



ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER IN A YIDDISH OPERA

David Schiff's *GIMPEL THE FOOL*

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Fere libenter homines id quod volunt credunt.
(Men readily believe what they want to believe.)
— Commentarii de bello Gallico

*Rabi elazar hammuda'i omer: hamalbin
p'nei haveiro barabim ein lo helek
la'olam habba.*

(Rabi Elazar of Modim said: He who puts
his fellow man to shame in public shall
have no share in the world to come.)
— PIRKEI AVOT III:15

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Of the many short stories by the Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer—unquestionably the most famous writer of Yiddish literature known to the American reading public—a few have enjoyed worthy stagings as plays in the realm of legitimate theatre, and some have found their way to the mainstream cinema of Hollywood. In the latter medium, the most widely viewed story was an unmitigated, embarrassing, even arrogant disaster—from production to casting, from direction to incongruous contemporary costuming and hairstyles; from the ill-advised presentation of an intimate story as a grandiose Hollywood musical, reverberating with late-twentieth-century pop vocal approaches to the absurd, pompous and kitschy ending that had nothing to do with what Singer imagined; and from distorted portrayals to p.c. (read puerile cockamamie) concocted hints of pseudosexual inversions that subverted the significance of the tale and its deliberate mystery.

For Singer, assessing reproachfully the finished product after its release, the screen adaptation had no artistic merit: the singing often “drowned the action”; one star was allowed to monopolize the film—usurping the entire script with a constant presence that left nothing of his characterization of the protagonist; the adaptation went against the essence of the story; and the production had “nothing but a commercial value.”¹

Other film adaptations of Singer stories were not without merit and in one case exhibited exceptionally fine acting along with Singer’s signature open-ended enigmas that defy simple resolution. Still, none turned out to be enduring masterworks of the screen.

Opera aficionados and dedicated Yiddishists might therefore derive a measure of satisfaction and pride in our

considered view that the theatrical adaptations that most appropriately reflect the integrity of Singer's work and capture its essence find their expression in the medium of opera—and Yiddish opera at that. Chronologically, the fourth of only five such operas of which we know is David Schiff's two-act *Gimpel the Fool*—the first Yiddish opera to be composed in more than a half century.²

In tandem with Schiff's brilliant score—with its colorful depictions, engaging melodic and modal materials, and the very fact of its novelty as a Yiddish opera for an American audience—the 1979 premiere of *Gimpel* resonated with significance not only in the opera realm but, inseparably, in general as well as in Jewish literary circles. Singer, already considered one of the great writers of Yiddish fiction in the modern era, had received the Nobel Prize in Literature the year before. Marking the first—and to date the only—instance of that award to a Yiddish writer, its citation referred to his “impassioned narrative art, which, with roots in a Polish-Jewish cultural tradition, brings universal conditions to life.”

At the time (and most likely still so today), “Gimpel the Fool” was Singer's most widely known story, albeit from its initial English translation published more than a quarter of a century earlier. The story was born in Yiddish as *Gimpl Tam*, which Singer published in 1945 in a comparatively obscure Labor Zionist (or proto-Zionist, Labor Zionist-oriented) Yiddish literary journal, *Yidisher Kempfer*—a more or less niche vehicle with a far more limited readership than the major American Yiddish dailies and other periodicals of the day, some of which (especially *Der Forverts*, *The Yiddish [Jewish] Daily Forward*) included new fiction either in full or serialized. Then, in 1953, the story appeared in *Partisan Review* as “Gimpel the Fool” in an English translation by or credited to Saul Bellow, another Nobel laureate. It was this published translation that was largely responsible for introducing Singer to the American reading public, although some but by no means all observers of Singer's launch to fame have included jointly, if to a much lesser, subordinate extent, the 1950 publication of the translation of his novel *Di Familye Moskat* (*The Family Moskat*)—even though it is thought to have been not widely read at the time.

Bellow's role, or the extent of it, has been reexamined thoroughly by David Stromberg, the Israeli author, translator and editor of the Isaac Bashevis Singer Literary Trust. Accompanying his new translation, in a fresh, revisionist assessment of the story on many levels, he has proposed—seconded by a number of Yiddish literary scholars (including David G. Roskies at a discussion at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in 2023)—that, at the very least, Eliezer Greenberg should have been credited as co-translator and collaborator alongside Bellow in the published 1953 translation.³

Central to Stromberg's reassessment is his new translation, partially based upon and tweaking and completing Singer's own late-in-life draft of a new translation of his own, which apparently amounted to about sixty percent of the text. Singer intended that effort as a dramatization, viz., a playscript, in the hopes of a stage play being produced in English. And apart from the fact that Singer was an author, and not a playwright per se, we should keep in mind that what works onstage and on the printed page for reading as literature are not always the same, and the two can differ markedly. In 2006 Stromberg discovered at YIVO a special edition of the journal *Yiddish* (ed. Joseph Landau) that featured Singer's new but uncompleted “draft dramatization.”

Whenever Singer began that project, it was long after the publication of the Bellow translation and Schiff's composition of the opera. And since the draft published in *Yiddish* was yet to be completed, we cannot know for certain that it represents Singer's final decisions on every detail of translation. By the time he would have completed and “signed off” on it as the final dramatization, he might have made any number of adjustments. In addition, as Stromberg readily acknowledges, certain jokes in one language cannot always be translated into another; and the same applies to humorous expressions, satirical or witty idioms, and the like. In any case, Stromberg's new translation and his analytic essay as the Afterword are not without points of disagreement, including issues of connotation or implication, the most advisable renderings of certain Yiddish words or phrases, their sociocultural or religious contexts, or the overall tone.

“Gimpel the Fool” is infused with many of Singer’s signature themes, fixations and puzzles: daily life in a lost world of small-town or village experience of one segment of eastern European Jewry; sexual repressions and frustrations; spirits, ghosts, inner and outer demons and engrained superstitions; mysteries that at first appear transparent; willing self-deception; blurred lines between fantasy and reality, fabrication and truth, the imagined and the known; and the desire, indeed the need, to believe, sometimes contrary to rational thought as a matter of faith.

To facilitate a non-Yiddish-speaking audience’s grasp of the plot, action, humor, and other dramatic details, Schiff sagaciously devised the role of the narrator, who provides an interjected but connecting flow and seamless commentary in English. At the same time, drawing on Singer’s own words, he created the role of the *badkhan*—the quintessential wedding jester and bard who typically contributed to and presided over the entertainment at Jewish wedding celebrations in traditional eastern European settings. In Schiff’s opera, the *badkhan* is not merely a superimposed master of ceremonies, but a fully fleshed-out member of the cast as an actor-singer. Singing in Yiddish, he ties the action together in a way that most in any audience can piece together and understand—if necessary, with the help of the narration. For the 1980 performances, Schiff wisely combined the narrator and the *badkhan* into a single role, singing in Yiddish but speaking in English.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

GIMPEL, a baker and the “town fool”	Baritone
ELKA, his wife	Mezzo-Soprano
Y’KHI’EIL, her son.....	Boy-Soprano
THE RABBI.....	High Tenor
THE RABBI’S DAUGHTER.....	“Young” Mezzo-Soprano
THE EVIL ONE	Soprano
THE <i>BADKHAN</i> (Jester).....	Baritone *
THE GOAT **	Baritone
THIRD SUITOR.....	“Young” Mezzo-Soprano
THE TOWNSPEOPLE (Chorus):	
FEIGELE	Soprano
YETTA.....	Contralto
WOLF-LEIB.....	Tenor
LEIBUSH	Bass

** The composer specified a “Broadway” baritone, i.e., one with less an operatic than a Broadway musical vocal approach or technique.*

*** The role of the goat can be double-cast with the Rabbi’s daughter.*

THE TIME: Presumably the nineteenth or early twentieth century, though not specifically so stated.
THE PLACE: The fictional town of Frampol, somewhere in Russian Poland.

