GIMPEL'S WILL TO BELIEVE: FRIEDRICH SCHILLER'S AESTHETIC IN ISAAC SINGER'S "GIMPEL THE FOOL".

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Isaac Bashhevis Singer's short story "Gimpel the Fool" remains his most examined and celebrated work. Critics have found historical origins for the story's ideas on belief, foolishness, and truth in Yiddish tradition, St. Paul, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Melville, and Dostoevsky while noting Singer's own mixture of faith and skepticism in the tale.[1] Using the gothic litany of shock, horror, disjunction, and psychic violence, critics have also compared Singer's tale to more recent works by O'Connor, McCuller, Faulkner, and Tennessee Williams.[2] An unexamined comparison however, is the story's important similarity to the metaphysics of play and truth as outlined in the later stages of Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic. A brief examination of Schiller's theories of how play and truth perception are combined should help us to explore more fully the meaning of Gimpel's willful persistence in choosing to believe his version of the occurrences in Frampol.

Friedrich Schiller, the 18th century German poet, playwright, and philosopher was never a systematic thinker and ultimately turned from his philosophical speculations to resume writing poetry and drama. Nonetheless, in his critique of Kant he abandoned his early attempt to construct an architecture of rationalistic, objective aesthetics and formulated instead a defense of radical epistemological and aesthetic subjectivity.

In his famous essay "On the Sublime" written in 1795, Schiller asks us to accept the incomprehensibility of nature as the starting point of our appreciation of life. Specifically, the world is strictly unknowable because "natural necessity" does not exist in this unpredictable world. Our hypotheses, which attempt to define and frame reality, are mere inventions, fictions, and heuristic devices used to generate answers needed for daily living. The validity of these hypotheses will always depend, however, upon human criteria of logic and accuracy and not upon their agreement with extrinsic nature. Thus the external world is known only as man constructs an image of it.

In addition, man's most essential quality — his freedom -is an imposed quality that itself is not chosen. The most important epistemological result of this is that we are free, within the basic limitations of what is given, to invent whatever schemes are compatible with those limitations. Moreover, men are, by reason of possessing a strong play or aesthetic impulse, able to mediate between the gross material givens of external reality and the "formal" impulse to organize data meaningfully. Our freedom is most vitally manifested in this play impulse as the impulse avoids explaining the

world exclusively in terms of sense or reason. Rather, it operates by taking as its object a "semblance" of reality which we freely construct ourselves.

Furthermore, Schiller tells us, the philosopher is far inferior to the poet, who is the real human being; the philosopher seeks merely to systematize, re-organize, and justify what he already feels that he knows, while the poet is not bound by his original temperament or the details of his environment. Encompassing world views change, and they are changed by people able to liberate themselves from the slavery of societal attitudes. It is exactly because world views are constructed, not given, that the creators, the poets, and all men, when they choose this function, are free. At least where evaluation, interpretation, or explanation are involved, we are free, through the exercise of our play impulse, to build a life-world significantly free of external determinations. In his related concepts of aesthetics, (the result of mediation into an integral unity the impulses of raw perception and formal organization), play, and "semblance" Schiller hoped to locate the essence of freely creating man.

The themes of existential freedom and arbitrariness of knowing are both explored in "Gimpel the Fool." Gimpel, the town baker and recognized fool, believes everything he is told by the mocking and jibing villagers. He believes everything because anything is possible. Further, to accuse others of lying is to lessen their dignity. Hence, when all Frampol plots to marry him to Elka, the course village slut, he agrees. He further chooses to believe that his wife's child, born after seventeen weeks of marriage, is his own. Later he finds another man in his wife's bed and chooses to view the sight as mere hallucination. Although his peers laugh at his incredible gullibility, he stands firm in his chosen perceptions and avoids bitterness. When his wife dies, Gimpel joins the parade of Wandering Jews whose very lives testify to the fact that man's encounter is between self-discipline and his complex inner needs.[3] In his encounter, the story would seem to indicate, Gimpel has emerged triumphant.

