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The Other Religion of Isaac Bashevis Singer

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This essay analyses the later fiction of Nobel Prize-winning writer Isaac Bashevis Singer through the prism of his vegetarianism. Singer figured his adoption of a vegetarian diet in 1962 as a kind of conversion, pronouncing it a "religion" that was central to his being. Here I outline Singer's vegetarian philosophy, and argue that it was the underlying ethical precept in the fiction written after the conversion. I demonstrate the way in which that ethic informs the presentation of both Judaism and women in Singer's later writings. The piece concludes with the suggestion that this vegetarian ethic was the mainspring of the critique of humanism found in Singer's final novels.

The work of Isaac Bashevis Singer is noted for its consistent engagement with both the practical and the philosophical dimension of Judaism. Indeed, Singer's writing, which spans almost sixty years, represents, perhaps, the twentieth century's most sustained fictional exploration of *Yiddishkeit*; the voices of the protagonists become more confused after the author's move to America in 1935, and more anguished after the Holocaust. Critical commentary on Singer's work has understandably and perhaps rightly focussed upon this aspect. But in later interviews and writings Singer figured his adoption of vegetarianism in 1962 as a conversion to a faith that was more central to his being than any other: "Vegetarianism is my religion," he wrote in 1986; "if there would come a voice from God saying, 'I'm against vegetarianism!', I would say, 'Well, I am for it'. This is how strongly I feel in this regard."[1] By the time Singer won the Nobel Prize in 1978 his vegetarianism formed an important (and cultivated) part of his public persona.[2] He was no doubt

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[1] Isaac Bashevis Singer, preface to Steven Rosen, *Food for the Spirit: Vegetarianism and the World Religions* (San Diego, CA: Bala Books, 1987), i–ii, ii.

[2] Singer frequently shoehorned his vegetarianism into interviews. When Marshall Breger and Bob Barnhart, for example, announce the conclusion of their interview with the writer, Singer interjects, commenting, "Let me add to you that I am a sincere vegetarian. You may be interested to know that". Breger and Barnhart are clearly not interested in the ensuing exposition of Singer's vegetarianism. Singer's vegetarianism was one of the few topics, perhaps the only topic, which Singer was consistent about through interviews, his writing, and his personal life. Marshall Breger and Bob Barnhart, "A Conversation with

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pleased to see the *New York Post* note, in its report on the award ceremony, that while the majority of guests dined on lobster and duck, "Singer, who's a vegetarian, had a special menu prepared for him. He was served Israeli avocado artichoke bottoms and a vegetable main dish."[3] The writer repeatedly stressed that his compassion for animals had long roots, claiming in an interview that his earliest memory was seeing a farmer hitting a pig: "maybe it had been squealing," Singer noted, "for I ran in to my mother to tell her the pig was crying and the man was beating it with a stick. I remember this very vividly. Even then I was thinking like a vegetarian!"[4] In his memoir, *Love and Exile*, Singer suggested that his first attempt at vegetarianism proper was made on board the ship from Cherbourg to New York in 1935 when he made the decision to tell the waiter of his dietary choice. After the waiter suggested that he join the kosher table Singer explained that being kosher was not the same as being vegetarian and commented that his "vegetarianism was based on no religion but simply on the feeling that one creature lacked the right to rob another creature of its life and devour it."[5]

This line of reasoning has proved "embarrassing … to many of his admirers," as Edward Alexander notes, and that, perhaps, is why it has generally been ignored in critical responses to Singer and his work, and the vegetarianism explained (or explained away) in terms that the writer explicitly rejected.[6] Singer's biographer, Janet Hadda, invokes the vegetarian as a

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Isaac Bashevis Singer," in Irving Malin, ed., *Critical Views of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 27–43, 42.

[3] Janet Hadda, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 80.

[4] Paul Kresh, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: The Magician of West 86th Street* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979), 21.

[5] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Love and Exile: The Early Years – A Memoir* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 234–35. There is not space here for an extended discussion of Jewish dietary laws and vegetarianism. As with most scripture, there is contradiction and debate. The usual conclusion is that these laws allow for killing when it is necessary and in accordance with strict rules (*kashrut*). Since Singer and his vegetarian characters dispute the necessity of such killing, they do not look to these laws for clarification on their vegetarianism, which figures instead as a personal ethic. (The dispute between personal ethic and religious duty in Singer is explored later in the essay through my readings of "The Slaughterer" and *The Penitent*). Richard Schwartz admits in the opening to his book on vegetarianism and Judaism that much of what he suggests could be "gainsaid," by referring to passages in the Torah which discuss sacrifice at Temple, and eating meat, so that his own advocacy of Jewish vegetarianism requires a "leap of faith." Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1990), xi. Jonathan Safran Foer asks whether the very concept of kosher meat has become a contradiction in terms due to factory farming. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), 70.

[6] Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 6.

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"type" defined not by an ethical stance but rather as a "negative self-definition." For Hadda, "vegetarians often formulate their world around exclusions, rather than inclusion. They prefer less, rather than more, choice; they embrace less, rather than more."[7] Fitting her subject into this type, Hadda dismisses the given reasons for the vegetarianism as sublimation and reads the dietary choice as the "most striking" of a number of self-imposed constraints that marked Singer's life in the US. These constraints, Hadda argues, stemmed from his sense of inner guilt about his failures as a Jew, while the dietary constraint, specifically, represented an attempt at lessening the guilt he felt over the fact that one as debased as he had survived the Holocaust while "millions of chaste souls had perished." Singer's vegetarianism was thus a "secular version of Kashrus, the Jewish dietary laws," and served to separate him from his increasingly corrupt American life and connect him "symbolically with his past." The repeated invocation of the rights of nonhuman animals in interviews and in the fiction was due to Singer's self-mythologization and his desire to avoid discussion of the real reason: "spiritual and bodily purity."[8]

While it is likely that there was an element of back-projection in Singer's later claims that his thinking had always been vegetarian – he could certainly be crafty and knew how to self-promote – Hadda's suggestion that his fully fledged vegetarianism after 1962 was primarily a version of his Jewishness is, I think, misguided. Singer frequently stressed – more often than not because of awareness that his position on animals was inconsistent with Orthodoxy – that though his "roots" were "in Jewish life" his "way of thinking needn't be Jewish." His lack of belief in revealed religion meant that Singer averred that he "had his own way of thinking [about] what is right and wrong."[9] We ought not to automatically take a writer, or a vegetarian, at his or her word, of course: writers lie, and there may often be a complex of factors which influence such a dietary choice. But the stubborn refusal of most critics to even contemplate the reasons given by Singer for his vegetarianism suggests more than prudent scepticism of his words due to awareness of his elusive personality. Rather, it seems to me that such refusal stems from the fact that what he is saying is unconscionable to the commentator: concern for the lives of nonhumans could not possibly be the prime ethical motivation for such a decision. This approach to Singer's ethics is echoed in the approach to his aesthetics, as most critics have adopted the same attitude to the

[7] Hadda, *Singer: A Life*, 227 n. 40.
[8] Ibid., 146–47.
[9] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Yiddish Writer in America," in Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein, eds., *Creators and Disturbers: Reminiscences by Jewish Intellectuals of New York Drawn from Conversations with Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 27–44, 39.