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Along with, or as part of, many other possible but not necessarily mutually exclusive layers of meaning and insights, the story has been cited in various ways for more than a half century as a parable of faith—not only in God, but in people and life, as well as in common goodness triumphing over malicious deceit. It centers around Gimpel, a baker and the supposed “town fool” (“Gimpel the Simple” in Stromberg’s rendering), a term that, however one interprets his persona, is not at all synonymous with the cliché of a “village idiot.” The town is the fictional village of Frampol, somewhere in eastern Europe—we might assume Russian Poland—probably in the nineteenth or very early twentieth century.

From childhood on, Gimpel, who was reared by his grandfather as an orphan, has been easily deceived or fooled by schoolmates and then by the general adult village folk. For fear of inciting them to accuse him of claiming that the town is full of liars, he has not dared openly to challenge the falsely professed, simulated unanimity of the community of pranksters who have told him outrageous (and outrageously hilarious) fabrications. Even though he may suspect what they are up to, he lets them have their fun by looking the other way. And he consoles—or pretends to console—himself for his disinclination to remonstrate, avoiding confrontation, by recalling privately that in a tract of the Mishna it is said that all things are possible. He knows that the wisdom of that saying doesn’t really apply to the context of his situation, and yet, even while believing or pretending to believe his tormentors and their lies, and despite the moniker he more or less accepts, he doesn’t think himself a fool.

Gimpel has become the constant butt of the townspeople’s practical jokes, tricks, pranks and concocted but impossible stories. He is also the willing, self-deceiving and long-suffering victim of a shrewish, mendacious wife, Elka, who berates him for being such a fool—or even an outright simpleton, which, as it turns out, he is not. He is mocked relentlessly by the townsfolk for his gullibility, and they cruelly take delight at his expense. At one time or another, he has been told that the emperor is on his way to visit Frampol, that the moon has fallen out of the sky, that the rabbi calved in the seventh month, that a cow flew over a roof and laid brass eggs, that the Messiah has arrived and corpses are being resurrected, and that his dead parents have risen from their graves and are looking for him. And he always falls for the gag, or seems to. About the monstrous fib about his dead parents, he muses to himself that he knows full well that it is both impossible and untrue, but, as he says, “What did I have to lose by just looking [for them]?” Upon hearing the jeers and laughter when he falls for that one, he swears to himself never to believe anything again. But then he realizes that that wouldn’t solve anything either, and he is utterly confused, to the point of not knowing what to think or what is going on (whether he was “coming or going” in Stromberg’s translation; “the big end from the small” in Bellow’s).

THE ACTION OF THE OPERA

After a brief overture during which the *badkhan*-narrator introduces us to Gimpel and his plight in Frampol, based on Gimpel’s famously ambiguous, self-contradictory and problem-saturated monologue that opens Singer’s story—now against cleverly fragmented instrumentation from the orchestra pit—the opera proper begins as a flashback from Elka’s deathbed, where she confesses that the six children she bore during their twenty-year marriage are not his. As she dies, he thinks he realizes that she was telling him that her twenty years of deceiving him had been the meaning of her life.

The next scene, back in the present, finds Gimpel initially infuriated by the townsfolk’s mockery and jeering at his “foolish” search for his dead but supposedly arisen parents. At the same time, confused about what to believe about

anything in future, he decides to consult the town rabbi for advice on how to cope. The rabbi assures him that, as it is written in a sacred text, it is better to be a fool (or a jackass) all your days than to be wicked for even an hour. The deceiving townsfolk are the collective fool, not Gimpel, because he who shames another forfeits *olam habba*—the “world to come.”

Indeed, deliberately and unnecessarily shaming, embarrassing or humiliating someone in public is considered a major transgression of Judaic law and ethical teachings. This is frequently illustrated by the didactic legend, objectionable as it is to many of us for what it implies, of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, wherein a rich man’s avoidable public humiliation of his personal enemy is said—though neither literally nor historically, of course—to have hastened the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.⁴

Much of the above action occurs in Act I, during which the townsfolk also organize a match for Gimpel with Elka, the town strumpet whose out-of-wedlock child she passes off as her brother. Gimpel resists at first, not only for that ruse but for other unpleasant features he finds in her. But the townspeople, knowing full well the truth about Elka, nonetheless threaten—as part of their torment of Gimpel—to charge him with slander, which could result in a fine by the rabbinical court. In the event, he not only courts and marries Elka, he solicits contributions so that she may have a proper dowry with dignity.

On their wedding night, Elka refuses to have sex with him, throwing him out of bed and out of the house—on the fabricated pretext that she has not been to the *mikve* (ritual bath), a monthly prerequisite for sexual relations.

In the beginning of Act II, only four months after the wedding, Elka gives birth to a boy. Gimpel knows enough to know that the child cannot be his, and he naturally feels disgraced and angry. But after being placated by the rabbi, who mysteriously compares Elka with the biblical Eve (the connection is never made clear, other than that no particular gestation period is given in Genesis), Gimpel not only pays for the *brit mila* (circumcision according to the Covenant) and the celebration, but he names the boy after his own father as a de facto adoption.

Gimpel sings a lullaby to the baby even as Elka insists that the baby was born prematurely, trying to make an even greater fool of him and insulting his intelligence by claiming that the boy was a “seven-month birth.” Gimpel makes it clear that he knows simple arithmetic: “Seventeen weeks is not seven months.”

Deciding to accept the situation with the ever-so-slight hope that somehow his worst fears might be unfounded, he consoles himself, recalling, “After all, they say that Jesus never had a [human biological] father either.”

When he’s at the bakery, having come to love Elka, despite her incessant mistreatment of him and her endless lies, he steals little bits of customers’ dough and baked goods for her: a *kikhl* (a puffed, hollow type of sugared biscuit, or cookie), a *shtritzl* (a little cake), a *khale* (the special bread for Sabbaths, Festivals and the High Holydays), and a *bubele a flodn* (a little fruit layer cake).

Oblivious to Elka’s affair with his apprentice (which the audience does not yet realize at this point), he praises the young lad’s good heart and sends him home while he remains working at the bakery after hours. Gimpel later returns home to jeers of the townspeople only to hear two sets of snores coming from his and Elka’s bedroom.

