

"Gimpl Tam" and the Perils of Translation

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Even a cursory examination of the fifty pages in the recently issued *Short Story Criticism* that are devoted to studies of Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Gimpl tam*, rendered into English by Saul Bellow as "Gimpel the Fool," will inform the reader that "Gimpel" is the best known of Singer's short stories, probably the most widely admired, and the one that, with its publication in 1953 in *Partisan Review*¹ opened the door to Singer's subsequent worldwide reputation. Most discussions, here and elsewhere, accept, even laud the quality of the translation. After all, it's by one Nobel laureate-to-be of the work of another, future laureate. Not a single discussion doubts the accuracy of the designation "fool" applied to Gimpel, who is variously identified as a shlemiel, a wise fool, a sainted fool or, at the opposite pole but, at the heart of his folly, a person transformed "from foolish baker to beloved prophet," a sage, a mystic. Elsewhere, Grace Farrell Lee² learnedly explores the Cabbalist roots and meanings she finds in the story. Some critics, in attempting to relate Gimpel to a "wise fool" theory, observe that the wise fool is a figure central to Yiddish literature, a highly dubious assertion, that seems to be borrowed by one critic from another, none of whom, one suspects, has a first-hand knowledge of Yiddish literature or of the Gimpel text in the original.

Among the Yiddish critics, however, Chone Shmeruk, briefly cited by Anita Norich³, reminds us that tam means simple, not foolish: "the English version ... does not distinguish between *nar* and *tam* and cannot reproduce the play on words derived from *nar*." (3) But Shmeruk does not go beyond that observation. One other Yiddish critic, Gershn Sapozhnikov (not mentioned in SSC) also has observed, and at some greater length, that the Yiddish *tam* does not mean fool at all.

Gimpl tam is ibergezetst gevorn in andere shprakhn vi "gimpl der nar," in shpanish un in English. Ober gimpl iz vayt nisht kayn nar, vi er aleyn zogt. Tam is der taych; rekhtfortikayt, ornlekhkayt, nayivitet, reynkayt, shleymes ...

Vegn iyevn vert gezogt in tanakh, az er iz geven an "ish tam vyasher" un yehoyesh taycht es: "An erlekher un rekhtfortiker mench ... un vi aza hot bashevis maysterhaft geshildert zayn held in der arumiker svive fun a "trefener" velt ...

Tam hot a spetsielln yidishn nyuans, s'iz a min gaystike kategorye, velkhe s'iz shver ibertsuzetsn in andere shprakhn. (71-72)

(Gimpl tam has been translated into other languages as "Gimpel the Fool," in Spanish and in English. But Gimpl [the correct transliteration] is far from being a fool, as he says himself. *Tam* means righteousness, honesty, naivite, purity, perfection In the *Tanakh* it is said about Job, that he was "an ish tam veyasher" and Yehoash translates it: "an honest and righteous man" and that is how Bashevis masterfully depicted his hero in the surrounding milieu of an unclean world ...

Tam has a specifically Jewish nuance. It is a kind of spiritual category which is hard to translate into other languages.)

Surprisingly, Sapozhnikov does not elaborate on the implications of the mistranslation. Even more surprising than the failure of Shmeruk and Sapozhnikov to explore fully the implications of the mistranslation is the failure of the critics writing in English to have consulted Yiddish sources. It is well known that the road to misunderstanding of foreign texts is paved with mistranslations.

Yet it is clear that the translation or mistranslation of *tam* can alter the entire significance of the story. It should also be quite apparent that, if Singer had intended Gimpl to be a fool, he would have used the perfectly common Yiddish word *nar*, which in the story is applied to others, never to Gimpel. It is not even one of the seven nicknames applied to Gimpl by his schoolmates. Clearly, Singer deliberately chose the word *tam*.

Anyone with even the slightest familiarity with the Passover *Haggada* would recognize the "*tam*" as the third of

the four sons described who respond to the Haggadic admonition, "vehigadeto levinkho," and thou shalt tell thy son – the obligation to pass on the story of the Exodus from Egypt. *Tam* is invariably rendered into English as "the simple son." With this meaning of simple, it passed into Yiddish speech. There is only one reason for hesitating to translate the title as "Gimpl the Simple" or "Simple Gimpl" (either one a proper translation): an objection to the rhyming title on stylistic grounds. Even "Gullible Gimpl," though possible, might not be unobjectionable on these grounds. Nevertheless, the failure to use the word "simple" has led almost all who discuss the story into misreading it.

From beginning to end, "Gimpl" is the story of an otherwise ordinary man who retains the credulousness, the simplicity of a child, a man who, like a child, believes what he is told by the adults in his little world. Gimpl's vulnerability derives from his retention of precisely that innocent credulousness, that belief in what he is told. Though childishly simple, he is nevertheless, far from being a fool. He plainly says so. Even his world does not call him a fool. It thinks him simple, a "*tam*."

Ikh bin gimpl tam. Ikh halt mikh nisht far kayn nar. Farkert. Nor di layt rufn mikh mit aza tsunemenish. Zibn tsunemen hob ikh gehat ... der letster nomen [tam] hot zikh tsu mir tsugeklept basher m'hot mikh gring gekent opnam." (*Gimpl*, 5)
(I am Gimpl tam. I don't consider myself a fool. On the contrary. But people call me by that nickname [i.e. "tam"]. I had seven nicknames ... The last one ["tam"] stuck because I was easy to deceive.)