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fiction as Hadda has to the man.[10] The vegetarianism has escaped critical scrutiny because it has been seen as a quirk that gives Singer's characters one more thing to agonize over before getting on with the real business of agonizing over their religious faith.[11] My suggestion here is that while the rich cultural background of Judaism obviously continues to provide the main backdrop for the fiction written after 1962 it is the vegetarianism that provides the overriding ethical precept; to subsume the latter within the former misses a source of productive tension in the later writing.[12] In what follows I outline Singer's

[10] The figure of the vegetarian has a long, though not extensive, history in fiction. Mary Shelley used vegetarianism as a way to distinguish her creature from humankind in *Frankenstein* (1818), and as a utopian ideal in her postapocalyptic *The Last Man* (1826). And, indeed, it is in utopic and dystopic fiction that vegetarianism has made its most frequent appearance, featuring in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), Sarah Scott's *Milenium Hall* [*sic*] (1762), Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1862), H. G. Wells's *On a Modern Utopia* (1905), and the *Oryx and Crake* series (2003–13) by Margaret Atwood. Perhaps unsurprisingly vegetarianism has not only featured as an ideal, but as a figure of the comedic, sometimes as a well-meant but misguided principle, as in Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955) and Graham Greene's *The Comedians* (1966). The most recent vegetarian in Jewish American writing – the fictionalized version of the author in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) – represents something of a coming together of the comedic and the sincere since the humour provoked when Foer's pathetic potato dinner falls to the floor dissolves the tension between the characters, and produces a mutual point of contact for them.

[11] Singer and his work are often invoked in books advocating or exploring animal rights, but, more usually than not, as cultural example, rather than as object of literary analysis. Charles Patterson's *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002), which takes its title from Singer's short story "The Letter Writer," is the most comprehensive overview of the vegetarian moments in the writer's work. Edward Alexander is one of the few literary critics to give credence to the vegetarianism. His book on the short stories of Singer includes a very brief section titled "Vegetarian Tales," and Alexander notes that "at his best, Singer uses the vegetarian theme to reveal the profound injustice at the heart of the universe." Alexander, 69. A subtler, but still brief, analysis is to be found in Anat Pick's fine *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), which contains a section on animality and the holocaust. In *The Cry of Nature: Art and the Making of Animal Rights* (London: Reaktion, 2013), Stephen F. Eisenman discusses Singer in the context of the artist Chaim Soutine.

[12] This essay is, of course, literary criticism, and is not intended as an argument in favour of vegetarianism, though it would be disingenuous to suggest that my approach is not flavoured by my own views on the matter. I try to follow the logic of Singer's thought according to historical and ethical precedent, but this is not a systematic attempt to fit Singer into the history of vegetarianism, or to provide a detailed examination of that history. Those interested in that history should consult Tristram Stuart, *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), or Colin Spencer, *Vegetarianism: A History* (London: Grub Street Publishing, 2016). For a scholarly consideration of the benefits of vegetarianism see Michael Allen Fox, *Deep Vegetarianism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); for less scholarly but quite lively arguments against vegetarianism see Dominique Lestel, *Eat This Book: A Carnivore's Dilemma*, tr. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press,

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vegetarian ethic and show how foregrounding it helps us rethink some of the writer's most important texts, demonstrating the way in which that ethic informs Singer's treatment of Judaism and his treatment of women (another topic that has not received the attention it warrants in critical responses to Singer). Singer's vegetarianism, I conclude, was the mainspring of the repudiation of humanism found in his later novels as the writer struggled to find a way to reconcile his thoughts on animals with the modern world; in this, his thinking pointed towards posthumanism.

In an important scene in Singer's 1972 novel, *Enemies: A Love Story*, Herman Broder, the main character, chastises his wife, Masha, for preparing meat.[13] Masha's response is revealing: "without meat, there's nothing to cook. God himself eats meat – human flesh. There are no vegetarians – none. If you had seen what I have seen, you would know that God approves of slaughter," she says.[14] Alexander uses this passage to suggest that Masha "has no patience with Broder's vegetarianism," because vegetarianism "denies the underlying principle of the whole system of nature."[15] In the context, this justification is clearly problematic: Masha's conflation of the human and the animal in her contestation of the validity of abstinence from meat must also serve to naturalize the slaughter of humans. The traditional view of the naturalness of using animals for human purposes stems from the belief that humans and animals are different in kind, and that humans' greater capacity for rational thought and for language formation places us higher in the chain of being. This has been, of course, the dominant, though not unchallenged, stance of Western philosophical thought since Aristotle; it received its most vigorous (if not particularly rigorous) articulation in the work of René Descartes, for whom animals lacked a soul and so were mere "automatons, or moving machines."[16] As Keith Thomas has demonstrated, this became the prevalent view in the eighteenth century, and was summed up in 1774 by the English novelist Oliver Goldsmith who noted,

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2016). Cora Diamond's classic essay "Eating Meat and Eating People" remains the most philosophically astute consideration of vegetarianism. Diamond is broadly in favour of vegetarianism but skewers the most commonly invoked reasons for it. The essay is included in Cass R. Sunstein and Martha Nussbaum, eds., *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 93–107. Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (cited above) provides a readable personal account of vegetarianism.

[13] The main character in Singer's short story "The Letter Writer," which I will discuss later on, is also called Herman, so I will refer to Herman Broder of *Enemies* as "Broder" in the remainder of this essay.

[14] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies: A Love Story*, tr. Aliza Shevrin and Elizabeth Shubb (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 166.

[15] Edward Alexander, *Isaac Bashevis Singer* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 104.

[16] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, tr. Donald A. Cress, 4th edn (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 31.

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"In the ascent from brutes to man, the line is strongly drawn, well marked, and unpassable."[17] It is quite remarkable that a position that has been so thoroughly assailed by history, philosophy, and science was still the majority view at the time Singer became vegetarian.[18] But here I would like to suggest that Singer's post-1962 fiction requires a different critical lens due to the fact that what Alexander identifies as the "underlying principle" of Masha's reasoning is challenged by the vegetarian characters in Singer's fiction.

The most quoted passage from Singer's short story "The Letter Writer," from *The Séance and Other Stories* (1968), exemplifies this. Herman Gombiner has been sharing his apartment with a mouse whom he has named Huldah. After an illness, Herman realizes that he has forgotten to leave food for the creature, and fears that she may have died. Singer writes,

> In his thoughts, Herman spoke a eulogy for the mouse who had shared a portion of her life with him and who, because of him, had left this earth. "What do they know – all such scholars, all these philosophers, all the leaders of the world – about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of the creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka."[19]

[17] Oliver Goldsmith, quoted in Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500–1800* (London: Penguin, 1984), 35.

[18] As Rogers and Kaplan note in their essay on the interface between scientific knowledge and legislation for animal rights, it is within "living memory that Descartes's views have found a continued reflection in everyday attitudes." Lesley J. Rogers and Gisela Kaplan, "All Animals Are *Not* Equal: The Interface between Scientific Knowledge and Legislation for Animal Rights," in Sunstein and Nussbaum, 175–204, 193. Here I cannot go into the full history of the relationship between the human and nonhuman. Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, is still the best place to start for this. For human relationships with animals and vegetarianism specifically, see the references given in notes 12 and 37.

