

Silence and the speaking symptom: a Lacanian account of “Black wedding” by I.B. Singer

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In woman's womb word is made flesh but in the spirit of the maker all flesh that passes becomes the word that shall not pass away.

James Joyce
Ulysses

Summary

Since no psychoanalytic examination of the structures of language and silence in Isaac Bashevis Singer's tales exists, I have tried to provide an adequate framework for such a study. The story was chosen for its textual significance as a record of psychosis, as well as for its formal similarity to more conventional psychoanalytic case-histories. Through a study of Lacan's developmental stages (imaginary, mirror, symbolic) I have attempted to explain the female protagonist's resistance to language and her consequent failure to achieve symbolisation, resulting in psychotic hallucinations. The failure of symbolisation on the part of the subject is explicitly linked to her subservient position in a rigidly patriarchal society.

Opsomming

Aangesien daar geen psigoanalitiese ondersoek van die strukture van taal en stilte in Isaac Bashevis Singer se verhale bestaan nie, het ek probeer om 'n toereikende raamwerk vir so 'n studie te verskaf. Die verhaal is gekies weens die tekstuele belang daarvan as 'n rekord van psigose, asook vir die formele ooreenkoms daarvan met meer konvensionele psigoanalitiese gevallebeskrywings. Deur 'n studie van Lacan se ontwikkelingsstadia (imaginêr, spieël, simbolies) het ek probeer verduidelik hoe die vroulike protagonis se weerstand teenoor taal, en haar gevolglike mislukking om die simboliese te bereik, psigotiese hallusinasies tot gevolg het. Die subjek se mislukking tot simbolisering is eksplisiet gekoppel aan haar onderdanige posisie in 'n rigiede patriargale samelewing.

Studies of the short fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer have included historic, racial, generic and symbolic considerations¹ yet there is a lacunae in the theory which has neglected to explore the language of these tales and the cultural pre-occupations inherent in the acts of speech, writing and exegesis in a particular community. The people of whom Singer writes: rabbis and heretics, sages and fools, virgins and harlots, women barren and bountiful, are all bound by the constraints of a narrow culture and it is this cultural milieu that I wish to explore through the medium of psychoanalysis.

Singer's people – the *shtetl* communities of Eastern Europe and the ghetto neighbourhoods of North America – define themselves in terms of language and the law. Therefore the work of Lacan, concerned as it is exhaustively with language and silence, desire and prohibition, speech and writing would seem to provide the ideal tool for excavating the collective psyche of these isolated communities. For the *shtetls* of Europe, Singer's preferred milieu, no longer exist: their people extinct, their language extinguished, they survive only in

memory, as fiction. Paradoxically it is precisely this eidetic status that provides us with the only communicable forms with which to measure a culture, the self-enclosed artifice of narrative.

“Black wedding” (Singer, 1961), the story chosen for this enquiry, conforms to the lineaments of fictiveness outlined above insofar as it is a tale about a people rendered extinct through time and genocide. More significantly however, the structure of the fiction is such that it refers to another kind of “self-enclosed narrative”, that of the case-history. Indeed the story of Hindele as told in “Black wedding” has been presented in psychological textbooks as a case study of the effects of psychosis on the female subject.

Hindele is the daughter of Aaron Naphtali, the ascetic and reclusive rabbi of Tzivkev. The family has long been plagued by evil spirits and soon the rabbi falls ill and dies. On his deathbed he admonishes his daughter to “keep silent if you are to be spared”, an instruction that takes on literal significance to the fevered girl. She is soon orphaned, for Hindele’s mother follows the example of her husband and the community sets about finding a spouse for this strange girl who, although unattractive and sickly, brings with her a spiritual dowry of some proportion, because her husband will inherit the religious leadership of the community.

In order to unite two neighbouring villages, the elders choose a young man from Yampol, son of the rabbi of Yampol. Against her will Hindele is betrothed and married to Reb Simon in a ceremony which she experiences as a satanic rite, a black wedding. She refuses to join in the intricate customs and ceremony of orthodox marriage, thus obeying her father’s edict of silence. Despite her hatred of her spouse Hindele falls pregnant and imagines that she is breeding a devil. In the throes of labour she cries out, breaking her vow of silence, and dies. The tale concludes with a report of her death in childbed and the birth of a male child to Reb Simon of Yampol.