Elka, in order to buy time for the apprentice to escape unseen, sends Gimpel outside to check on their goat, which she claims has been unwell. The white goat, which Gimpel describes as trading in (selling) the symbolic confection or mixture of raisins with almonds, is more than just a goat here, but a ubiquitous motif in eastern European Jewish folklore—specifically in lullabies. Usually the goat is found under or near a baby’s cradle. In this case, the goat being left outside may tell something about Elka’s priorities, or the scene may represent Gimpel’s projection out of concern for the child’s future. The goat image has been perceived as either a companion or a symbol of protection for a baby. Among other more probing constructions, however, the goat has been interpreted as representing the father, who, on a metaphoric plane, seeks to ensure not only a sweet future for his child (the raisins with almonds) but also a better world in terms of national or spiritual redemption, or both—all of which may be symbolized in that interpretation

by the acquisition of raisins and/or almonds. In Yiddish folksong, many tune and text archetypes of the lullaby go on to express the prototypical hope that the child will grow up to be Judaically learned and religiously observant: “The study of Torah is sweeter than honey.” This might also refer to an old custom of having a child lick some honey placed on a page of sacred text in order to create a quasi-Pavlovian association between sweetness and learning at the youngest possible age.

The goat image is undoubtedly most widely known now from its appearance in the theatrical song “*Rozhenkes mit mandlen*” (“Raisins with Almonds”), which Avrom Goldfaden apparently stitched together from multiple folk tune sources for his 1880 operetta, *Shulamis*. (One of the principal phrases of that song has an echo in Mahler’s Sixth Symphony, which might simply suggest its ubiquity in Czech, Moravian, and other nearby folk melos.)

Apart from the raisins-with-almonds component, the goat image may also have been derived from even earlier Judaic sources (predating Yiddish folklore) in which the kid symbolizes the Jewish people and its determination for, as well as faith in, redemption and survival—themes that could have resonated with Gimpel. Moreover, the goat in the refrain of the beloved Aramaic-Hebrew seder song “*Had gadya*” (“A Single Kid”)—although some literary critics insist that the text is simply drawn from a children’s verse based on a once popular French ballad—also has been interpreted as a metaphor for God’s having taken the people Israel as “His own” through the Decalogue of the Sinaitic Covenant. All these things were undoubtedly known to Singer, and it is worth considering that Gimpel has taken Elka’s child “as his own.”

Gimpel’s song to the goat is the only instance in the opera where Schiff used, appropriately for this moment, an actual Yiddish folk tune, “*Unter soreles vigele*” (“Under Little Sarah’s Cradle”). Unrelated to and preceding Goldfaden’s song, it appears in one of the first collections of Yiddish folksong, where it is also recorded in a number of text variants as “*Unter yankeles vigele*,” “*Unter dem kinds vigele*,” and others.

[MUS. E.G.]

Elka’s diversion is not successful, for Gimpel catches a glimpse of his apprentice fleeing. But Elka’s “offensive defense” is to curse and berate Gimpel for even suggesting that he saw this, insisting that he has imagined it and she is the victim (“your mind is possessed”).

Her abuse is echoed by the townspeople, who, for fun, always take her side merely to irritate Gimpel. But this time he has had it: “Even to Gimpel’s foolishness there must be a limit,” explains the *badkhan*.

Now Gimpel is determined to divorce Elka, which means that he must persuade her to accept a *get* (a bill of divorcement), since, under Judaic law, both parties must agree to a divorce.⁵ Gimpel goes to the rabbi to discuss the matter, and the townsfolk once again jeer outside, warning that Gimpel’s stated grounds for the proposed divorce amount to punishable slander.

Despite Elka’s continued protests that Gimpel has imagined what he saw, the rabbi agrees that he must try to divorce her. He tells Gimpel that if she refuses to appear in person to accept the *get*, he should “declare” a divorce. By that he means a *get zikku’i*, whereby the husband prepares a proper legal *get* and has it delivered to an agent appointed by the court on her behalf, based on the assumption that in this case it would be in Elka’s interest to accept it. She would otherwise be unable to remarry, and she probably would want to find a husband to support her two children. (Gimpel has no financial obligations to them; he has not adopted them legally.)

No sooner has the rabbi expressed his view and given his advice than Gimpel begins to relent—asking if he would still be able to see the children, of whom he has obviously grown fond. The rabbi replies that he must not, that he must remove himself immediately not only from Elka (“that whore”) but also from her children, who are, after all, considered or assumed to be *mamzerim*. (Under Judaic law, however, a *mamzer*, which does not translate to “bastard” in the sense of a child born out of wedlock, is a product of a biblically forbidden union, such as a married woman with a man other than her husband. But at least two of Elka’s children were obviously conceived before her marriage

to Gimpel, and it is presumed in the story that she was unmarried at the time.) Clearly, he also has second thoughts about never seeing Elka again. He begins to back down at the rabbi's admonition to leave ("Good, Rabbi, I'll consider it")—for which he is taunted by the townsfolk, who seem to know gleefully that the whole matter is painful and not so simple for Gimpel.

In a monologue Gimpel rebukes himself for his inability to sustain his anger. But then he begins to question his own memory—seizing on Elka's skillful acting in her denial—believing what he so desperately wants to be the case, trying to ignore that which he would rather not confront. Here we find Singer in his almost mystical merging of fantasy, imagination and delusion with reality and truth—a subordination of truth itself to the human quest for belief. For in Singer's mysterious and mystery-filled universe, there can be, as he suggested in a 1963 interview in *Commentary*, something of truth after all in fantasies and self-deception—some revelation about the depth of the human psyche from which such fantasies emerge. And what this might reveal is the human realization that the search for truth cannot result in its attainment—hence the need to choose belief, even if that choice may be untenable.

Since Gimpel truly loves Elka's children as his own, his words in the monologue suggest that rather than being the fool he appears to be, perhaps he is possessed of a certain folk wisdom—in his retreat to acceptance, his inclination to forgo his dignity for the children's sake, and his search for an excuse to overlook reality. His conflict, and the way he tries to cope with it, illustrates what Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, in their *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, have cited as the thematic "sanctity of the insulted and the injured" in Yiddish literature.

Gimpel concludes by reminding himself (through the nudging of the *badkhan* in the staging) what the rabbi once told him about the need for faith and trust in marriage: "If today you don't believe your wife, tomorrow you won't believe in God."

In the balance of Act II, Gimpel, missing his family, returns to the rabbi, seeking permission to return to his wife and home. After prolonged deliberation, the rabbi finds some rabbinic authority to allow the reunion with a sexually faithless and therefore forbidden wife, and Gimpel returns. Over the course of the twenty years of marriage, Elka bears six more children, finally succumbing to a fatal illness. On her deathbed (at the beginning of Act I as the Prologue), she confesses to Gimpel that none of them are his. In his shock—given all that has transpired, probably including, though not specified, the lack of any sexual activity between them—Gimpel grapples with his naïveté in allowing himself to be deceived all through those years.

After the funeral, an "evil spirit" appears to Gimpel in a dream, urging him to seek revenge upon the townspeople—who tricked him into the marriage in the first place—by urinating on the dough for the *hallot* they will be purchasing for the following Sabbath. After he does so upon awakening, Elka appears to him in another dream and urges him not to go through with his revenge, telling him that she is being punished in the afterlife for all she has done. This is justice enough for Gimpel, who realizes he should not allow himself to become an evil deceiver because of *her* deceit. Why should he, because of her, forfeit the reward of eternal life in *olam habba*? Why should he succumb to the "evil spirit" after all he has endured? In the event—in Singer's portrayal of her ultimate realization—she had deceived only herself, and on her deathbed she had remarked pathetically that her deception of Gimpel had been the "meaning of her brief life."