[19] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Letter Writer," tr. Alizah Shevrin and Elizabeth Shub, in *Isaac Bashevis Singer Collected Stories: Gimpel the Fool to the Letter Writer*, ed. Ilan Stavans (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 724–55, 750. The comparison with the Holocaust has also been made in fictional terms by J. M. Coetzee in *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and by several other thinkers, including Jacques Derrida in "The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow)," tr. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry*, 28, 2 (2002), 369–418, 395. In art it has been made most notably, perhaps, by Sue Coe. It is, of course, a contentious claim, the legitimacy of which has been challenged most vocally by the Anti-defamation League. Derrida is particularly careful to note that a comparison between human and animal genocide cannot be dismissed simply on the grounds that the human has greater value, but he is also attentive to the fact that the comparison may inhibit the articulation of the uniqueness of suffering. For a discussion of Derrida's view see Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University, 2008), 112. For more on the comparison see Patterson, *passim*, and David Sztybel, "Can the Treatment of Animals Be Compared to the Holocaust?", *Ethics and the Environment*, 11, 1 (2006), 97–132. Here I make no judgement about the *ethical* validity of the comparison; I do argue, however, that it is essential to a

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For Herman, the logic that would put mankind at "the crown of creation" – that which undergirds the so-called "natural principle" – is faulty since man is in fact the "worst transgressor." The Holocaust provides the rationale for this argument: no species but man has engaged in the systematic, industrialized slaughter of members of its own, as well as other, species. This rationale underpins all of Singer's vegetarian works; they constitute extended fictional critiques of the anthropocentrism that underlines the "natural principle" which exalts the human on the basis of greater intelligence, rationality, or reasoning powers. Singer's position is in a rich vein. In *Beast and Man*, the moral philosopher Mary Midgley points out that Darwin himself avoided the use of terms such as "higher" and "lower" when talking about evolution, and she observes that "creatures diverge, each to its own way of life, each finding its own characteristic sort of fulfilment," noting that what counts as intelligence is difficult to discern, and that ranking relative intelligence is an impossible task. "Are we sure that we would always recognize intelligence if it was of a different kind from our own? if it were exhibited by creatures with different interests?" she asks.[20] Singer articulated his own position in a conversation with Richard Burgin, commenting, "it is just common sense to me that if you believe in compassion and in justice you cannot treat the animals the very opposite simply because they are weaker or because they have less intelligence. It's not our business to judge these things. They have the type of intelligence they need to exist."[21] He and his vegetarian characters suggest that the use of "higher" and "lower" in reference to evolution is premised upon and reifies a greater capacity for violence against those (human and nonhuman alike) who have less ability to fight back.[22] As Broder puts it in *Enemies*, "The smugness with which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right."[23] Broder's use of "racist" to describe human prejudice against other species cements the connection with the discrimination of the Holocaust,

proper reading of Singer's fiction that we try to understand the logic behind that comparison.

[20] Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, reprint (London and New York: Routledge 1998), 157–58.

[21] Isaac Bashevis Singer and Richard Burgin, *Conversations with Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 152.

[22] G. E. Moore suggested in *Principia Ethica* that the mistaken notion that evolution is all about how the higher species survives the lower rests upon the assumption that "we can kill them faster than they can kill us." As he points out, "this forms no part of Darwin's scientific theory." G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 47.

[23] Singer, *Enemies*, 257.

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and evinces the same logic that led to the coining of the awkward, but clearly necessary, term "speciesism."[24]

As these quotations suggest, Singer and his vegetarian surrogates cleave to the belief expressed in Midgley's apparently counterintuitive musing, "what is supposed to be that good about cleverness? Being clever is not obviously so much more important than being kind, brave, friendly, patient, and generous that it inevitably confers an instant right of general massacre."[25] Of what use is greater capacity for rational thought, for reason, Singer's vegetarian characters ask, if it not only fails to lead to a greater moral sensibility, but also leads to mankind becoming, in Herman's words, the "worst transgressor"? Highlighting this aspect helps explain Singer's "apparently licentious" employment of the Holocaust in his commentaries on the treatment of animals, for this is, indeed, a version of the question with which Theodor W. Adorno struggled in his own philosophic response to human domination over others.[26] Even before the full extent of the Nazi horror had emerged, Adorno and Max Horkheimer had famously critiqued the Enlightenment's legacy of "instrumental reason," stressing that man's pursuit of domination over nature, via science and then technology, created the conditions for domination over other humans: "what human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts," they wrote in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.[27] In a lesser-known fragment on Beethoven – written even earlier than *Dialectic* – Adorno explicitly framed this argument in terms of nonhuman animals, drawing a link between their treatment by humans and Nazi treatment of Jews:

> What I find so suspect in Kantian ethics is the dignity attributed to man in the name of autonomy. A capacity for moral self-determination is ascribed to human beings as

[24] Coined by the psychologist Richard Ryder in 1970, the term was popularized by the philosopher Peter Singer in his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, in which the author explained, "The racist violates the principle of equality by giving greater weight to the interests of members of his own race when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of another race. The Sexist violates the principle of equality by favouring the interests of his own sex. Similarly, the speciesist allows the interests of his own species to override the greater interests of members of other species. The pattern is identical in each case." Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, reprint edn (London: Jonathan Cape: 1976), 9.

[25] Midgley, 255–56.

[26] "Apparently licentious" is Alexander's term. Alexander, *Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction*, 65.

[27] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press: 2002), 2. Adorno shared with the other members of the Frankfurt school an abiding interest in nonhuman animals. The rebuke to Kantian idealism here is based on its assumption that nonhuman animals, though sentient and capable of suffering, lacked autonomy and so could be regarded as "things". The only value animals have, then, in the Kantian system, comes from their use-value to humans.

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an absolute advantage – as a moral profit – while being covertly used to legitimise dominance – dominance over nature. This is the real aspect of the transcendental claim that man can dictate the laws of nature. Ethical dignity in Kant is a demarcation of differences. It is directed against animals. Implicitly it excludes man from nature, so that its humanity threatens incessantly to revert to the inhuman. It leaves no room for pity. Nothing is more abhorrent to the Kantian than a reminder of man's resemblance to animals. This taboo is always at work when the idealist berates the materialist. Animals play for the idealist system virtually the same role as the Jews for fascism.[28]

The realization in the Holocaust of the full extent of the horror that such domination produced would lead Adorno to later make his famous, though often misunderstood, comments about poetry and culture, which, in the words of Rolf Tiedemann, suggested that "what took place in Auschwitz and the other death camps implied the collapse of the existing civilization that had been built up so laboriously," amounting to nothing less than the "revocation of what Adorno ironically termed the 'Western legacy of positivity', in other words the innermost substance of traditional philosophy."[29] For Adorno, if the painstaking creation of Western culture could not prevent the death camps, what point could there be in the pursuit of such culture after them? For Singer and his vegetarian characters the thinking is similar: Western culture will continue to fail as long as it allows for the maintenance of logic that condemns nonhuman animals to an "eternal Treblinka."