The text is interesting both in terms of its explicit concern with psychosis and in the shifting narrative structure which seems to fluctuate between omnipotent viewpoint and intimate testament. I say “seems” because in fact the tale is told throughout from the point of view of third person narrative. However there is a sense in which the middle section which relates Hindele’s embittered perceptions is told from her own position within the text. Certainly it is the festering girl and not the author who experiences her wedding day as a black mass, her pregnancy as a satanic covenant and her death as a deliverance. This angled perspective is emphasised by the return to a detached viewpoint in the final paragraph where we are told with the deliberation of a news report that a son has been born to Reb Simon and his late wife Hindele.

The hallucinations of the female subject in “Black wedding” are in effect bracketed between two entirely mundane accounts of the events that take place in a religious community when the old rabbi dies and the new one takes over. This imbues Hindele’s demons with the ambiguous status usually accorded to hallucinatory episodes and it is by way of these textual juxtapositions that folk-tale mimes case-history.

In addition to being an evocative text about the state of psychosis, “Black

wedding” also imitates the form of the traditional case history² where commentary and pathology are both textually represented. Furthermore, the fantastical configurations of the story would seem to yield to a Lacanian study where *imagos*, dreams and visions are utilised as instruments of psychic recovery.

Singer’s artistry expresses a vision of a world no longer existant, of a people extinguished, of a language extinct. In the most profound sense, his tales exist as cultural traces, as remnants of a gutted past, as historical narratives (or history-as-narrative).

The *shtetls* of Eastern Europe, the Jews who populated them, their language exist now mainly as fiction and may be accessed solely through fictional devices.

Post-structuralists like Barthes and Kristeva and psychoanalysts like Lacan, emphasize the fictiveness of chronicle and case-history. Fiction here is not set in opposition to fact, but viewed in conjunction with narrative: the textual structurations of the tale, the verbal configurations of the patient’s discourse. For this reason, a post-structuralist analysis is itself a re-enactment of the very fictionality of the given text, whether it be story or psyche. And when the object under scrutiny exists, as here, only within the archive of memory and ungratified desire, perhaps the only true tribute lies in fiction.

If the *shtetl* communities of Europe are reclaimed, however briefly, within the configurations of Singer’s narrative, the problem for the critic lies in retaining this aura of a lost past even as one examines the restored object in the guise of the tale. It is only through the insights afforded by psychoanalysis in general and of Lacan in particular that such a Janus-like vision may be sustained. The following is an account of those Lacanian figures – the imaginary and symbolic phase, the mirror stage – that are used in my account of the short story, “Black wedding”.

The imaginary register in accordance with Lacan is the dimension of the image and is characterised by the relation of similitude, or the concordance apparent between the object and its image. And if, as is most often the case, the figure projected conforms to the lineaments of the psyche, the ego must seek its own congruence in the volumes of the image. The symbolic register on the other hand is located in the domain of the signifier and is characterised by relationships of conjunction. The sign in this form is a cipher which acquires value only insofar as it is differentiated from other signs, themselves enigmatic except in their function as differential referents: the signifier is what defines the sign for the subject. The symbolic register pre-exists the subject who is defined through his entry into it and his articulated response to language and the law.

The child located in the imaginary phase may best be described by an identification that is at once fusional and perversely dual. The infant believing itself to be part of the mother can perceive no separation, no difference between itself and the source of all gratification. When this plenitude is generalised to encompass all of the external world, the subject is then possessed of an illusory and falsely unified ego by which all further images are measured. If the subject does not negotiate the transitional stage at this point

he will remain locked within an imaginary dimension of phantasms, *imagos* and spectres, unable to reclaim the self from the mother, the word, the world.