Realizing that surrendering to the evil impulse and becoming no better than the townspeople would be a mistake, Gimpel—after awakening from the dream—heeds Elka's advice and discards the contaminated dough. He relinquishes all his belongings, leaves town permanently, and becomes an itinerant raconteur and yarn spinner for children, who eagerly run after him asking him to repeat his fantastic stories. He draws on many of the same stories that had been told to him as lies. Now, however, they are not lies, but entertainment for children. And he is no deceiver, but a performer of worthy deeds in the eyes of Jewish tradition and teaching, since he brings laughter and joy to the children. He has come to believe that "there really are no lies," for whatever does not actually happen is—or can be—dreamt, and could even come to pass sooner or later.

Gimpel's newfound mission brings to mind—though this is not suggested by Singer—an apocryphal story rooted in a talmudic vignette about Elijah, in which a Jew in a busy public square is asked by a friend which of all the other Jews congregated there will be found worthy of eternal life in *olam habba*—if, for the sake of intellectual exercise, only one could be selected. Looking around, the man notices pious Jews engaged in the study and deliberation of Torah and other sacred texts, Jews dispensing charity, Jewish merchants striving to earn an honest living to support their families, Jews praying the afternoon service, and, finally, a shoeless simpleton street entertainer and clown—to whom he points as his sole predicted candidate. Astounded, his friend asks him why, when there are so many more worthy, pious, learned and hardworking Jews fulfilling so many of God's commandments, he would single out the simple buffoon for God's favor. "Why?" came the answer. "Because he brings laughter to sad people."

Gimpel finds comfort not only in his entertainments for children and the respectful treatment he is accorded everywhere he goes, but also in his communication with Elka through dreams and, in view of her rehabilitation, in his hopes to be reunited with her in the end. In that perfect "world to come," there will be no such thing as deceit, and even Gimpel will not—cannot—be fooled or mistreated.

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It is well known that Singer was intimately familiar with the tales of Reb Naḥman of Bratslav (1772—1810), the Hassidic master whose mystically endowed, often messianically symbolic stories are filled with undecipherable secrets deliberately meant to defy our decoding. As early as 1939, Singer wrote a series of articles on the Bratslaver *rebbe's* life and work. And he returned to the subject only a year before his publication of "*Gimpl Tam*," so that R. Naḥman's tales—in particular the assumed theme of faith contained in the stories as well as in his life—are believed to have informed *Gimpel* on more than one level.

David G. Roskies, one of the foremost scholars of Yiddish literature, has identified the particular Bratslaver tale that appears to have been the most significant influence on "Gimpl": "*Mayse m'khokhem v'tam*" ("Tale of a Sage and a Simpleton"). In his authoritative study, *Rabbi Nachman's Stories* (Jerusalem and Monsey, NY, 1983), Aryeh Kaplan translates *tam* in this case as "simpleton." But, he explains, this does not mean that the *tam* in this tale lacked intelligence, rather that he was without guile and "shunned casuistry and roundabout reasoning." That simplicity, R. Naḥman once pointed out, can be the greatest wisdom (*Rimzei ma'asiyot*), coinciding with his dictum that a Jew must serve God with simplicity.

The narrator in the tale takes pains to emphasize that the *tam* was not a fool, but that his mind was *proste*. It is strange, however, that David Stromberg (see below) translates *proste*—which he identifies as a Yiddish word derived from Slavic languages—as "simple." In fact, *proste* means vulgar, gruff, coarse, crude, or, at best, ordinary in an uncomplimentary sense—unless one chooses to treat "simple" synonymically with those adjectives. Otherwise, this only complicates our guesswork about what R. Naḥman actually meant.

Schiff has explained that he sought musically to evoke some of the vanished world of Singer's story. In part, he relied upon echoes of traditional cantorial inflections and eastern Ashkenazi modalities and idioms. But he also wanted to reflect some of what he imagined to be the typical sounds and spirit of traditional eastern European Jewish wedding and other entertainment bands in a Frampol—now all too often fallaciously (and for some of us, vexatiously) misnamed "klezmer music," as if to suggest a bona fide musical genre. But, terminology aside, that approach—which certainly made artistic sense—was neither so obvious nor so easily pursued as it would be today. For one thing, as Schiff has articulated in retrospect, the so-called klezmer revival movement (whose foolish terminology he is not responsible for inventing) had only begun and had not yet quite gotten off the ground.

In the interest of perspective and cultural context with regard to what Schiff fittingly intended, it is worth emphasizing that the literal meaning of the Yiddish word *klezmer* (thought to be derived from a contraction of two Hebrew words) is simply an instrumental musician. Among eastern European Jewry and its immigrant generations, however, the term came to acquire the specific connotation of a band musician in ensembles (possibly though not ideally a soloist) for traditional Jewish wedding celebrations or other aesthetically similar entertainments, rather than, for example, a classical instrumental musician, a jazz artist, and so on. And that appellation cannot apply to any musicians of other Jewish folk cultures or analogous (folk or classical) traditions of, or native to, regions of the world apart from eastern Europe.

Yet even in eastern Europe, the *klezmer* designation was reserved officially for formal membership in the applicable professional association, or “guild”—even though it was often applied loosely and informally, if incorrectly, to nonmember musicians who (at least in popular perception) played more or less the same types of music, whether in Europe or in lands of immigration.⁶

In any case, even if those bands might have been more pervasive in other eastern European areas, we can plausibly suppose—as did Schiff—that their aesthetics would have been familiar to the townsfolk of Singer’s Frampol.

The so-called revival movement to which Schiff has referred with regard to concern for resonance among *Gimpel*’s initial audiences is also a misnomer—which is to say, commonly misunderstood. For in its transplanted guises, that soundscape of eastern European Jewish wedding and other celebration or entertainment bands never actually died—no matter how admittedly diluted, acculturated, adapted, further alloyed, less authentic, and fragmentary it had become by the time Schiff embarked on his project.⁷ Naturally, even the earliest transcontinental echoes involved the necessary substitution of conventional instruments for certain now rare or obscure ones typically played by *klezmerim* in Europe but either unavailable or without experienced players in the new environments. (But then, many performances and recordings of the post-1970s phenomenon have also resorted to substitute instruments that were never part of the ensembles in eastern Europe.)

It is true that fresh interest in the tradition was kindled in the 1970s. But even its acculturated elements had not quite yet become omnipresent in North America, as they would—reinforced by more authentic reconstructions—in the ensuing decade. It was then that the purportedly reauthenticated, and in some cases historically informed, melos, instrumental techniques and clichés, timbres, flavors, inflections, ornamentation, modalities, and overall spirit of this substantially improvisatory art all combined to ignite a still unabated explosion of popular intrigue. Fueled at least in part by adopted if not manufactured nostalgia, it has all but eclipsed all the many other sacred and secular manifestations of “Jewish music” in general, having become the primary if not exclusive association with that admittedly vague, imprecise branding.

To his credit, Schiff judiciously resisted leaning on that *Gebrauchsmusik* tradition out of proportion to other equally appropriate aural evocations. What he wanted to convey with some of the flavors of the music played by *klezmerim* was merely one aspect of a backdrop to the folk culture of a Frampol. And he did so with artistic originality rather than pedestrian imitation. And although the unprecedented introduction of the so-called *klezmer* phenomenon to the general public on the scale of a “movement” was still in its infancy in the 1970s, Schiff need not have been concerned about audience resonance. Beginning with the premiere and through the 1980 performances of *Gimpel*, somehow the audiences—which included many non-Jews as well as Jews with little or no previous exposure to any such sonances, in addition to those with some familiarity—responded collectively to those carefully manipulated echoes with transparent, high-spirited enthusiasm.⁸ Perhaps this was evidence that the tradition had never actually “died.”