Understanding this way of thinking allows us to return to the proposition of Masha in *Enemies*. Her belief that the ethical nullity of vegetarianism is proved by the Holocaust's demonstration that "God himself eats meat – human flesh" ends up as a perverse justification for any and all slaughter: why spare an animal if "God approves" the slaughter of humans? Masha's reasoning stems from an acceptance of the "natural" valorization of the human above the nonhuman, but it also betrays an elision of animal "meat" and human "flesh," an elision which stems from the deliberate and tactical dehumanization of Nazi ideology. Adorno – expanding on the theme first articulated in the fragment on Beethoven cited above – comments on this in *Minima Moralia*, noting that the availability of the metaphor of the animal lies at the heart of much discrimination, including that of the Holocaust: "The constantly encountered assertion that savages, blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys for example, is the key to the pogrom."[30] But neither

[28] Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music. Fragments and Texts*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, tr. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 80.

[29] Rolf Tiedemann in Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), xii–xiii.

[30] Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, tr. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), 105.

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Adorno's thinking nor Singer's novels suggest that we should accept Masha's nihilistic conclusion; her view is challenged by the philosophy that lies behind the vegetarianism in Singer's fictional worlds. What lies at the heart of Adorno and Broder's positions is the recognition that what appears as a dissolution of the distinction between the human and the animal was, in Nazi ideology, as elsewhere – in slavery, for instance – precisely the opposite: a way of maintaining a spurious binary designed to provide evidence for genetic superiority and to rationalize the degradation of others. The maintenance of that binary, coupled with the anthropocentricism that places the human above the nonhuman, allowed for the former to be strategically "reduced" to the level of the animal – to be designated "subhuman" – and to then be (mis)treated accordingly. Our conception of what it is to be human has tended always to be predicated on the existence of a nonhuman other, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes when she suggests,

> The great doctrines of identity of the ethical universal, in terms of which liberalism thought out its ethical programmes, played history false, because the identity was disengaged in terms of who was and who was not human. That's why all of those projects, the justification of slavery, as well as the justification of Christianization, seemed to be alright; because, after all, these people had not graduated into humankind, as it were.[31]

And this goes part of the way to explaining Singer's later repudiation of humanism. His commitment to the belief that "as long as human beings will go on shedding the blood of animals, there will never be any peace [because] there is only one little step from killing animals to creating gas chambers à la Hitler and concentration camps á la Stalin," helps explain Broder's suggestion that "in their treatment of animals, all humans are Nazis," and highlights that it is Masha's view which is defunct since vegetarianism in the real and fictional worlds of Singer represents a necessary first step in the saving of the human.[32]

For Singer, and for the vegetarian characters in his stories, then, the ethical treatment of all animals necessarily precedes the ethical treatment of any particular species of animal, humans included. This is why, when Singer was asked about the ecumenical importance of the silence of God in the face of human anguish, he could not help but answer in terms of carnivorism: "Not only does anguish unify the Jewish and the non-Jewish, but the man and the animal. It does not express in words, but when an animal screams it is the same scream as

[31] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak quoted in Cary Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 7.

[32] Isaac Bashevis Singer, foreword to Dudley Giehl, *Vegetarianism: A Way of Life* (London: Harper & Row, 1979), viii–ix.

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that of a human being. The animal also asks God, why have you forsaken us?"[33] The belief that humans and nonhuman animals share the "same scream" is fundamental to Singer's post-1962 epistemology. This scream is what the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher and social critic John Oswald, in his influential 1791 treatise of the same name, called, after Rousseau, "the cry of nature."[34] There, Oswald asked,

> has not nature given, to almost every creature, the same spontaneous signs of the various affections? Admire we not in other animals whatever is most eloquent in man, the tremor of desire, the tear of distress, the piercing cry of anguish, the pity-pleading look, expressions that speak the soul with a feeling which words are feeble to convey?[35]

It does not matter, then, that the nonhuman animal is not articulate in the same way as the human animal, because in the face of anguish all creatures "speak the soul" in the same fashion; that anguished scream is more powerful than words, Oswald implied, precisely because it is not confined to the language of any particular species.[36] In the fiction of Singer these screams represent not only a cry of pain that needs to be heard, but a cry for rights to which humans have a moral obligation to listen: "parrots demanded their rights with raucous screeching," thinks Broder upon visiting a zoo in *Enemies*.[37] Here Broder – a keen reader of philosophy – offers a corrective to Wittgenstein's elliptical declaration in *Philosophical Investigations* that "If a lion could talk, we would not understand him," by implying that the

[33] Grace Farrell Lee, "Seeing and Blindness: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 9, 2 (1976), 151–64, 152.

[34] I am grateful to Stephen F. Eisenman for pointing this out to me. In *The Cry of Nature*, Eisenman traces this "scream" as it appears in art from the middle of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first.

[35] John Oswald, *The Cry of Nature; Or, An Appeal to Mercy and to Justice, on Behalf of the Persecuted Animals* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1791), 57–58.

[36] For a subtle discussion of Oswald see Eisenman, 144–46.

[37] Singer 1972, 53. I doubt that Singer gave much consideration to the term "rights" here (and this is, of course, a translated text); its use, however, both signifies the gap in available concepts and terminology (still a problem today) and highlights the character's proposition (Singer's too) that the rigid distinction between human and nonhuman animal is false. The question of animal rights has produced long and heated debate (as have all other types of "rights," of course). For the history of the term, and the debate surrounding it, one might turn to Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*; Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press,1980); Hilda Kean, *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain since 1800* (London: Reaktion, 1998); Richard D. Ryder, *Animal Revolution: Changing Attitudes towards Speciesism* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Paola Cavalieri, *The Animal Question: Why Nonhuman Animals Deserve Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sunstein and Nussbaum, *Animal Rights*; Paul Waldau, *Animal Rights: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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truth is more likely to be that "If a lion could talk, we simply would not listen to him."[38]

Although in later autobiographical writings and interviews Singer maintained that he had always inclined towards the kind of belief that would lead to his eventual adoption of vegetarianism, there is, in truth, little in his earlier fiction that could be pointed to as evidence of a direct engagement with such an ethic. At best Singer's sensibility in the earlier fiction might be said to manifest itself as the sporadic attempt at producing an *affective* response to animal suffering – the revulsion a reader might feel at the mass slaughterhouse scenes in *Satan in Goray*, for example; but the call for the *ethical* response of vegetarianism, which we see emerge in the fiction of the 1960s, is absent.[39] Indeed, the scenes in *Goray* are more likely still rooted in questions concerning *Kashrut*, and its place and function in premodern and modern times, as Stephen F. Eisenman notes.[40] After the commitment to vegetarianism, though, that ethic becomes central and is figured as neither stemming from nor being necessarily reconcilable with the writer's religion. "Some of God's commands I do obey. Not all. I am not sure that God revealed himself and told us exactly what to do," Singer wrote in 1982. The fact that this is preceded by the suggestion that God "has created a murderous world and I have moments when I hate Him for creating it and for doing so much wrong to the animals" indicates that Singer had his vegetarianism in mind, seeing it as a moral decision neither demanded nor necessarily sanctified by God.[41] The possible clash between a personal vegetarian ethic and religious duty is brought out most dramatically in Singer's short story "The Slaughterer," from *The Séance and Other Stories* (1968). The story opens with Yoineh Meir being denied his rightful position as rabbi by the Kuzmir Hassidim. Due to the fact that it is a sin to leave a man "without a source of earnings," the Kuzmir persuade Yoineh to accept the position of town slaughterer despite his protestations that he is "softhearted" and cannot "bear the sight of blood."[42] Accepting his duty spurs Yoineh into an even greater devotion to God, necessary not only because "the first paragraph of the Grain of the Ox says that the ritual slaughterer must be a God-fearing

[38] For an illuminating discussion of Wittgenstein's comment see Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, 44–54. The fact that it is parrots who are demanding their rights establishes the connection between character and author. Singer was very fond of birds and at the time that *Enemies* was published had two pet parakeets. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that Broder, at this moment, is a mouthpiece for the author.