The mirror stage is that mythic moment symbolised by the first glance of the subject into the looking glass – when he apprehends his own image beyond himself and witnesses then and ever after the physical fragmentation into ego and image. Presented thus with the apparent material disintegration of the self into unitary image and statutory ego, the infant experiences his first trauma of the flesh, identifying his own body as “other” and beyond himself, anarchic, subversive and rebellious. Lacan’s mirror stage is reminiscent of Freud’s oedipal crisis insofar as the moment of the mirror is brought about through the precipitate intervention of the Father’s Law which severs forever the blissful dyadic unity of mother and child. The loss of this imaginary identity with the mother (and through her, with that of the world), the violent separation from the maternal bounty, can only be experienced as a physical expulsion from the mother’s body – as amputation or as birth.

Like all births there is pain and the tearing of flesh: like all births there is the wail of the infant wrenched from its source. And it is here that language begins, here at the place where the subject articulates its loss, so that language first uttered by the “I” who has lost, must ever after be defined and structured about an absence, an insatiable desire. The speaking subject comes into existence through loss and unsatisfied desire, and loss and desire must thenceforth be the orientation of all language. And it is at this place too that we locate the unconscious, emerging like language from the child’s thwarted desire for symbiotic unity with the mother. Like language, the unconscious is precipitated by desire, perpetuated by repression and taboo.

Let us return to the father whose Law invokes the mirror stage: it is always the father’s phallus that precedes both the child’s real birth and its psychic separation from the mother. The infant within the imaginary register comes to represent the phallus for the mother, and as such becomes her decoy, the elided object of desire for the very thing she lacks or lost in her own childhood. So the child must conform to the desire of the Other, the law-giver, the phallic progenita, he who has not lost, he who has never lacked. Furthermore, with the entry into the symbolic order, the icons of the imaginary register are translated into signs – flesh becomes word, word fragments into letter; the mother that once was, now is m(other) and the father becomes Name and Law, both legal fiction and paternal metaphor.

The previously polymorphous, perverse, heterogeneous and ineluctable subject now falls subject to the law, the divisions of language, and the prohibitions of the phallus. The dyad has been broken and the child must take up his position in the symbolic order, separate and distinct, free to choose beyond the familial circuit from object choices not constituted by his own lack. However, too many misrecognitions have taken place: the child who believed he was part-mother, and was proven wrong, the child who believed he was part-mirror, and was proven wrong, grows wary of the words “designed” to catch the world. Despite the successful negotiation of the mirror stage, imaginary significations proliferate, the subject misrecognises himself and his world, and the very language that defines him falters on

misconstrual and enigma. This Lacan called *méconnaissance*, a neologism which in his discourse represents the necessary failure to recognise that is so pivotal to the figure and function of knowledge (*connaissance*).

Language and the Law, the monolithic edicts of the symbolic father, act as a bar to the child's desires, and as such divide the subject on his entry into the symbolic dimension. It is however, a division of the word that is experienced perversely as a fragmentation of the flesh, a point which deserves clarification as it is of great significance in "Black wedding".

Firstly, the child enters the symbolic dimension already mutilated by the effects of a discourse that divides even as it names. This disfigurement may be physical but more often however, the maiming is psychical and no less painful for that. Hindele is rent, and from her shattered womb a demon child is torn. She remains mute despite the agony of misbegotten travail, for her voice has been stolen by the father in the promise of salvation.

Secondly, language whether it be the spoken word or the written cipher is inextricable from the subject who speaks-writes, and the precariousness of that identity before articulation mimes the misconstruals and misreadings to which all flesh is heir. In Barthes' words, writing destroys identity insofar as the authority of each writer is displaced by the writing that writes him:

Writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin. Writing is that neuter, that composite, that obliquity into which our subject flees, the black-and-white where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes. (Barthes, 1986: 49)³

Speech similarly annihilates the body that speaks, the voice that names, and speech even more than writing is potent to depose the subject who desires and through whose utterance desire is recognised.