Schiff had heard some “*klezmer*-flavored” wedding band music during his youth. Even at nonorthodox celebrations it was (and still is) common to hear at least two or three of the most widely known such dance numbers (the *sher*, for example, in particular), but of course with standard American dance band instruments. He has insisted, however, that those sounds were dormant in his mind and ear by the time he began sketching out *Gimpel*. Still, one wonders if some

of those dormant sonic experiences might have been reactivated unconsciously then and, even if filtered, contributed to the overall aura of certain moments if not scenes. One hears in those a kind of personal if subliminal imprint.

But when it came to his ideas for instrumentation and orchestration, Schiff was particularly (and understandably) put off by the use of incongruous instruments in purported “*klezmer-like*” renditions he heard, such as guitar, electronic piano, ukulele, or even banjo. Those sounds were, in his words, “too American”; what he wanted was “something more European.” So for that stage of his work he turned instead to what struck him as reflections of eastern and Central European folk melos in certain classical works. The particular ensemble of fourteen musicians on which he decided eventually was influenced by his reexamination of pieces by such composers as Mahler, Stravinsky and Weill, whose influence, he feels, is heard in certain instrumental idioms.

Schiff has also credited his teacher at The Juilliard School, Elliott Carter, with good suggestions about the orchestral ensemble. “Start with an unusual ensemble,” he has recalled Carter advising, to avoid artificial efforts to produce unusual sounds. “You wouldn’t think Carter [not necessarily as a non-Jew, but as an avatar of rigorous nontonal music] would be of much help with this kind of music,” Schiff said in a 1999 interview, “but he was!” Schiff also worked on the orchestration with the composer Trude Rittmann, who introduced him to some Broadway techniques; and he found some helpful hints in Benjamin Britten’s use of a similar ensemble for his opera *The Turn of the Screw*. In 1982 Schiff fashioned an instrumental suite from *Gimpel* as a divertimento for clarinet, violin, cello and piano.

* * * * *

Gimpel had a protracted and cumulative operatic gestation. The idea came to Schiff in fulfillment of an undergraduate assignment to develop a libretto for a composition class with Nicolas Flagello at the Manhattan School of Music. Schiff, who had read none of Singer’s stories either in Yiddish or in translation, was teaching a literature class at the New York branch of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion (along with another class in music theory at its School of Sacred Music), and he had put some of those stories in their English translations on the reading list for his class—“as an excuse to read them himself,” he later confessed.

He was drawn immediately to *Gimpel the Fool*. Like Gimpel in the story, his own grandfather had been a baker. But Schiff also had a growing urge to explore some of his ancestral roots in Poland, and this story served as a conduit. At the same time, he intuited the operatic potential of the story and its characters, especially vis-à-vis “the true believer who appears foolish in the eyes of the world.” With Singer’s permission, he proceeded to adapt a libretto directly from the author’s words, returning to the original Yiddish with the help of a number of Yiddish speakers and readers. Singer of course approved the libretto, but Schiff has explained that it was not a collaborative process: “I can’t say I wrote it [the libretto], because it is Singer’s words; I ‘arranged his words.’ But the structure is mine.”

By the time Schiff actually began composing the music for *Gimpel*, in 1974, he was a doctoral student at The Juilliard School, working with Carter. The opera ultimately became his dissertation. The initial version, however, amounted to only a small part of what became the full opera. And that initial small part was first performed, with piano accompaniment, at Schiff’s family synagogue in New Rochelle, New York, in 1975. At that point, it was, in Schiff’s words, “more like a little cabaret piece.” Subsequent performances followed in New York and Boston, each time with additions and refinements to the score and even to the structure and theatrical concept. But it remained unorchestrated until the opportunity came for a fully staged production of the completed work (its “first completed version,” in the composer’s words) in 1979 at the 92nd Street Y in New York. It more or less inaugurated the imaginative and exciting “Jewish Opera at the Y” annual series, which became a formal program the following season and lasted until 1985.

Even for New York, an unusual degree of intrigue surrounded the very fact of a serious Yiddish opera by a classically oriented composer—not a commercial Second Avenue–type Yiddish musical comedy or melodrama, nor a Yiddish operetta, nor a Yiddish cantata, of which there had been hundreds on New York stages since the late nineteenth

century. Moreover, the staging of a newly composed, serious Yiddish theatrical work at no less an established venue for New York's (or any city's) concertgoing public than the Kaufman Auditorium at the 92nd Street Y (formerly the YMHA, or Young Men's Hebrew Association) was unprecedented, adding to the prestige of the premiere.

There can be little doubt that the audiences for the only three preceding Yiddish operas—in London (1912), St. Petersburg/Petrograd (1923) and Warsaw (1924)—were almost all, if not completely, Jewish. Yet the sold-out premiere and subsequent performances of *Gimpel* attracted mixed audiences, including an array of classical music and opera enthusiasts as well as literary devotees from among the general public, adding to *Gimpel's* standing in the arts world as a watershed event.

Following the 1979 production, Schiff continued to revise and polish the opera, which was produced again at the Y the following year. Then, anticipating its third production there, in 1985 (following Jewishly related operas in the interim by Elie Siegmeister, Bruce Adolphe and Lazar Weiner), he began to have (perhaps unfounded) second thoughts about the viability of an opera in Yiddish. Despite the success of the clever theatrical measures and compensating devices he had introduced to mediate the language barrier for a mixed audience with at most a small minority of Yiddishists, he became concerned—in the face of all evidence to the contrary—that much of the meaning, and especially the humor, was still lost on those not fluent in Yiddish. And he came to fear that even those moments that had induced howling laughter from the entire audience—for example, “Jesus” rendered in the diminutive Yiddish equivalent *Yossl*—would probably not fly elsewhere in the country and, after another generation or two, not so easily in New York either.

Some might be inclined in retrospect to misinterpret that reservation as a typical underestimation of the growing receptivity to things Yiddish in other cities, perhaps Los Angeles in particular, although the trend was still in its early stages of contagion in 1980. And on a superficial plane of humorous or even merely (for outsiders) humor-inducing Yiddish words or phrases, no one in 1980 could have predicted their cavalier, untranslated but obviously viable use twenty years later in some of the most popular (often tasteless), nationally broadcast frivolous television programs. Nor could one have predicted then the coming ill-advised inclusion of Yiddish words or idioms in certain widely used but less than academically rigorous American English dictionaries, as if those words now belonged to the English language—without the authority of any officially recognized agency such as, in France, the Académie Française, which of course has no counterpart for English.

Still, given the frequently touted, highly idiomatic nature of Yiddish, with its suggestive expressions, double entendres, insider wit, parochial mindsets, veiled connotations, and references to ethnic and religious matters—so went Schiff's line of reasoning at the time—no amount of advance preparation with a translated libretto could compensate adequately. (Supertitles had not yet been implemented in many opera houses, but, for Schiff, even those would probably not provide a satisfactory solution—although some of us question now whether their value in principle, such as it may be for any language, overrides their distraction.)