[39] *Satan in Goray* was serialized in *Globus* between January and September 1933 as *Der sotn in Goray*, and published in English in 1955.

[40] Eisenman, 220.

[41] Singer, "The Yiddish Writer in America," 39.

[42] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Slaughterer," tr. Mirra Ginsburg, in *Isaac Bashevis Singer Collected Stories: Gimpel the Fool to the Letter Writer*, 546–57, 546.

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man," but also because, we might surmise, he must crush personal belief, via religious commitment. This proves disastrous for Yoineh, who comes to the conclusion that "it [is] destiny to cause torment and to suffer torment." Inflicting suffering leads to one's own suffering so that "the killing of every beast, great or small, caused [Yoineh] as much pain as though he were cutting his own throat."[43] Yoineh's suicide in the denouement is thus inevitable. Illustrating the way in which the vegetarian philosophy outlined above has been marginalized in studies of Singer, Irving Malin, in his brief analysis of the story, writes, "We do not know why Yoineh is so upset; we want psychological motivation, but we are compelled to accept this fear as a given."[44] Because the underlying vegetarian ethic has been missed, Malin must conclude that Yoineh "loses his mind," suggesting, "By accepting the validity of his obsession – it is not 'right' to kill even for religious reasons – he can no longer act rationally."[45] Alexander concurs, commenting, "Vegetarianism carried to its extreme, radical form alienates the slaughterer from nature and religion, and brings him to the conviction, so long resisted, that he is indeed more compassionate than God Almighty. From blasphemy it is a short step to madness, and from madness to suicide."[46] Both Malin and Alexander, then, abide by the premise that eating nonhuman animals is natural, so that not eating them is unnatural. The killing is justified both on the ground that nonhuman animals also kill each other, and because God has apparently legitimized such killing – "slaughter is after all sanctified in the Torah," writes Malin.[47] Their readings thus tacitly affirm the sentiments of the community who tell Yoineh that what he is doing is wrong because "man may not be more compassionate than the Almighty," confirm Yoineh as irrational because his beliefs do not fit in with those of the community, and conclude with the suggestion that the story is about the perils of usurping God.[48]

Yet Singer's suggestion that he doubted from an early age "all the traditions and dogmas [of religion]," and his comment, noted in the opening to this piece, that he would have little problem with the claiming of a higher moral ground than God if God was "against vegetarianism," highlight the possibility of a different reading. Rather than demonstrating the consequences of alienating oneself from religion and God, the story, perhaps, dramatizes the opposite: the consequences of the abandonment of a personal (vegetarian) ethic in favour of abiding by community norms. The "psychological motivation" for Yoineh's suffering and suicide, which Malin misses, is the character's recognition of the human-as-animal: "Under every skin he saw blood. Every neck

[43] Ibid., 546–48.
[44] Malin, *Critical Views*, xiv.
[45] Ibid., xvi.
[46] Alexander, *Singer: A Study of the Short Fiction*, 69.
[47] Malin, xv.
[48] Singer, "The Slaughterer," 546.

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reminded Yoineh Meir of the knife. Human beings, like beasts, had loins, veins, guts, buttocks. One slash of the knife and those solid householders would drop like oxen," realizes Yoineh.[49] The motif is extended when Yoineh, on the night before the slaughter for the feast of Elul, dreams of cows "with beards and side locks, and skullcaps over their horns … and of a goat, which curses him in Hebrew and Aramaic."[50] The dream functions both as a symbol of the elders embodying the Laws reproaching Yoineh for questioning his religious duty, and as a grotesque image establishing the Singerian motif that to slaughter an animal is also to slaughter one's own. Once the human–animal connection is made in Yoineh's mind, and once he recognizes the animality of his own being, that he is "a body composed of feet, belly, a chest, elbows," slaughtering himself becomes entirely logical.[51] Since, as I have already noted, the slaughter of animals is figured as a version of "Treblinka" in Singer's fiction, Yoineh becomes a proto-Nazi, and the story can be considered a Holocaust text.[52]

From this perspective Malin's reading of the last sentence of the story as possibly "hopeful," because it reasserts tradition in the call for a new slaughterer, is problematic.[53] Such an ending can only be hopeful when one reads the continuation of tradition as more important than an end to the slaughter. As we have seen, in Singer's epistemology this is not the case; in fact, the reassertion of tradition in the ending is figured as insidious:

> There were many witnesses to testify that Yoineh Meir had behaved like a madman, and the rabbi ruled that the deceased was not a suicide. The body of the dead man was cleansed and given burial near the graves of his father and his grandfather. The rabbi himself delivered the eulogy.

But Yoineh had willingly divested himself of the "burdens" of his faith, his skullcap and his prayer fringes, so that there is surely something sinister about the way in which he is enfolded back into the tradition after his death, and his willed decision to end his life dismissed because "he behaved like a madman."[54] Foregrounding Singer's vegetarian philosophy, however, allows us to understand that Yoineh's descent into apparent madness is a kind of "becoming-animal," a "process not of imitating or identifying with animals," but of being "transformed by an encounter with nonhuman perspectives," as Matthew Calarco puts it.[55] This nonhuman perspective is inconceivable in Yoineh's society so that Yoineh's actions can only be understood as

[49] Ibid., 549. [50] Ibid., 551. [51] Ibid., 551.
[52] In *The Penitent*, discussed below, the main character, Joseph Shapiro, comments, "I've thought more than once that when it comes to animals, every man is a Nazi." Isaac Bashevis Singer, *The Penitent* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 39.
[53] Malin, xvi. [54] Singer, "The Slaughterer," 556–57. [55] Calarco, *Zoographies*, 42.