Many of Singer's tales like "Gimpel the fool" (Singer, 1981) and "A crown of feathers" (Singer, 1979) exhibit the plight of the subject who is written-spoken by others (the prohibitive father, the permissive mother) and who cannot then achieve symbolisation. "Black wedding", however, illustrates the bedlam of the subject written by her own texts, spoken by her own silence. Both situations involve a displacement of the word; in the first place from the individual to the authority who speaks for the subject; and in the second place, from the subject to the authoritative centre of his/her speech. The passage of the word from subject to other, from speaker to speech is facilitated by the notion of exchange where the word is given in the form of a reciprocal gift, and received as debt, deposit or demand.⁴ The particular form of the discourse between two speaking subjects then, patterns the figures of their ensuing social interaction. The word thus forms the basis of all political ties, establishing itself as contract, entrenching a power relationship between sender and receiver. The balance of power lies of course with the subject best able to limit meaning, able that is to restrict the arbitrary forms of the signifier to univocal significance. The symbolic father whose Word is Law is he who most stringently represents the power of language to limit, and in limiting, prohibits all ambiguity, all desire. It is to him that all speech falls,

and the subjects who disobey his edicts and indictments are to a greater or lesser extent spoken, stricken or silenced.

The story which follows traces the denial of symbolisation on the part of the undeveloped psyche, through a refusal of speech. The protagonist of this tale refuses the word, thus foregoing her developmental passage through the mirror. She remains thereafter caught and bound by an imaginary form, captured by a false reflection in a duplicitous glass. Hindele rejects the sacred word in favour of a profane image, thereby keeping faith in the perverse covenant of her silence even when confronted with the manifold hallucinations of a history lived as hysteria. This story then illustrates the plight of the individual when language is denied and the symbolic portal is foreclosed. Hindele, the psychotic bride of "Black wedding", refuses to allow the paternal metaphor adequate expression in her virgin's discourse, and as a result she remains intact because silent.

Lacan's conviction that language is a symbolic construct which pre-exists the individual is particularly evident in his 1957 seminar, "The agency of the letter in the unconscious". In this passage he states:

Language and its structures exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it. (Lacan, 1985: 148)

The notion that the subject may negotiate the mirror stage and thenceforth accede to the symbolic order through an awareness of the word both as it constitutes a social covenant and as it composes an individual contract, is central to Lacan's epistemology. In the following tale, language is proffered as an emphatic refusal, so that the subject involved is incisively barred from symbolisation. The central protagonist, Hindele, refuses to partake of such metaphorical processes as the law, writing and language. In consequence, she fails to enter the symbolic dimension remaining thus below mirror level at the stage of infancy for the duration of her life.

"Black wedding" is a tale that tells amongst other things of the inheritance of the curse of silence, an hereditary scourge of the word. Hindele is the female off-spring of a long line of rabbis, all of whom "warred constantly with the evil ones" (Singer, 1961: 27), and all of whom, because blessed with the power of the word, eventually emerged triumphant. Hindele however, as a woman, is denied access to the language of incantation and exorcism and consequently is exhorted to everlasting silence by the patriarchal edict of her father, the rabbi of Tzivkev.

Hindele's father, Rabbi Aaron Naphtali, is a past-master both of the word and of the letter. We are told that his penmanship mimes that of the ancient scribes and that this sanctified script is used for the writing of amulets which are in turn hung from the necks of each of his followers. The chain of signifiers, here literally a yoke, a harness of the word, stretches back in time to the letter of the ancients binding by the written word its present day adherents. Moreover, Reb Naphtali immerses himself in the ancient lore of Kabbalah, a cult of the word insofar as it evokes the object:

It was said that Reb Aaron Naphtali wanted to imitate the feats of the ancient ones, to tap wine from the wall and create pigeons through combinations of holy names. It was even said that he moulded a golem secretly in his attic. (Singer, 1961: 26)

This practice of holy utterance whereby clay may be animated through the intercession of the word is a Godlike practice which in the words of Harold Bloom:

... goes so far as to say of God and the *Sefirot*: "He is They, and They are He", which produces the dangerous formula that God and language are one and the same. (Bloom, 1975: 26)⁵

An assumption one might add, which locates power firmly in the mouth so to speak, of the suppliant, in this case the divine doyen of all speech, holy Reb Naphtali, the Kabbalist.

We are told that the old rabbi of Tzivkev exorcised a *dybbuk* from a young girl and that the evil spirits, unable to harm his son Rabbi Hirsch, who died young, revenged themselves upon the grandson, Reb Naphtali, who thenceforth had to contend with malevolent devils all his life. Hindele, who has been named after her saintly grandmother is thus the final product of the blighted generation all of whom bear the cross of the family name, stretching backwards through the centuries to her great-grandfather, the exorcist. The sins of the fathers find resonance in this girl, the feminine extract of three generations of male rabbis, each one of whom, in sequence, has repressed the speaking signifier.