In the context of comparative linguistics, it may be worth reflecting on a proposition that some Yiddishists might think heretical, namely that Yiddish is hardly the only language that relies significantly on untranslatable idioms and expressions peculiar to its unique cultural sensibilities, nuances, experiences and orientations. Consider, for example, the French *savoir faire*, *sangfroid*, *esprit de corps*, *beau monde*, *belle époque*, or *je ne sais quois*; or the German *Zeitgeist*, *Weltanschauung*, *Schadenfreude*, or *Gemütlichkeit*. No groping for English equivalents can succeed in matching or evoking the essence, spirit, allusions, flavors or linguistic nuances of these terms, all of which are inseparable from their cultural contexts, mindsets and worldviews.

For this reason, they are best left in their original languages—including in otherwise translated opera librettos. Yet their idiomatic singularity would not preclude presentations of operas in French or German. Whether or not, on balance, Yiddish is actually “more” idiomatic than these or other languages could probably be argued either way. But it may not necessarily be the case that Yiddish so defies operatic viability ipso facto that it must be jettisoned altogether as a workable language for the medium.

Neither the matter of idioms, however, nor the certainty that Yiddish would become increasingly unfamiliar to opera audiences were Schiff's only concerns. He also considered the famously complex matters of diction, pronunciation and inflection that would pose heightened challenges for future productions. At least in 1979 and 1980 there were still a few classically trained and operatically experienced singers to whom Yiddish was not entirely foreign. Even so, intensive, concentrated coaching had been required, not only for those who had no previous experience with Yiddish but for the entire cast, to ensure uniform pronunciation according to accepted standard literary Yiddish. This would always be necessary, in view of the many regional dialects that often depend upon one's family background, in addition to exposure to uninformed, ubiquitous mispronunciations passed around in America.

For this indispensable task, the peerless Mascha Benya, of blessed memory—*nulli secundus*—was engaged to coach the singers in 1979 and 1980. For many decades Mascha was the foremost authority in America on learned, artistic Yiddish vocal rendition and diction. Her own long singing career included opera as well as Lieder and folksong in at least four languages in addition to Yiddish and Hebrew. Singers came to her from across America for coaching in Yiddish rendition.

But there would be no Mascha Benya in Houston, Seattle, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Chicago, and so on for cross-country productions, let alone abroad. And given her age, related travel would soon be (if not already) impractical even in the short run. Moreover, recognizing the inevitable, Schiff probably realized that even in the Greater New York area there would not likely ever again be anyone with her unique combination of vocal, musical, and Yiddish expertise, together with her standards of perfection and her natural pedagogic gift for coaching.

Nonetheless, and perhaps ironically in retrospect, what Schiff could not have foreseen was the astonishing resurgence of Yiddish studies that would soon produce people who—though not duplicates of Mascha—are capable of proper coaching and could be brought anywhere for tours. All that is needed is an adequate budget.

Without that prescience, and in a way to “hedge his bets” as it were, Schiff decided to create an English version for the third production at the Y in 1985. The English translation was his own—with some untranslatable Yiddish expressions and idioms left intact to preserve the flavor. Although he now considers this the “final” version (“I would rather have the opera sung well in English than badly—or not at all—in Yiddish”), he has nevertheless continued to express the hope that both versions may be produced “as is most appropriate for the performers and the audiences.” And he wisely retained the role of the *badkhan* in the English version, to fill out certain elements of the story while permitting the music to focus on dramatic moments.

With all due respect, allowing for the composer's cogent arguments and keen identification of difficulties to be overcome, not all of us are necessarily persuaded about the need for an English version. Other “foreign” languages most frequently encountered in opera houses in English-speaking countries are hardly free of their own idioms and culturally specific expressions. Moreover, those operas whose languages are not part of standard vocal and/or operatic training at conservatories—such as Czech (Dvorak's *Rusalka*, or Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, for example) or Hungarian (Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*)—still require more than the usual language coaching. Yet, though not familiar to more than a fraction of most opera audiences at best, those languages do not seem to prevent widespread appreciation of the operas sung in them.

Perhaps the most potent ammunition for a rebuttal to Schiff's argument is found in the extraordinary public success of operas by Philip Glass that employ such ancient, arcane languages as Sanskrit, Arcadian, and an extinct purported language of ancient Egyptians. Do we presume that diction coaches for those languages are more easily found than those for Yiddish? Do we suppose that even a single singer at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, for example, or a single patron, knows or has ever heard one word of Arcadian or Sanskrit? Yet those Glass operas continue to meet with undiminished enthusiasm and are consistently sold out.

We must acknowledge that the analogy is imperfect in terms of public response, as much of the allure of those operas lies in a certain seduction by the cryptic—especially that of an invented antiquity—coupled with the undiminished

(but difficult for some of us to fathom) enticement of so-called minimalism—a tag that, oddly enough, Glass rejects as a rule, especially vis-à-vis his post-1970s works. Still, the importance of words is inextricable from the medium of opera per se, and champions of those operas seem not to mind their inability to understand any of them. And lest supertitles be hailed as the satisfactory solution, it is difficult to accept that they would be less effective for Yiddish—objections in principle to the technology notwithstanding.

In fact, it seems to have been the general consensus among non-Yiddish speakers in the 1979 and 1980 audiences that even without advance preparation—and certainly with some prior familiarity with the story read in translation—very little was lost. The narration, together with the *badkhan* and, better yet, the cleverly combined role in 1980 as an integral character, succeeded in tying everything together so that one could understand enough of the plot and action without commanding Yiddish.

In the years since Singer’s death, in 1991, there have arisen a number of reconsiderations concerning both the English translation of many words and phrases in “*Gimpl Tam*” and what many of the descriptions and references in the original Yiddish mean or were meant to mean. In 2023, much of the Jewish literary world was fascinated by the publication of the small revisionist book *Simple Gimpl*, by the aforementioned David Stromberg, et. al. (see n. 3). It proposes quite a few seemingly radical revisions to Bellow’s translation as well as to how we should make sense out of many of Singer’s phrases and references.

The book’s opening salvo is the certainty that not only is the English title “Gimpel the Fool” simply wrong for the Yiddish title “*Simpl Tam*,” but that Singer was never happy with Bellow’s title or his translation of the story—which was why he was planning his own new translation of it as “Simple Gimpl.” Then there is a host of other previously accepted matters of translation, meaning, connotations, and symbolism with which Stromberg takes issue.

The justification for the proposed alteration of Bellow’s English title, which would have to apply to the opera as well, centers around the meaning of the Yiddish (and Hebrew) word *tam*, on the (misguided) assumption that it invariably means “simple”—not in the sense of uncomplicated or straightforward, but in characterizing a dim-witted, therefore easily gullible person, viz., a simpleton. Stromberg contends that this is what Singer meant. After all, he asserts, Gimpl announces in the opening line that though he is called *Gimpl tam* by the townsfolk, he doesn’t think himself a fool.

The problem with this contention, however, is that *tam* can have more than one meaning completely apart from “simple.” And even when it does mean simple, it can also mean—alternatively and unrelated to one who is not terribly bright—simple in the sense of unassuming, humble, plain, innocent, without guile or deceit, artless, without ostentation or affectation, unpretending, natural, of low rank or position, common, ordinary, or unimportant. Singer must have been agreeable to “Gimpel the Fool” as late as 1978, when it also became the title of Schiff’s opera and he had no objections. He would have to have given his approval along with the rights. And, as he told many after the premiere, he was quite pleased.