His "follies" are not self-generated misconstructions of reality. They are responses to the world which, it turns out, delights in deceiving him. The list of those deceivers is known to anyone who is familiar with the text: the town pranksters; the rabbi's daughter; the whole town in collusion to persuade him to marry Elke, the town's loose woman Elke herself. "Gimpel"'s readers recall his consultation with the rabbi, who reassures him that it is better to be a blockhead all your life rather than to be evil for one hour. "You are ... not a fool. They

are the fools." (*Gimpl*, 6); his betrayal by Elke, which brings him to the Rabbi again; the Rabbi's insistence that Gimpl divorce Elke and Gimpl's unwillingness to do so because of his love for her and the children; his decision, because of his love, to claim that he made a mistake and his return to Elke; his discovery that Elke has again been unfaithful to him; and his determination always to believe what he was told. (What's the good of not believing? Today it's your wife you don't believe, tomorrow it's G-d himself). During the period of mourning Elke's death after twenty years of married life, he is tempted in a dream to take revenge on the town by pouring his urine into the dough. The appearance of his deceased Elke in another dream, warns him that those who think they deceive others deceive only themselves; He recoils from the evil he was about to commit and decides to divide his possessions among his children and to wander about the world.

In this crowded sequence of events, there are several key moments on which the story hinges: the deceptions of the town; the betrayals by Elke; Gimpl's determination to believe since the alternative is to endure the corrosion of doubt; the temptation to defile the dough and his rejection of it, and the decision to wander about the world on a journey part penance, part discovery, part rejection of its "unclean" values.

As Gimpl the wanderer tells his stories to children, stories of lies and inventions, he discovers that "there are no lies. If something didn't happen to one, it happened to another. If not today, then tomorrow, next year or in a hundred years. What's the difference?" As he wanders, eating at stranger's tables, the children ask him to tell stories. "Once a chubby little fellow said to me: 'Grandpa, every story is the same. As I live, the little rogue was right.'" ("Zeyde, s'iz alts di eygene mayse, un kh'lebn r'iz gerekht geven, der sheygets." (17) (trans. mine). The Bellow translation "It's the same story you told us before" is not only incorrect; it obscures Singer's point that all stories are essentially the same; that the basic story of human destiny is the same: the struggle between belief and disbelief and in a world where anything is possible, belief is the only meaningful response.

That is Gimpl's story, the tale of the trial of a man's faith

and of his progress from childish naiveté to an intellectual determination to believe as a way of life, a willed affirmation of faith as the only alternative to a world of lies, deception, chicanery, humiliation – a world that was 'treyf' – ritually unclean. It is the story of *Gimpl* the orphan, of man alone, who must make his own choices. *Gimpl* discovers that doubt corrodes. As the Rabbi instructs him, first you doubt your wife and next you doubt God. If these words sound familiar, it is because they are reminiscent of Rabbi Singer's rebuke to his wife for criticizing his Hassidic rebbe in the presence of the children: first you doubt the rebbe then you doubt God. (*In My Father's Court*, 56) Indeed, the template for *Gimpl* could very well have been fashioned from Rabbi Singer, who, not as intellectual as Isaac's mother, was a man of simple, unshakeable faith.

At her death Elke seemed to *Gimpl* to have confessed "I deceived *Gimpl*. That was the end and meaning of my short life." (*Gimpl*, 16) What, to Singer, is the meaning of *Gimpl's* life? Everyone is a wanderer through life on a kind of penitential journey in a "treyf" world in which anything can happen and usually does. The relatively rare practice of "oprikhtn goles," a penitential wandering, becomes in *Gimpl* a symbol of human life. Simple *Gimpl's* progress from indiscriminating belief to the intellectually rooted – or spiritually needed – belief in a Creator who has endowed everyone with the freedom to choose and the redeeming capacity to love is Singer's paradigm for human life. In this sense, *Gimpl* is Singer's Everyman. Unlike the sin-wracked medieval Everyman, Singer's is an Everyman out of Jewish tradition, born innocent and trusting. Free to choose, he has chosen to wrong no one, to deceive no one. His road in life takes him through the mistakes and the suffering, the doubts and the challenges to belief that beset mankind; it takes him to a freely chosen, unqualified faith in the Creator's world of humane morality.

In sum, it places *Gimpl* among the core works of Isaac Singer – *Satan in Goray*, *The Slave*, *The Magician of Lublin* – works that deal directly with the theme that is central to Singer's life and work, the struggle between faith and doubt.

NOTES

(1) *Partisan Review* XX 1953, 300-313.

(2) Grace Farrell Lee, "'Gimpel the Fool': The Kabbalistic Basis of Singer's Secular Vision," *Essays in Literature*, XIII. 1, Spring 1986, 156-166.

The following remarks are excerpted from Elias Schulman's conversation with Singer, printed in the *Forverts*, February 18, 1979, 7, "A shmues mit yitskhok bashevis zinger."

"As we arrived he was finishing a conversation with a professor of literature. She was, she informed me, preparing two books about Bashevis – one a biography, and a second in which she would discuss his work. Miss Farrell had a tape recorder. She asked questions and both Singer and his wife responded.

When Miss Farrell ended her session, I asked her whether she knew any Yiddish. "No," she answered "but I have a friend who does know Yiddish, and my friend will help me compare the English translation with parts of the Yiddish original." When she told me this I was reminded of the famous American critic Edmond Wilson that, with rare exceptions, he never writes about writers whose work he cannot read in the original. Yet here a non-Jewish young woman is undertaking to do not one but two books about Bashevis not knowing a single word of Yiddish. She will in those projected two volumes have to ignore a large part of Bashevis's work, since about a score of his novels ... have not been translated and are to be found only in the original Yiddish."

(3) Anita Norich, "Isaac Bashevis Singer in America: The Translation Problem," *Short Story Criticism*, 314.

(4) "Der shpigl", xxxv.

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