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those of a madman. Unable to accept the brutality required by apparent sanity, Yoineh declares that he "no longer wishe[s] to be sane," suggesting that he (and Singer) might accept the diagnosis of madness if it comes as a result of adopting the alternative perspective highlighted by Calarco.[56]

Another element in the story and in Singer's writing more generally might give us pause. Yoineh, we are told, "had longed for sons who would study the Torah," but his wife, Reitze Doshe, "bore girl after girl." Although fond of them when they were children, now they are adults Yoineh notes that they "seemed to have taken after their mother. They had spread out in width."[57] This exaggeration of the body disgusts Yoineh; it is an exaggeration exclusively female, of course. The repulsion caused by the female body is conflated with the repulsion felt towards his job, made explicit when Yoineh dreams of slaughtering a calf which turns into a girl: "Her neck throbbed … she ran to the study house and spattered the courtyard with her blood."[58] The connection between the female body, the transformation of animals into meat, and blood is a literalization of a metaphor, "woman-as-meat," which, as Carol J. Adams demonstrated in her influential book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, underpins patriarchal society; the metaphor recurs frequently in Singer's writings.[59] For Adams, the eating of meat is an "integral part of male dominance," so that acts of vegetarianism demonstrate a "sign of dis-ease with patriarchal culture."[60] Adams controversially suggested that the good feminist ought always to be a vegetarian; Singer, however, gives the lie to the notion that a vegetarian will always be a feminist. Evelyn Torton Beck was one of the first (and remains one of the few) critics to articulate the misogyny of the writer's work: "while Singer presents men in terms of their individual psychological aberrations, he treats women as a class, making far more frequent use of clichés and stereotypes in depicting them than in depicting men," she observed. Beck's conclusion that "Singer's vision – combining the traditional Jewish image of woman as subservient and inferior with the misogynistic view of woman's nature in the philosophies of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, and Weininger – represents a powerful assault on the Jewish woman" is correct, but I would supplement it by suggesting that this vision is, curiously, sharpened

[56] Singer, "The Slaughterer," 555. [57] Ibid., 550. [58] Ibid., 551.

[59] Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist–Vegetarian Critical Theory*, twentieth anniversary edn (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2010). Adams writes of the relationship between meat eating and menstruation at various points. See for instance, 178, and 214–15, where she writes that "gender roles, male dominance, and menstruation, to name just a few issues that arise from women's experience, are intertwined with our mythology of meat eating," and suggests that there may be a connection between menstruation and a woman's decision to become a vegetarian. Clearly, this is a rather different kind of connection than we find in Singer.

[60] Ibid., 217.

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by the vegetarian ethic.[61] In Singer's vegetarian texts what Adams calls the "absent referent" – the animal – is revered, and what takes its place in the signifying system – meat – is abject and so abjured. Singer's female characters demonstrate on occasion that they are aware of the metaphor themselves – Anna, in *Shadows over the Hudson*, for instance, comments, upon seeing a window display in a butcher's shop, that "they might easily have displayed me in the same way."[62] However, this depiction of women tends to be drawn through the vegetarian characters (who are always male) as the female body comes to symbolize for them the dual temptations of sex and carnivorism. Accordingly, *pace* Adams, it is the vegetarians who come to distrust women the most.

"The Fast," from *Short Friday and Other Stories* (1964), demonstrates this most clearly. Itche Nokhum "was always a small eater," we are told:

> He had long felt a repugnance to eating meat or anything that came from living creatures. Ever since he had seen Leizer the shokhet slaughter an ox at the slaughterhouse, meat made him nauseous. Even milk, drawn from udders, and eggs, laid by hens, were repellent. All of these had to do with blood, veins, gut.

It was this small appetite that led to Itche's wife, Roise Genendel, leaving him: if women equal meat, sexual abstinence must follow from dietary abstinence. "It wasn't right between us from the very first. Forgive me, but you're not a man," clarifies Roise when she appears later in the story.[63] Because dietary abstinence represents an attempt to "overcome the enemy," as Itche puts it, then the female who attempts to draw the vegetarian back to the indulgences of the flesh must figure as an agent of that enemy, Lilith or Eve, staples of Singer's fiction.[64] Accordingly, Itche is plagued by dreams in which Roise appears "as naked as mother Eve" speaking "perverse words" and laughing "shamelessly."[65] The necessity of doing away with the source of such carnivorous temptation means that uxoricide features prominently in Singer's fiction, and both Yoineh, in "The Slaughterer," and Itche, in "The Fast,"

[61] Evelyn Torton Beck, "I. B. Singer's Misogyny," *Lilith*, 6 (1979), 34. Even "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," from *Short Friday and Other Stories* (1964), made into something of a feminist cause célèbre by Barbra Streisand's Hollywood film version, had nothing to do with women's liberation in the eyes of Singer. "She doesn't want worldly things," Singer commented on the occasion of the opening of the original theatre production of the story, "She only wants to study Torah. And she wasn't fighting for other women – only herself." Singer, quoted in Hadda, *Singer: A Life*, 189.

[62] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shadows on the Hudson*, tr. Joseph Sherman (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1998), 112.

[63] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Fast," tr. Mirra Ginsburg, in *Isaac Bashevis Singer Collected Stories: Gimpel the Fool to the Letter Writer*, 420–29, 420, 426.

[64] Hence why a novel about a man married to three women is titled *Enemies: A Love Story*.

[65] Singer, "The Fast," 421.

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dream of their wives being murdered. The extraordinary relish taken in the description of the latter's fantasy testifies to the "deadly pleasure" that Singer took in misogyny, and requires no further comment.[66] Singer writes,

> For a time he [Itche] watched dumbly as she approached, half woman, half shapeless ooze, a monstrous fungus straining to break away from its root, a creature put together in haste. After a while she began to melt away. Pieces dripped from her. The face dissolved, the hair scattered, the nose stretched out and became a snout … She spat out her tongue. Roise Genendel vanished, and the sun flashed in the east sharp as a knife. The morning had slaughtered Roise Genendel and splashed her blood.[67]

Dietary abstinence means that Singer's women see the vegetarian as less of a man; it thus follows that in Singer's fictional world the most lustful women want the most carnivorous of men. This is brought out most vividly in the remarkable, and unpleasant, "Blood," from *Short Friday and Other Stories* (1964), which opens with a statement of its main theme: "The cabbalists know that the passion for blood and the passion for flesh have the same origin, and this is the reason 'Thou shalt not kill' is followed by 'Thou shalt not commit adultery.'"[68] The theme is dramatized by the tale of Risha, whose reputation as a "man killer" preceded her marriage to Reb Falik, her current husband. In an echo of Arthur Schopenhauer's description of women as "stunted, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped, and short-legged," Risha is described as "having the broad hips of a child-bearer."[69] That she has never borne children means that the sex she practised with her first two husbands produced only lusty delight, a dereliction of her womanly duty in Schopenhauerian terms as she "exists solely for the propagation of the race."[70] It is her lust for meat that leads her, upon the death of the estate's slaughterer, to seek out new candidates for the role; the symbolic and bloody connection between Risha and Reuben, slaughterer-in-waiting, is established when Singer describes her "full head of red hair" and his "red neck."[71]

[66] Mark Spilka, "Isaac Bashevis Singer and the Deadly Pleasures of Misogyny," in Spilka, *Eight Lessons in Love: A Domestic Violence Reader* (London and Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 321–45.

[67] Singer, "The Fast," 425.

[68] Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Blood," tr. Isaac Bashevis Singer and Elizabeth Pollet, in *Isaac Bashevis Singer Collected Stories: Gimpel the Fool to the Letter Writer*, 353–70, 353.