Stromberg’s case for “Simple Gimpl” to replace “Gimpel the Fool” is based in part on an understanding of *tam* in the Hebrew Bible and in Hebrew liturgy, where he maintains that it implies a simpleton. For example, he cites the reference to Jacob in Genesis 25:27, which refers to Jacob as an *ish tam*, positing that it means there a simple man.

Yet Rashi, the giant among medieval commentators on the Torah, explains that *tam* with reference to Jacob means merely that he was a *plain* man, abiding in tents, in contrast to his brother Esau, who is described as a “cunning hunter” and a “man of the field.” Rashi expounds further that the *ish tam* label means that, despite not being expert at hunting and other skills, like Esau, Jacob was a man of integrity, not knowing how to entrap and deceive their father, or how to be cunning in general: “One who is not ingenious at deceiving people is called a *tam*—plain, simple.” Later

exegeses have expanded upon this reading, telling us, for example, that *ish tam* signifies that Jacob’s “heart and lips spoke the same language” (H. Freedman, quoted in the *Soncino Humash*).

Meanwhile, in the two most widely used Torah translations in English-speaking congregations, *ish tam* for Jacob is rendered as a “quiet man.” And the more recent *JPS Tanakh*, hailed as a contemporary updating, renders the phrase as “And Jacob was a mild man [who stayed in camp],” i.e., as opposed to hunting out in the field.

On the other hand, Robert Alter, one of major figures of modern and postmodern biblical scholarship, does translate *tam* for Jacob as “a simple man,” but goes on to explain that *tam* in that passage suggests integrity, even innocence.⁹

Similarly, whereas Stromberg cites *tam* in Job to support its meaning as “simple,” Alter renders the applicable phrase (Job 1.1) as “And the man was blameless and upright and feared God and shunned evil.”

Stromberg’s supporting example from Hebrew liturgy is in the section of the Passover Haggada that invites the telling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt in response to the questions of four sons (*k’neged arba’a*), each from a different perspective. The third son is identified as the *tam*. It is true that in nearly all Haggadas with English translation, that is given as “the simple son.” But it is nonetheless a poor translation, because he merely asks the meaning of the seder and all its elements, which hardly makes him simple in the sense of a simpleton. Traditional commentaries have explained *tam* in his case as “unaware,” sincerely expressing a desire to learn and know, and there is no legitimate analogy or similarity to a Gimpl. Other commentaries have suggested that *tam* for the third son means undocinated, unadulterated or uncomplicated by outside influences from non-Judaic or anti-Jewish sources.

We are told in the 2023 book that Singer’s use of the word *proste* for Gimpl in itself indicates that he is simple. But nothing in the story, or in the way Schiff portrays Gimpl in the opera, approaches vulgarity or crudeness, other than his contamination of the *halla* dough until Elka’s spirit talks him out of going through with the plan to provide it to his customers. What the opera does explore and scrutinize is Gimpl’s personality and inner conflicts, even as it proposes no conclusions.

Several things to which Singer alluded in connection with Gimpl’s decision to go through with the match with Elka engineered by the townsfolk have attracted Stromberg’s serious reconsideration and even radical revision. Singer has Gimpl saying or thinking to himself, as a sort of “Why not?,” *m’kon dokh nisht shtarbn in laybserdakl*. Bellow translated this as “Besides, you can’t pass through life unscathed, nor expect to,” which in retrospect is rather strange. Was Bellow inferring that marriage is a scathing experience ipso facto, or just that life with Elka would be so? Stromberg’s “You can’t die a bachelor” is certainly preferable and could be accepted as neutral were it not for his trying to sort out what *laybserdakl* has to do with it.

Laybserdak(l) can have at least two separate meanings. It can mean simply an old, tattered garment, which could suggest that even by old age, one is so impoverished he hasn’t been able to replace it. With that meaning it could suggest that as a wife, Elka would be supporting Gimpl, otherwise he would die in poverty. But that meaning can’t apply to this situation.

But *laybserdak(l)* can also mean what Stromberg apparently reads it to mean, viz., *talit katan*—the vestment with the ritual fringes (*tzitzit*) attached to each corner, in keeping with the commandment in the Torah that the “Children of Israel” make and wear these fringes “throughout their generations” (Numbers 15:37-41). A ritually observant Jewish male wears this his entire lifetime, typically under his outer shirt, although it could be worn on the outside. (Referring to the *talit katan* as an undergarment, however, can be a bit unintentionally misleading; the Yiddish word for underwear is *untervesh*.) Assuming that Singer meant the *talit katan*, it has nothing whatsoever to do with marital status one way or the other. So the implication that once married, a man no longer need wear the *tzitzit* is just plain misinformed. And surely Singer knew better.

Perhaps Stromberg has conflated the *talit katan* with the *talit gadol*, the “regular” outer prayer shawl. For while the latter is worn during morning and certain other prayer services, usually from the time a boy becomes a *bar mitzva*,

many eastern European Jewish men followed the custom of praying without a *talit* until marriage—commonly though not universally perpetuated in lands of immigration. But this, too, is irrelevant to Gimpl’s decision. A man certainly *can* pass through life praying without a *talit* if he is single (there is no law against it), except possibly for the public embarrassment of being unmarried—contrary to Judaic desiderata. And no one ever married just to be able to pray with a *talit*.

A Jewish man, married or a bachelor, is supposed to be buried covered with a *talit gadol*. Preferably it is his own, but otherwise the *khevra kadisha* (the communal Jewish Sacred Society) would provide one. But this is not the *laybserdak(l)*, and it has nothing to do with whether or not Gimpl married Elka. Besides, had he not married Elka, he could, in theory, have married someone else at a future time.

It only confuses matters further to connect Gimpl’s decision to marry Elka, as Stromberg has implied, with his otherwise not having *takhrikhim* (burial shrouds) in which to be buried as a bachelor. This makes no sense. Although a married *or* single man can acquire *takhrikhim* during his lifetime and keep them for when they will be needed, they would otherwise be provided by the *khevra kadisha*. So even though Singer does have Gimpl refer to having his own *takhrikhim* as he lies on his deathbed (“ready in my sack”), that can have nothing to do with his marital status.

In the event, Stromberg’s “You can’t die a bachelor” is probably the wisest and most acceptable translation for now, leaving it at that, ignoring or bypassing whatever Singer meant by *laybserdak(l)*. Surely he must have meant something, which, however, eludes us and cannot be made relevant as it stands. And it turned out coincidentally that when Stromberg was perusing Singer’s published but unfinished draft for a playscript, he found that Singer himself had also retranslated Bellow’s line as “Besides, you can’t die a bachelor,” without attempting to translate his *laybserdak(l)* reference—almost as if he had not written it in the first place.

Returning to the question of the English title, it may be that neither “Gimpel the Fool” nor “Simple Gimpl” works ideally—as such translations seldom if ever do. The classic literary canon of works in languages other than English is filled with titles and texts that continue to undergo revision, even as some prefer earlier ones. Stendahl’s *Le Rouge et le Noire*, for example, is available in print as *The Red and the Black* and as *The Scarlet and the Black*, and the two do not mean precisely the same thing. There are numerous published translations of *Anna Karenina*, and we have not seen the last. Perhaps someday one might, if reluctantly and unconcerned about charges of heresy, give thought to yet a third possibility, although it would not likely have the same punch for an opera title.

