they cannot draw from the wells of instinct. They can only use a secondary source. Literature has become a huge industry. The printing presses are waiting. New hordes of readers emerge daily, and there is neither time nor patience to wait for the emergence of real talent. Most of these writers are semi-intellectuals, and they sincerely believe that literature is a profession and can be taught in courses and that there exists a ready-made formula.

Another factor contributing to modern literature's infatuation with intellect is the envy of science and scientists. The progress of technology has confused many potential writers and made them decide that literature must follow the methods of technology. If social conditions change, literature must be the horse that pulls the social wagon or at least pushes it. Both the communists and the fascists demanded that literature should become their slave. If literature is an energy, it should be harnessed and used.

The truth is that it is much easier to enslave people than art. Men surrender their freedom, at least for a time, when they have no choice. But art stops being what it is the moment one tries to direct it and rule it for some financial or political purpose. We all know that those writers who sit down to write with just the aim that the book be a best-seller have never managed to produce anything of high artistic value, no matter how much they tried to combine the vulgar with the sublime. The imps of vulgarity and greed peek out from behind the lines. For many

years the Soviet critics have been demanding and hoping for the great socialistic novel. So did a number of Soviet writers. To them, there seemed to be no reason why the muse of some writers should be anti-socialistic. In the times of the Czar, Maxim Gorky had written some adequate novels and stories with a clear anti-capitalistic leaning. But the moment communism acquired the power to command to the writer, to point the way with a gun, the capricious muse of the writer began to sabotage either itself or those who tried to lead it. The same Maxim Gorky failed bitterly in his novel *Klim Samgin*, which he wrote in the time of the Stalin terror. Art is a force, but without a vector. It stirs the mind but it cannot direct it. Terrible as these words may sound to some, the fiction writer must be an entertainer in the highest sense of the word. He can only touch those truths which evoke interest, amusement, tension. He cannot, like the historian or the sociologist, proceed directly and with a single goal. What he discovers must be not only true, it has to possess beauty and often a sense of humor. In its very essence art is free, personal, nonpartisan. It is basically moral but never moralistic and didactic. If art tries to guide, to analyze social events without regard to proportion and harmony, it is lost. More than any other human institution, art opposes any kind of routine and established thinking. It is playful even when it is mourning. It originates its own logic where cause and purpose become identical. The artist cannot be totally serious, because the whims of the events and the fancy of the spirit are his subject matter. He thrives on the vagaries and fantasies of love where freedom is the law and exception the rule.

In epochs of tyranny, literature somehow has managed to ridicule kings and dictators. Like life itself, art is a risk and a hazard in its very nature. It tries to sneak by the mighty powers of causality, to muddle through and smuggle itself over the frontiers of all possibilities. It is always fragmentary, never complete. No literature can tell the whole story. Its validity is the venture and the mood of the moment. All theories of art falter sooner or later. All efforts to give to art

the stature of science fail. The arts, like the emotions, are unpredictable and therefore not scientific. Where talent reaches high, it surprises the master himself with its deviations and daring.

The worst mistake a writer can make is to assume that the days of aesthetic enjoyment are past and that an artist can permit himself to bore his audience in the name of a higher purpose. There is no Paradise to compensate bored readers. In art, as in love, the act and the enjoyment go together. If there is redemption in literature, it must be immediate. In contrast to politics, art does not thrive on promises. If it does not impress you now, it never will.

Human individuality is not discovered by tricks of speech. The real writer restricts the volume of the words while broadening their meaning. He may start out with general statements, but he proceeds from there to a description of the hero and his or her specific situation. As he proceeds, the writer must remember that his work has to evoke a sense of enjoyment in the reader, to lift up his spirit, and to give him the means of escape which every form of true art affords, be it comedy or tragedy. The literary artist cannot probe into the human condition without certain limits. He cannot solve social problems, try to reform society. He is building the future by telling tales of the past and by keeping the past alive. Even the great works of poetry were narrative until not long ago.

It certainly is not my intention here to preach realism, mysticism, or any other literary ism. I do believe in literary experimentation. I am sure that new media and new methods will develop in writing. Every creative writer brings to his work his own variation on style and method. But I do not believe that the maximum can be attained by discarding the minimum—by broadening the definition of literature to such an extent that it becomes propaganda or by confusing it to the degree that it becomes a puzzle.

The most important manifestation of talent is an innate and relentless urge to ponder the eternal questions, a refusal to accept human and animal suffering. Freedom

is the very air the talented person breathes. Whatever he wants to create must be unique and his own. He may be loved by many, but he is not a leader of the masses. No matter how deeply he is rooted in his environment, he will never be truly a part of it. He belongs and does not belong to the society in which he lives. True talent wrestles not so much with social orders as with God. The talented person is often a pessimist or even a fatalist; but he cannot be an atheist for the reason that by his very nature he must wrangle with the higher powers. In a moment of rage the artist may revile God, but he cannot deny Him.

Behind rhyme and rhythm, fable and folklore, the writer was Malthusian before Malthus, Freudian before Freud. While he laughed and clowned he told of calamities and desires which the people of his time refused to admit even to themselves. He has mocked illusions which were considered sacred. He stealthily entered the darkest nooks of our existence and cried out against evils for which no remedy could ever be found. He pointed out the turmoil of being young and the fear of being old. He described the state of mind of the hunter and the hunted, of the betrayer and the betrayed. The poet admires God's wonders, but he often protests and rebels against God's divine neutrality. Love of life is the very essence of the artist's soul. It was always the artist's will to preserve the lifestyle of nations, to prevent culture from sinking into oblivion. In our time when tools of war and terror reach the most frightening proportions, the artist feels the peril of human existence more than ever. He realizes that man must try the impossible—to eradicate his instinct for destruction, not by surrendering to aggression and crime, but through strength and preparedness. The passion of the artist must become the passion of all human beings. To paraphrase a saying in the Talmud, Mount Sinai is hovering over our heads with a warning: "Accept my commandments or I will bury all of you."

Within the past century philosophy has become so analytical, so critical and self-conscious, that it almost committed suicide. I do not think that art will meet with the same fate. Philosophy has closed its gates to the

outside world, has become esoteric and solipsistic. The artist on the other hand is becoming the symbol and the definition of human freedom—the freedom which according to the sages was the very design of Creation. According to the Talmud and the Cabalists, God asked advice from the angels before he created the world. He told them that he was going to risk and bestow free will upon man. The angels warned God against this divine plan. They contended that man, being the weakest link in the chain of emanation, might fail and thus spoil the evolution of the spheres. However, God did not listen to the angels and He created man,

delegated freedom to him to use as he pleases, as he chooses. The truth is that while inspired man creates he keeps on searching for truth in his own fashion. He tries to penetrate the secret of being, to solve the riddle of our contradictory emotions, to reveal love in the very abyss of cruelty. The creative person has never made peace with death. He knows that we are a part of eternity. Our hopes are closely connected with all the stars, with all the galaxies of the universe. If the universe is a blind and senseless accident, so are we. If the universe is alive and growing, so are we. This is the message both of true religion and of true art.