[69] Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Women," in Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, selected and translated by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2004), 80–88, 85; Singer, "Blood," 353.

[70] Schopenhauer, 84.

[71] Singer, "Blood," 353, 355. Although I am arguing that the primary impetus for Singer's vegetarianism does not stem from *Kashrut* it would be remiss not to point out that this connection between meat and female blood owes something to the prohibition on consuming blood found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy; the traditional requirement of *shechita* (ritual slaughter) is that blood of the carcass be fully drained. The abundance of female blood in Singer's stories is a way of emphasizing their "unclean" and prohibited status.

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Reuben puts on a display of butchery for Risha, who watches in delight as the slaughterer disdains pity and kills a gander. The sight of the white feathers growing red with the blood of the creature establishes "the connection between blood-lust and sexual lust," which Ted Hughes saw as one of the many "occult insights" that Singer's fiction offers. Risha bites her lip in carnal anticipation and invites Reuben to come to join the staff on the estate.[72] The ensuing affair cements that connection as the "amorous play" of the pair facilitates Risha's desire to be "murdered" by Reuben, and dramatizes the way in which the author figures her as complicit in her transformation into meat. The implicit danger of the metaphor is signified when Singer notes that the "cutting of throats and the shedding of blood" are so "mixed with carnal desire" that Risha loses track of "where one began and the other ended."[73]

Alexander notes that "Risha reduces herself more and more to the state of the human animal [as] the old figure of the 'beast with two backs' is literally realized," and concludes that the moral of the story is that "sexuality, like all things originally good (and perhaps more than most), is liable to perversion if carried to excess."[74] Such a view is consonant with the traditional Western philosophical position because the animal metaphor, in just one of its many spurious employments, is used to convey excessive sexuality. "Sexuality exposes man to the danger of equality with the beasts," warned Kant in his "Duties towards the Body in Respect of Sexual Impulse."[75] But, as we have noted, to "become animal" is not to be "reduced" in Singer's epistemology, but rather to be revealed as that which we already are. Singer, rather than warning against excessive sexuality, then, is accepting patriarchal distrust of the lascivious woman and employing the "woman-as-meat" metaphor as a conduit for a vegetarian message. In fact, Risha's lust for blood comes to predominate over her sexual lust. Her announcement that she wishes to take a hand in the slaughtering alarms Reuben: "True, he was an adulterer," Reuben thinks to himself, "but why should they lead other people into iniquity, causing them to eat non-kosher carcasses? No, God forbid he and Risha should do anything like that. To become a slaughterer it was necessary

[72] Ted Hughes, "The Genius of Isaac Bashevis Singer," *New York Review of Books*, 4, 6 (22 April 1965), n.p., available at www.nybooks.com/articles/1965/04/22/the-genius-of-isaac-bashevis-singer.

[73] Singer, "Blood," 360.

[74] Alexander, *Singer: A Study in the Short Fiction*, 60–61.

[75] Immanuel Kant, quoted in Midgley, *Beast and Man*, 42. Commenting on Kant's suggestion, Midgley wonders, "how can there be such a danger? … The point might be that beasts give more time and attention to sex than people, or are more promiscuous. But even if this were true, it would not alone show that they were wrong to do so, or that people would be wrong to imitate them – not unless one had shown separately that animals always were wrong, or that people should never imitate them." Midgley, 45.

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to study the *Shulchan Aruch* and the Commentaries." The lust for blood produces the greater sin as Risha not only browbeats Reuben into submission but takes such "pleasure in the killing" that he is relegated to the role of her assistant.[76] When it has been discovered that the pair have been selling unkosher meats Reuben flees the town out of both fear and guilt. Risha, however, feels no contrition, and stays on, converting to Christianity so that she can "slaughter openly and in whatever manner she pleased."[77] When Reuben returns years later, after "wandering from town to town, eating no meat," his conversion to vegetarianism renders him a penitent, and so worthy of being saved. But Singer affords no such forgiveness to Risha, who, as instigator of symbolic and literal carnivorism and corrupter of the village, is destined to meet the same bloody end as the animals she has slaughtered. This ending suggests that "Blood" is not simply about the presentation of sexual perversion or religious transgression; it indicates, rather, that the story is concerned with dramatizing the vegetarian ethic through the misogynistic connection between carnivorism and the female.

Psychoanalytically inclined readings of Singer, such as those provided by Mark Spilka, and Janet Hadda, in her biography, suggest, troublingly, that Singer played out in fiction what he could not realize in life.[78] Spilka writes, "Strictly speaking, Singer himself is the great wife killer … [he] dispatches vain women with a punishment that seems rather incommensurate with their crimes."[79] In such readings, Singer's guilt provides the context for his problematic relationship with women: he did, after all, leave behind a wife (and child) in Poland upon emigrating to America. This, as Spilka admits, cannot account for the gratuitous ending of so many of Singer's women; but Singer's vegetarianism, and his acceptance of the "women-as-meat" metaphor, helps explain, if not excuse, this tendency. Singer made clear in his writings and interviews that he associated animals with innocence: "Do you need your glory to be connected with so much suffering of creatures without glory, just innocent creatures who would like to pass a few years in peace?" he asked of the Almighty, during an interview with *Newsweek* given just after winning the Nobel Prize.[80] Part of a general valorization of innocence, Singer also lauded the quality in children, whom he depicted as ideal readers, and for whom he wrote books.[81] Accordingly, throughout Singer's fiction the ideal

[76] Singer, "Blood," 361.
[77] Ibid., 366.
[78] Hadda draws on the testimony of one of Singer's female translators to make this point. Hadda, *Singer: A Life*, 159.
[79] Spilka, "Deadly Pleasures," 332.
[80] Peter S. Prescott, "Singer the Magician," *Newsweek*, 92 (6 Oct. 1978), 97.
[81] In his presentation at the Nobel Prize Banquet Singer utilized material from an earlier piece called "Why I Write for Children," explaining, "Children read books, not reviews … They don't read to free themselves of guilt … they have no use for psychology … They detest

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woman is the childlike *naïf*: Yadwiga, the peasant virgin in *Enemies*, for example, or the eponymous Shosha, whom I discuss in greater detail below. Their innocence saves them, but those women who figure as corruption incarnate, because they represent the double temptation of flesh and carnivorism, are doomed; they are guilty, in the eyes of Singer's vegetarian characters, of bringing on their own metaphorical and literal "slaughter" since they willingly transform themselves, via sex, into reviled meat.