The 2023 *Simple Gimpl* volume was by no means the first serious examination of “Gimpel the Fool,” although it raises many issues not heretofore addressed and, as such, is a welcome addition to the critical literature. Over the years since its publication, Singer’s story has been subjected to voluminous literary criticism, analysis and interpretation on many different levels and from various perspectives and disciplines. Whether because of Gimpl’s faith in and capacity for love, his own guise of pacifism, his natural inclination toward belief in goodness, his turning a blind eye rather than taking revenge or even remonstrating, his optimism, or his embodiment of potential goodness in the common man (the *yetzer ha’tov*, the natural inclination toward good, which Judaic teaching holds that God has implanted in every person along with the *yetzer ha’ra*, the evil inclination—so that mankind may choose or be educated to choose between the two competing forces), most critics have dealt with the question of whether Gimpl was a fool *or* a simpleton. And many have tended toward the view that the inclination toward delusion is basic human nature.

One critic, Thomas Hennings, saw in the story a basis in the biblical Book of Hosea. Others, such as Edward Alexander, have raised the issue of a possible parallel to the inability or refusal of many Jews to face the reality and confront the truth prior to and even during the Holocaust—a failing, owing to an ultimate belief in mankind, that jeopardized not only their own survival but that of so many other victims. If so, Gimpl’s naïveté, real or feigned, might not be so benign a symbol. He could *represent* a fool, even if he is not.

Whatever the critical approach or method, the issues seem always to come down to the essential question: Was Gimpl a fool? However one might translate *tam*, at the outset of the opera he tells us that he is Gimpl the fool. But he follows

immediately with his own rebuttal, which is that he doesn't think himself a fool—to the contrary, in fact, as the story and the opera progress. Had Singer revealed the answer, he would not have been Singer. And Schiff wisely stays out of it, with no attempt to have the music or the characters help us know whether Gimpl was or was not a fool. But the more probing question might be: Did Singer know?

ENDNOTES

- 1 “I.B. Singer Talks to I.B. Singer,” *New York Times*, January 29, 1984.
- 2 Those that preceded *Gimpel* are *King Ahaz* (1911–12) by Samuel Alman; *Di himlen brenen* (early 1920s, premiered in 1923) by Moses Milner; and *Dovid un Bas Sheva* (1924) by Henoch Kon. Insofar as we know, the only Yiddish opera thus far written after *Gimpel* is *Gan eydn fun a nar* (1993), by Ofer Ben-Amots.
- 3 During the Roman occupation and rule, so the story goes, a wealthy Judean was hosting a large party/feast, and he sent his servant to invite his good friend Kamtza. But the servant made a mistake and went instead to the home of his master's hated personal enemy, Bar Kamtza, and extended the invitation to him. Thinking that the host thus wanted to reconcile, Bar Kamtza readily accepted. When he arrived, the host, astounded and infuriated, was about to throw him out in front of all the guests. Bar Kamtza pleaded with him not to humiliate him, to let him stay—saying that he would gladly pay for his meal. The host would have none of it and expelled him, much to his great embarrassment. In anger that obfuscated his judgment, Bar Kamtza went to the Roman authorities and told them there was a secret group of Jews (presumably including the host) that was planning a rebellion, and that the priests in the Temple were collaborators—no longer performing the sacrifices there but instead allowing the Temple to be used as a refuge to organize the coming rebellion. To “prove” his allegation, Bar Kamtza deliberately gave the Romans a blemished calf to give to the priests for sacrifice. Unaware that the blemish (which they couldn't notice anyway) precluded its sacrificial offering, the Romans did so—only to see that indeed the priests failed to perform the sacrifice. For the Romans, that was sufficient evidence of a conspiracy, and they proceeded with a preemptive strategy to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple.
- 4 David Stromberg (and Saul Bellow), ed. Ilan Stavans, *Simple Gimpl—The Definitive Bilingual Edition* (Brooklyn, NY, 2023). See the Afterword by David Stromberg.
- 5 This means that both parties must be in the same state of mind, i.e., with the same degree of possession of cognitive faculties, as when they were married—when the *ketuba* (marriage contract) was written, given to the bride, and accepted. So, for example, if a wife has succumbed to dementia or some other mental condition that prevents her from understanding fully the ramifications of a divorce, she cannot be permitted to accept a *get* (divorce decree) from her husband. Under certain circumstances, for example if the man still wants to have children, or even just the Judaically encouraged companionship of a wife in possession of her mind and all else that goes with marriage, he can seek the permission of one hundred recognized orthodox rabbis to marry a second, concurrent wife. But since he is not and cannot be divorced from his first wife, he remains obligated to support and provide for her, along with all his other obligations according to the *ketuba*.

- 6 Also commonly overlooked is the fact that those bands could include local or regional non-Jewish musicians, such as Gypsies and Romanians, among those of several other ethnicities, who played alongside fellow Jewish musicians. Moreover, repertoires of those ensembles were not as a rule homogenous. They incorporated and assimilated a variety of ethnic musics: Gypsy, Ukrainian, Moldavian, Transylvanian, Romanian, Hungarian and Slovakian, among others, even if the result came across as a unique composite delivery. There was also the not insignificant imprint of musics from Greek, Turkish, and Balkan regions within the Ottoman Empire. *Klezmer* is a noun, not an adjective, and as such it is not an identifier of any one particular or exclusive musical type, style, tradition or genre. As a noun-cum-modifier, it reveals little about that which it purports to modify—neither about the music nor about the performers. Indeed, such misuse can be deceptively reductive, if not condescending.

For the most recent definitive, exhaustive and authoritative study—the result of many years of intensive research—see Walter Zev Feldman, *Klezmer: Music, History, and Memory* (NY, 2016). For an earlier, valuable contribution to the field, see also Rita Ottens and Joel Rubin, *Klezmer-Musik* (Kassel, Basel, London and NY, 1999).

- 7 As the ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin has suggested, “‘Revival’ only makes sense in the case of [the biblical] Lazarus or in giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitations. Short of that, terms like ‘reevaluation,’ ‘remembrance,’ or ‘re-energizing’—as in lost battery power—are far more appropriate.” (Quoted in Henry Sapoznik, *Klezmer! Jewish Music from Old World to Our World*, NY, 1999). Sapoznik, an authority on aspects of the subject in his own right and, through his recordings and live performances with his band, one of the original instigators and promoters early on of the meteoric resurgence and public awareness of the phenomenon, has agreed in part: “Affixing it [‘revival’] to the active across-the-board performance of klezmer music denigrates the subtle and irrevocable process of continuity that is key to widespread renewal of the music.” *Ibid.*
- 8 I report this from personal observation, having attended the premiere as well as subsequent performances that year and in 1980.
- 9 Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1 (NY and London, 2009). Alter observes that in biblical idioms, “the heart can be crooked,” and the idiomatic antonym is *tam*, as pureness or goodness “of the heart,” as in Genesis 2:5. At the same time, Alter brings up possible “complicating irony in the use of this epithet for Jacob,” inasmuch as his behavior is “very far from simple or innocent in the scene that is about to unfold,” viz., vis-à-vis his birthright acquisition.