The compelling impulse behind the long-suffering Gimpel is his instinctive sense that belief is not a matter of evidence about a determing objective, external order but rather of human will.[4] We can believe what we choose and in doing so we give witness to our spiritual freedom. Unlike other schlemiels of classical Yiddish literature, Gimpel chooses to believe the unbelievable and to forsake the "dignity" that would come in adopting the common perceptions of his shtetl. Like Singer himself, he realizes consciously that life is not a given that we must conform to but rather is at least in part produced by our free, "artistic" formulations. In a *Commentary* interview in 1962, Singer outlined his debt to Hans Vaihinger who himself owed a debt to Schiller:

> There was a famous philosopher, Vaihinger, who wrote a book called *The Philosophy of 'As If,'* in which he showed that we all behave 'as if.'

> The 'as if' is so much a part of our life that it really isn't artificial; after all, what could be more artificial than marriage? When a man marries a woman he assumes that she is going to be devoted to him and he acts as if his wife will treat him in this fashion.
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> And so on and so on . . . Every man assumes that he will go on living. He behaves as if he will never die.
>
> So I wouldn't call my attitude artificial. It's very natural and healthy. We have to go on living and writing.

In the same interview Singer further expounds upon his choice of consciously held illusions and finds that choice to be vital to the existential stance of his art and his living.

> I have no faith in dogmas of any kind; they are only the work of men. Man is born to free choice to believe, to doubt, or to deny. I chose to believe.[5]

In the story, Gimpel can believe in any proposition because his basic premise is that "everything is possible, as it is written in the wisdom of the Fathers." When he was told that the Messiah had come and that his parents had been resurrected, he knew that "nothing of the sort had occurred," but nevertheless he went out. "Maybe something had happened. What did I stand to lose by looking?"[6] His choice to believe in the Czar's imminent arrival in isolated Frampol, the rabbi's wife's pregnancy, and the fall of the moon in Turbeen are all justified by the argument that since all perceptions are equally partial and, in light of the "fallenness" of the world, arbitrary, one's "faith in faith" is legitimate. With Schiller, Gimpel views the world as a construct of subjective "playful" sensibilities where virtually anything is possible:

> I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods but the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies, whatever doesn't really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn't happen to another tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year. What difference can it make? Often I heard tales of which I said 'Now this is a thing that cannot happen.' But before a year had elapsed I heard that it actually had come to pass somewhere.[7]

From Schiller and Gimpel, awareness of the contingency of worldviews and the role of playfulness in securing their creation frees the artist-poet from ordinary thralldom to external "facticity." Gimpel, elevated to the status of

peripatetic foolbard-prophet at the end of his life, is finally even free to exercise his playful creativity without shame of censure.

> Going from place to place, eating at strange tables, if often happens that I spin yarns- improbable things that could never have happened- about devils, magicians, windmills, and the like.
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> The children run after me, calling "Grandfather tell us a story." Sometimes they ask for particular stories, and I try to please them. A fat young boy once said to me 'Grandfather, it's the same story you told us before.' The little rogue, he was right.[8]

The central foolishness of Gimpel's life, of course, is the willingness with which he allows himself to be "duped" into marrying Elka, the town whore. Her continuing infidelities over twenty years of uneasy marriage challenged Gimpel's love and faith. Yet significantly his belief in belief itself is strong enough to deny all negative evidence. Indeed, "all kinds of things happened but I neither saw nor heard. I believed and that is all. The Rabbi recently said to me, 'Belief in itself is beneficial. It is written that a good man lives by his faith.' "[9] As in the late aesthetics of Schiller, then, man's "playful," creative impulse must operate by taking as its object a "semblance" of reality which itself is freely constructed. In this sense Gimpel is a Schillerian "poet" rather than a philosopher. More specifically, he is a "sentimental" rather than "naive" poet because he consciously seeks to freely will the "semblance" of nature to which he will respond rather than merely recording the appearance of a problematic objective nature.