The female in a rigidly patriarchal culture, does not speak, but is spoken by a consensus, a male quorum as it were in the context of a milieu which wholeheartedly favours the masculine order of all things:

There was a custom in Yampol that when the wife of a young man gave birth to a girl, the father was placed on a table and lashed thirty-nine times with a strap. (Singer, 1961: 29)

The silence of the woman in this context is nothing more than a denial of masculine law, a refusal to be spoken, ironically presented here, through the symbol of the *dybbuk*, the possessor, he who literally expropriates the speech of the other, and in so doing bequeaths the gift of tongues. This possession of the woman by a *dybbuk* is imbued with dual significance. Firstly insofar as it provides an index to the feminine condition as it is inscribed within a masculine discourse; secondly, it mockingly parodies the restrictive law of the fathers through the restorative anarchy of inversion; the self deposed, the possessor enshrined. The procedure of exorcism then, is no more nor less than an attempt to oust this rebellious usurper of masculine power. However, like an anarchist expelled from the gates of the city, the symptom returns from exile to pursue each generation, until the circuit of vengeance is completed.

The first father, the old rabbi of Tzivkev exorcises the demon in his lifetime; the second father, Rabbi Hirsch escapes the demon through his

death and the third father, Rabbi Naphtali endures the demon all his life, transferring it at the moment of his death to his daughter, Hindele.

Even before she is exhorted to silence, Hindele is stricken with all the symptoms of impotent language, of speech repressed and restrained at the outer limits of its utterance: "Hindele often suffered attacks of yawning, red flushes spread over her face, her throat ached, there was a buzzing in her ears" (Singer, 1961: 27). These symptoms are expressed as the indirect fulfilment of a wish since what should be expressed in language can only gain access through the body (in the case of a female subject). And certainly, the *shtetl* community is one which encourages this hysterization of the female body. Schneiderman, following Lacan, calls this phenomenon the "speaking symptom":

The patient is effectively deprived of her speech insofar as that speech can function to give her access to a desire that would be hers. As a bearer of a symptom, the subject is prey to some-one else's desire. (Schneiderman, 1983: 116)⁶

The displaced desire in this case is, quite clearly that of the father, manifesting itself first in speech: "At such times incantations had to be made to drive away the evil eye" (Singer, 1961: 27), and finally in silence, as when the rabbi entreats Hindele: "You must keep silent if you are to be spared" (Singer, 1961: 28). This is the moment of the frontier, when silence is bidden, speech forbidden. Julia Kristeva in *The system and the speaking subject* (1975) provides an illuminating gloss on this demarcated crisis-point, in her treatise on the infringement of the law:

All functions which suppose a *frontier* and the transgression of that frontier, are relevant to an account of signifying *practice*, where practice is taken as meaning the acceptance of a symbolic law together with the transgression of that law for the purpose of renovating it. (Kristeva's emphasis, 1975: 7)

It remains to be seen then to what extent the frontier is redressed, the edict renounced and the law renovated.

Lacan, in his "Discours de Rome", explicitly aligns the failure of the word as signifier with the presence of the bespoken subject:

The absence of the word is manifested here by the stereotypes of a discourse in which the subject, one might say, is spoken rather than speaking. (Lacan, 1984: 43)

In "Black wedding", Hindele is undeniably spoken for if not fore-spoken:

True, Reb Simon was a divorced man with five children. But as Hindele was an orphan, who would protest? . . . She was told that he was a widower, and nothing was said about the five children. (Singer, 1961: 29)

The subject who is refused speech and who retaliates by refusing to speak fails to inscribe herself as a potent and autonomous subject in psychic terms.