There is a felt incongruence here: given the logic outlined above (Adorno's, Spivak's, Adams's) a concern for the advancement of the rights of animals ought to be accompanied by a concern for the rights of women. Such incongruity is not without precedent, though. Most pertinent to note here is Schopenhauer, whose misogyny is well documented, and whose repellent diatribe "On Women" seems to have been drawn upon by Singer for his characterization of females, as we have seen above.[82] Yet Schopenhauer, who paradoxically saw compassion as the root of his morality, was one of the first – and certainly the most significant – post-Enlightenment philosophers to write explicitly of a duty to alleviate the suffering of nonhumans. Regarding Kant's propositions on animals (see footnote 27) "revolting and abominable," Schopenhauer saw his articulation of this duty as a key part of his critique of his philosophical predecessor's idealism.[83] As Adorno, much influenced by Schopenhauer's thinking on animals, wrote, "In his day Schopenhauer held it to be the particular merit of his own moral philosophy that it also included a view of our treatment of animals."[84] The tension, the contradiction, perhaps, in both Schopenhauer and Singer seems irremediable. But perhaps if one believes that "there is no hope, no universal hope," as Singer, explicitly invoking Schopenhauer, writes in his 1982 essay "The Yiddish Writer in America," one can have only contempt for a sex which exists "solely for the propagation of the race."[85]

In two of Singer's final novels this pessimistic outlook seems to have broadened into an expression of generalized contempt for humanity: *Shosha* (1978) and *The Penitent* (1983) also crystallize the themes with which this essay has been concerned.[86] After witnessing the "blood-spattered walls" of

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sociology … When a book is boring, they yawn openly … They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity." Quoted in Hadda, 157, ellipses in original.

[82] Several critics have noted the influence on Singer of Schopenhauer. Of those drawn on here see Beck, "I. B. Singer's Misogyny," 34; Alexander, *Singer: The Short Fiction*, 57, 61; Spilka, 339–41.

[83] Christina Gerhardt, "Thinking With: Animals in Schopenhauer, Horkheimer, and Adorno," in John Sanbonmatsu, ed., *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 137–46, 143.

[84] Ibid.,142.

[85] Singer, "The Yiddish Writer in America," 41; Schopenhauer, "On Women."

[86] Three of Singer's novels were published in English posthumously: *The Certificate* (1992); *Meshugah* (1994); *Shadows on the Hudson* (1998). *Scum* (1991) was published in English

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a slaughterhouse, Aaron Greidinger, in the former, concludes, "this hell made mockery of all blather about humanism," and vows "never again to touch a piece of meat or fish."[87] This conversion prefigures his decision to search out a figure from his childhood – Shosha, the only woman he has ever loved, despite numerous subsequent affairs. That Shosha is both physically and mentally underdeveloped underscores the connection between vegetarianism and a problematic rendering of the desirability of female subservience, coded as "innocence." In *The Penitent*, the protagonist, Joseph Shapiro, a secular Jew in New York, withdraws from the corruptions of the modern world to embrace Orthodoxy in Jerusalem. Shapiro, like Greidinger, considers that "man's treatment of God's creatures makes mockery of all his ideals and of the whole alleged humanism," and his consequent abstinence alienates him from the Orthodox community whose members try to dissuade him from his beliefs using the same rhetoric as the community in "The Slaughterer"; one cannot be more compassionate than the Almighty, they argue.[88] Notably, though, in this later text, Singer's character is insistent on upholding his personal ethic. Accepting that his abstinence will "form a barrier" between himself and those he had moved country to align himself with, Shapiro avers, "I was determined to live the way I wanted and the way I understood. If this meant that I had to alienate myself from all people, it would be no tragedy either."[89] This willingness to shun "all people" is the culmination of the rejection of all things human in Singer's work. For Harold Bloom this produces a novel which is nothing more than a nonsensical jeremiad, "a failed attempt at a Swiftian diatribe against the contemporary world."[90] Bloom is, I think, partly

three months before Singer's death. Except for *Meshugah*, all had been published serially in Yiddish in *Forverts* some years before *Shosha* and *The Penitent* (*Scum* and *The Certificate* in 1967, as *Shoym* and *Der sertifikat* respectively; *Meshugah* as *Farloyrene neshomes* (Lost Souls) in 1981; *Shadows on the Hudson* as *Shotyns baym Hodson* in 1957–58.) There was less of a publication gap for both *Shosha* and *The Penitent*, which were serialized in 1974 and 1973, as *Neshome-exspeditsyes* (Soul Expeditions) and *Der bal-tshuve* respectively. See Roberta Saltzman, *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Bibliography of His Works in Yiddish and English, 1960–1991* (London and Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002). Since Singer tended to work on more than one book at a time, and since there are such overlaps in his writing – particularly those later novels (to wit, Aaron Greidinger is the name of the central character in both *Shosha* and *Meshugah*) – it is impossible to establish definitively the order in which his books were written.

[87] Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Shosha* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 73–74.

[88] Singer, *The Penitent*, 39.

[89] Ibid., 132–35. Singer suggests in *Love and Exile* that none of the other passengers wanted anything to do with him after his pronouncement of vegetarianism on the boat from Cherbourg to New York: "I had committed the sin of isolating myself from others," he writes, "and I had been excommunicated." Singer, *Love and Exile*, 236.

[90] Harold Bloom, "Isaac Bashevis Singer's Jeremiad," *New York Times*, 25 Sept. 1983, 3, available at www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/25/home/singer-penitent.html.

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right. Certainly this manifestation of Schopenhauerian pessimism means that *The Penitent* is aesthetically, morally, and philosophically uneven. Singer seems to reach an impasse or an aporia, perhaps, which signals the end of his novelistic engagement with society, and in his final novel – *The King of the Fields* (1988) – Singer returns to his biographical and novelistic roots, writing a fantastical historical story about Poland, reminiscent of his first novel, *Satan in Goray*. One might be tempted to dismiss the later novels as the ravings of an angry old man bitter at the world, as Bloom does; or, one might suggest that even in old age Singer's impish quality remained and that the vituperation is all part of the persona. But Singer's exposition, in 1982, of his belief "that the treatment of animals is proof that there is not much hope for human morality" demonstrated both the continued way in which his worldview (and much of his fictional world) was shaped by his concerns about animals and his Adorno-like realization that past behaviour not only offered no hope for change in the future but necessitated the repudiation of everything that went before.[91] These concerns meant that the generally conservative Singer preempted the call for the "displacement of metaphysical humanism and anthropocentrism" found in the posthumanism of today's critical animal studies, and that, in the vegetarian tales, he respected and articulated what the moral philosopher Raymond Gaita described as "creatureliness."[92]

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Theophilus Savvas is Lecturer in English at the University of Bristol. He is the author of the monograph *American Postmodernist Fiction and the Past* (2011), as well as several articles on American writing of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is currently working on a book project which explores representations of vegetarianism in literature. This article began as a talk delivered at the Animals under Capitalism: Art and Politics conference in Bristol, May 2016, and the author would like to express his thanks to Michael Malay for inviting him to give that talk, and to Stephen Eisenman for offering valuable feedback on it.

[91] Singer, "The Yiddish Writer in America," 41.

[92] Calarco, *Zoographies*, 42. In *What Is Posthhumanism?* Cary Wolfe distinguishes this kind of posthumanism from the "cyborg" posthumanism of Donna Haraway, and from its inheritor, "transhumanism," the roots of which lie in Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment notions of perfectability. Wolfe writes that the point is "not to reject humanism *tout court*, but to show how [its] aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them. The philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism … reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity – a specific concept of the human – that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place." Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xvii. Singer's critique of humanism is based on the same reasoning, and his sweeping repudiation of it is a fictional gambit born from frustration and the desire for didactic cogency. Gaita outlines "creatureliness" in *The Philosopher's Dog* (Oxford: Routledge, 2003).

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