What are the possible benefits to the individual who retains a sense of life's contingency and the important role of playful creation in perception, interpretation, and explanation? Whereas Schiller found the advantages of this aesthetic to be primarily in explaining the creative process and in demonstrating the almost spiritual transcendent role of freedom in human life ("Beauty is freedom in sensuous form"), Singer suggests additional advantages. First, Gimpel refuses to take revenge on the shtetl of his randy wife primarily because of his incapacity for righteous anger and hatred. Realizing that his beliefs and perceptions are often chosen "as if" they reflected the way things "really are," he cannot find a secular bar from which to judge and condemn the beliefs and perceptions of others. In fine, Schiller's aesthetic and epistemological theory, at least when applied to the material world, liberates us from arrogantly confusing our chosen partial views for the whole. In choosing to be fooled, to be used, to forsake dignity, the creative individual is capable of irony about the sacrifices required by his selected faith of faiths. Such an ironic perspective prevents the Schillerian

poet from being seduced into self-destructive and fictive self-sufficiency. The importance of this for "Gimpel the Fool" and all of Singer's works is brilliantly summarized by Irving H. Buchen:

> To Singer the essence of Satan's temptation - and, at this point, his psychology becomes theology — is to offer clarity. Both Singer and Satan realize that Judaism's dualistic center is so unrelieved and, as long as man lives, so unrelievable that many try to escape to the circumference.
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> Satan always seeks to persuade man to get off the tightrope for the more solid footing of extremism.
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> On that periphery, Satan spreads his wares and encourages men to take his pick of an infinite number of absolutist alternatives: Sabbatai Zevi Communism, Bundism, messiahship, etc. — any will do as an antidote to endless duality and fearful symmetry. The clarity of extremism makes man singular and absolves him of the endless process of making and remaking the self. . . . In other words Satan is a straddler — he closes all the gaps Singer insists are necessary both for existence and art.
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> Indeed, in his passion for explication, especially of the inexplicable, Satan is the external critic of God's artistry.[10]

Both Schiller and Singer, then, celebrate pluralism and tension although perhaps for ultimately different reasons.

The difference between the aesthetics of Singer as explored in "Gimpel the Fool" and the aesthetics of Schiller as developed toward the end of his life seems to lie largely in Singer's greater emphasis on theology. For Schiller, the German Romantic, theology did not constitute the primary support for his aesthetics while for Singer theism in general and Judaism in particular do provide that support. For example, Singer (through Gimpel) links faith in a taunting, lascivious wife to faith in a God who is not manifest in this world. As Gimpel makes clear, "all Frampol refreshed its spirits because of my trouble and grief. However, I resolved that I would always believe what I was told. What is the good of not believing? Today it is your wife you don't believe; tomorrow it's God Himself you won't take stock in."[11] Choosing to believe is, as both Schiller and Singer know, a choice which proceeds from an innermost need. For Singer, at least, to deny the choice would endanger our spiritual sense as well as our aesthetic sensibilities. For example, when Gimpel is at one point finally shamed by the ridicule of his neighbors he is tempted to believe in nothing. But the rabbi reassures him with the reminder that a believing Jew can hardly be superior

and skeptical about the Messianic deliverance promised by the Judaic religion. As the rabbi opines, "It is written, better to be a fool all your days than for one hour to be evil. You are not a fool. They are the fools. For he who causes his neighbor to feel shame loses paradise himself."[12] The paradox is that he who is apparently the fool for his willful belief is by the standards of theological faith the opposite of the fool.