In his seminar on the mirror stage in *Écrits*, Lacan speaks of the entry into a symbolic order as that nexus which constitutes:

... a moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatisation through the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by the co-operation of others, and turns the I into that apparatus for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger ... (Lacan, 1985: 5)

There is just such a moment in the tale, in which this "mediatization" may be fulfilled, the mirror stage completed and the symbolic order straddled. Significantly it is at this very point that Hindele refuses to comply with the desire of the other, withholds her speech and consequently tumbles backwards into an imaginary world. This moment constitutes the frontier of the gaze, the cutting edge of potential recognition: "When Reb Simon lifted the veil from Hindele's face after the wedding, she saw him for the first time" (Singer, 1961: 30). What Hindele sees is an object covered entirely by hair, he wears a broad fur hat, has a pitch-black dishevelled beard and a long moustache: "Clusters of hair grew out of his nostrils and ears. His hands too, had a growth of hair as thick as fur" (Singer, 1961: 30). And from this point onwards, the poor girl finds herself surrounded by a plethora of squirming, writhing, and entangled phalluses: "The sashes of the young men were snakes in reality, their sable hats were actually hedgehogs, their beards clusters of worms" (Singer, 1961: 30). What is disclosed to her in this primal scene, at this, the close of the imaginary phase is no different to that which mediates the imaginary for most children – the phallus suddenly revealed by the desire of the other: "He gazed at her like an animal" (Singer, 1961: 30).

However, Hindele, stricken by the silence of the three fathers, whose law is that of the Word, is herself bereft of words, unable even to pray: "She wanted to call out 'Hear, O Israel' but she remembered her father's death-bed admonition to keep silent" (Singer, 1961: 30). For Hindele, speech would not only endanger her soul, but more stringently, it would invoke the dead father, and it is for this reason alone that she refuses speech. If the daughter persists in her silence, the father remains dead, this despite the refracted mirror and the symbolic portal fore-closed.

In her despair, Hindele seeks consolation in the Word:

She found a page of a psalter in the mossy forest and she recited psalms furtively. She also remembered a few passages from the Torah and of the prophets. (Singer, 1961: 33)

This persistence in the ancient discourse of her forefathers emphasises her servitude and is only slightly less futile than the silence she maintains in the face both of sexual violation and agonising birth pangs: "One sigh and she would be lost. She must restrain herself in the name of her holy forebears" (Singer, 1961: 34). Her silence, the words she dare not speak turn to flesh in the kaleidoscopic violence of her imagination and Hindele's holy union with Reb Simon takes on the aspect of an iniquitous Black Mass in her fevered imagination. Beneath the layers of respectable wedding apparel peek the webbing of goose-feet, elf-locks and snouts: beyond the staid walls of the living room lurks the forest; behind the familiar songs of the joyous festival, snakes hiss. It is significant that at this point, the images of violation, sexual abuse and masculine domination take precedence and the bridegroom

becomes all that is rapacious, brutal and pillaging: "He stepped on the bride's foot with his hoof so that he might rule over her. Then he smashed the wine-glass" (Singer, 1961: 31). This breaking of the hymen, this ritual entry into a male world of division and difference contrasts with Hindele's insistence on the validity of the image, a point which Jacqueline Rose, in her Lacanian seminar on feminine sexuality emphasises:

It is therefore a refusal of division which gives the woman access to a different strata of language, where words and things are not differentiated. (Rose, 1982: 55)⁷

However, words and things are undeniably different, in this world as in the next. The child of her belly, Belial the mannikin, recalls division from whence she had banished it by his disembodied insistence on the word and more specifically, on a language that identifies, on a syntax that names: "He was already chattering, calling her mother, cursing with vile language" (Singer, 1961: 33). And it is this egoistical insistence on utterance that cruelly divides and ravages Hindele, for whom after all, language has always been flesh. With the pain of child-bearing, her speech is forced, and as a piercing scream of torn flesh rises from her throat, the heavens divide, language fragments, the flesh and the word are severed, the earth opens and Hindele sinks into a Lacanian abyss:

Where is the background? Is it absent? No. Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge – just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence. (Lacan, 1986: 26)

This moment of utterance, constitutes the still centre of primeval loss: "Hindele had lost everything, this world and the world to come" (Singer, 1961: 35). For not only is the daughter damned for all eternity by the bar of her speech, but more perniciously, the father is resurrected triumphant and resplendent to resume his rightful place in the community, as the eldest male child of Reb Simon and the late, unlamented Hindele. After the howling and hell-fire, as the hosts of Asmodeus welcome Hindele to their lair there is a sudden disconcerting return to a real world of just cause and measured effect:

In Tzivkev and in the neighbourhood the tidings spread that Hindele had given birth to a male child by Reb Simon of Yampol. The mother had died in child birth. (Singer, 1961: 35)

The resumption of the omniscient voice of the narrator over-rules the turmoil of Hindele's delirium so that in the final analysis her hysterical discourse signifies not at all. She, for whom womb has become word, is in the final lines crucified upon the cross of the word, what Lacan in a highly relevant passage from *Écrits* has called the "passion of the signifier":

This passion of the signifier then becomes a new dimension of the human condition, in that it is not only man who speaks, but in man and through man that it speaks, that his nature is woven by effects in which we can find the structure of

language, whose material he becomes, and that consequently there resounds in him, beyond anything ever conceived of by the psychology of ideas, the relation of speech. (Lacan, 1982: 78)

If man is woven by the structure of a language that is his creation and his domain, then woman is no less ineluctably constructed by the pattern of a silence that is her refusal and her retreat. And, it is equally evident from this tale that the speaking subject controls this and all other transactions by virtue of the power vested in him by language, since the other has as clearly relinquished her power for the rather more ambiguous position of silence.

Notes

1. Critics like Irving Howe (Howe, 1969) and Irving Malin (Malin, 1972) have taken pains to place Singer within the context of Jewish-American writers, a category that accords his work refugee status. This is particularly evident in Dorothy Seidman Bilik's book entitled *Immigrant-survivors* (1981) in which his fiction is seen to be at once assimilated into and differentiated from the mainstream of the American literary tradition. Other theorists have viewed Singer as a writer concerned essentially with what is known as the Jewish experience, and whose characters express the extremities of exile and persecution. An example of this may be seen in Sanford Pinsker's study (1971) entitled *The schlemiel as metaphor* in which characters are accorded archetypal significance.
2. In this sense there are striking parallels with Freud's *Study of paranoia* in the Schreber case-study, (Freud, 1984) where the psychoanalyst's detached commentary is juxtaposed with the immediacy of the patient's discourse.
3. If writing destroys identity, then speech is the means by which identity is reclaimed. Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy make this point in their psychoanalytic study entitled *The works of Jacques Lacan* (1986: 83): "In Lacan's view, speech is the dimension by which the subject's desires are expressed and articulated. It is only when articulated and named before the other (e.g. the analyst) that desires are recognised. It is only with speech that the subject can fully recognise his history."
4. Lacan bases this notion of the exchange of the word on structural accounts of exchange practices amongst tribal communities. Marcel Mauss in *The gift* (1969) and Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) present systems of reciprocal obligation, where a formal and non-functional gift is given whose purpose is to reinforce kinship ties by demanding that the gift be returned in kind. The gift has no intrinsic value within the society but is at the same time priceless because it can never be replaced. Lacan maintains that the tribal artifact is replaced in modern culture by the gift of the word – the only object given, whose sole value lies in exchange.
5. *Sefirot* are the holy names of God which can be used to conjure up spirits or to inspire *golems*.
6. In this context it is interesting to note Breuer's (1983: 77) description of Fräulein Anna O, in *Studies on hysteria*, a repressed woman suffering a similar vocalisation of the unspeaking symptom: "It first became noticeable that she was at a loss to find words, and this difficulty gradually increased. Later she lost her command of grammar and syntax; she no longer conjugated verbs, and eventually she used only infinitives, for the most part incorrectly formed from weak past participles; and she omitted both the definite and indefinite article. In the process of time she became almost completely deprived of words."

Similarly, it is appropriate to consider Roland Barthes's observation in *Elements of semiology* that, "the zero degree is therefore not a total absence, it is a significant absence". (Barthes's emphasis, 1985: 77)

7. Again and again in these tales, men violate the fused circuit of feminine hysteria whether by brute force or through the formal rituals of exorcism. This scene from "The power of darkness" is a case in point: "Father called three men to ameliorate the dream, and they stood in front of Tzeitel and intoned, "Thou hast seen a goodly vision! A goodly vision hast thou seen! Goodly is the vision thou hast seen." (Singer, 1979: 223)

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