Furthermore, willful and even gratuitous perception of another may spring from the highest ethical ideal.[13] Gimpel's belief in Elka despite the evidence of his senses springs from his profound love for her. Singer seems to suggest in this that where love is great there must be faith.[14] Moreover this love extends to all living things. This, it would seem, is why his faith in her is related to his faith in God's order. Although physically strong, he has refused to retaliate against the village's self-appointed reality monitors. Almost stoically he proceeds through life to bear his burdens without rancor, consoling himself by asking "What is one to do? Shoulders are from God, and burdens too." Thus, Gimpel's love and humanity permit him to consciously opt for what may appear to others to be mere illusion and self-deception. Knowing with Schiller and Vaihinger that most appreciations of life are in fact relative and ultimately unprovable, Singer sees to it that Gimpel's "playful" reconstructions of the world are conducive to the fulfillment of the highest ethical requirements. If there can only be seekers after an often metaphysically problematic God and never finders, then Gimpel's decision to behave "as if" his values predominated may be the best he can hope for.

Finally, whereas Schiller avoids the attempt to measure the inadequacies of the profane world against the perfections of the total truths and cognitions of the theologically transcendent sphere, Singer finds such an attempt to be unavoidable.[15] Gimpel finally concludes with Singer that the world is entirely imaginary, as it is perhaps only the composite construction of all human creative perceptions.[16] If the world is flawed, it is because it is the sum total of the individual ideas of it possessed by freely creative, but fallible human minds. Though like Schiller Singer sees in this creation a special majesty and opportunity for man, Singer's Judaism requires that he unfavorably contrast the forms and world views which are anthropurgic. This world is for Singer and Gimpel an imaginary one, "but it is only once removed from the true world . . . whatever may be there, it will be real, without complication, without ridicule, without deception. God be praised: there even Gimpel cannot be deceived."[17] This transcendently real world, is rejected by Schiller who saw the secular world "as if" it were all humanity could be sure of. Thus, for both Schiller and Singer life is comprised of men capable of self-conscious, playful, arbitrary explanations and interpretations of the date of experience. As such, all men are in a sense artists mediating the impulses of pure perception and formal organization with

willful, playful combinations. Singer, who makes Schiller play an important part in the education of the character Asa Herschel in the novel *The Family Moskat*, would at least agree that the discovery of the freedom to frame the secular world in an undetermined hermeneutic is the first step toward responsible self-awareness in our daily creations and actions. Both would further hope for balance and humility in the knowledge of our epistemic partiality. Lastly, for both writers the tragedy of man-as-creator is to forget that "to sever the mysterious bond between illusion and reality is to deny illusion a vital function in reality and to deny reality its body in illusion."[18]

NOTES

1. Paul N. Siegel, "Gimpel and Archetype of the Wise Fool," in *The Achievement of Isaac B. Singer*, ed. Harry T. Moore (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 161.
2. Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now: A Guide to Contemporary Fiction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), pp. 193-94.
3. Ben Siegel, *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 19.
4. Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), p. 144.
5. Joel Blocker, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," *Commentary* XXXVI (November, 1963), pp. 364-372.
6. Isaac Singer, "Gimpel the Fool" in *Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, edited by Irving Howe (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 4.
7. *Singer*, p. 18.
8. *Singer*, p. 19.
9. *Singer*, pp. 15-16.
10. Irving H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), pp. 208-209.
11. Isaac Singer, "Gimpel the Fool", in *Selected Short Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, edited by Irving Howe (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 12.
12. *Singer*, p. 5.
13. J. S. Wolkenfield, "Isaac Bashevis Singer: The Faith of His Devils and Magicians", *Criticism*, V (1962), pp. 350-51.
14. Morris Golden, "Dr. Fischelson's Miracle: Duality and Vision in Singer's Fiction" in *The Achievement of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, edited by Marcia Allentuck (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 43.
15. Michael Fixler, "The Redeemers: Themes in the Fiction of Isaacs Bashevis Singer", *Kenyon Review*, XXVI (Spring, 1964), pp. 371-386.
16. Paul Kresh, Isaac Bashevis Singer: *The Magician of West 86th Street* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979), p. 204.
17. Isaac Singer, "Gimpel the Fool" in *Selected Short Stories of Isac Bahsevis Singer*, edited by Irving Howe (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 12.
18. Irving H. Buchen, *Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Eternal Past* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 213.