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'The whole world is a slaughterhouse!': *Eating Animals* and Jewish Vegetarianism

In this talk, I would like to offer a comparative reading of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (2009) and the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer as exemplifying two different strains in Jewish vegetarian thought. As a work somewhere between memoir and journalism, *Eating Animals* sees Foer reflect on the question of meat eating from his own perspective as a relatively secular Jewish-American man and grandson of a holocaust survivor. Foer's grandmother is a central figure in this text, a link to a historical identity and trauma which intimately shapes Foer's attitudes to food. For many of us, particularly those with a migrant or refugee background, we recognise the centrality of food as a part of cultural practice and memory. As Foer writes:

Within my family's Jewish tradition, I came to learn that food serves two parallel purposes: it nourishes and helps you remember. Eating and storytelling are inseparable - the saltwater is also tears; the honey not only tastes sweet, but makes us think of sweetness; the matzo is the bread of our affliction.¹

The foods Foer lists refer to items associated with two Jewish festivals, the saltwater and the matzo are traditionally eaten on passover (Pesach), and honey with the Jewish New Year (Rosh HaShanah). Meatier items for both of these festivals include lamb shank bones (Pesach) and fish served with their heads still attached (Rosh HaShanah). Food both *evokes* and *maintains* memory, providing a point of continuity across generations and functioning as a means of storytelling and education.

This linking of food and cultural memory is expressed by Foer not only as a part of a broader cultural identity but more particularly in his relationship to his grandmother and her survival during the Second World War. Foer describes her ordeal:

In the forests of Europe, she ate to stay alive until the next opportunity to eat to stay alive. In America, fifty years later, we ate what pleased us. Our cupboards were filled with food bought on whims, overpriced foodie food, food we didn't need. And when the expiration date passed, we threw it away without smelling it. Eating was carefree. My grandmother made that life possible for us. But she was, herself, unable to shake the desperation. (Foer, p. 7)

¹ Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Eating Animals* (London: Penguin, 2014) p. 15. Kindle Edition.

In a clear response to the intense trauma of persecution and survival, Foer's grandmother insists on feeding up her children and grandchildren on everything and anything, insisting that 'No foods are bad for you. Fats are healthy - all fats, always, in any quantity. Sugars are very healthy. The fatter the child is, the healthier it is [...] Lunch is not one meal, but three, to be eaten at 11:00, 12:30, and 3:00. You are always starving.' (Foer, p. 8) In relation to meat-eating, Foer's grandmother reasons that 'animals that are bigger than you are very good for you, animals that are smaller than you are good for you, fish (which aren't animals) are fine for you' (Foer, p. 8) These descriptions are affectionately comical, many of us can think of a doting friend or family member who insists on feeding you, many of us will have come out of our own contexts of hospitality culture which feel familiar. However, beneath the affection of the portrayal, Foer puts his finger on something much deeper, rooted in tragedy:

[...] the story of her relationship to food holds all of the other stories that could be told about her. Food, for her, is not *food*. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joyfulness, humiliation, religion, history, and, of course, love. As if the fruits she always offered us were picked from the destroyed branches of our family tree. (Foer, p. 9)

With such emotional and psychological significance attached to food, the question of meat-eating, and abstaining from it, is a significant rupture. Foer cites Michael Pollan's writing on "table fellowship", the essential idea that '[s]haring food generates good feeling and creates social bonds.' (Foer, p. 51) For somebody who doesn't eat meat, they face an awkward social tension when coming to the table with meat-eaters: '[...] it stinks not to eat food that was prepared for you, especially [...] when the grounds for refusal are ethical. [...] How much do I value creating a socially comfortable situation, and how much do I value acting socially responsible?' (Foer, p. 51) Although Foer concludes that it is better for all parties at a table to eat a vegetarian meal so as to be inclusive as possible, he concedes that this conundrum as a dinner guest can be more complicated: 'The relative importance of ethical eating and table fellowship will be different in different situations (declining my grandmother's chicken with carrots is different from passing on microwaved buffalo wings).' (Foer, p. 51)

There is a world of difference between the small inconvenience of being a vegetarian dinner guest and the potential insult of rejecting a meal prepared by a close loved one. Even

in situations where people are relative strangers, the disruption of table fellowship can change an atmosphere in a group, comparable to the violation of a taboo. Foer's interaction with Mario the pig-farmer is one such example, after a pleasant meeting Foer writes: 'I want very much to show Mario my appreciation for his generosity. And I want to be able to tell him that his hard work produces delicious food. [...] I want to "break bread" with him.' (Foer, p. 144) However, Foer is faced with a dilemma when he is offered a slice of ham:

'I don't want to eat it. I wouldn't want to eat anything right now, my appetite having been lost to the sights and smells of a slaughterhouse. And I specifically don't want to eat the contents of the plate, which were, not long ago, the contents of a pig in the waiting pen.' (Foer, p. 144)

As a solution, Foer is forced to lie:

"I'm Kosher," I say.
 "Kosher?" Mario echoes as a question.
 "I am." I chuckle. "Jewish. And kosher."
 The room falls silent, as if the air itself were taking stock of this new fact.
 "Kind of funny to be writing about pork, then," Mario says. And I have no idea if he believes me, if he understands and sympathizes, or if he is suspicious or somehow insulted. Maybe he knows I am lying, but understands and sympathizes. Everything seems possible.
 "Kind of funny," I echo.
 But it isn't. (Foer, p. 145)

In this scene, there is not only the dietary/ethical difference between vegetarian and omnivore but also the *cultural* difference between Jew and non-Jew. Whilst Foer admits to us that he is lying about keeping kosher, he utilises his Jewishness as a cover for his squeamishness of the food he is offered. It is difficult to judge which of these differences Mario is responding to, as Foer cannot effectively read his reaction. Mario's reply: 'Kind of funny to be writing about pork, then' (Foer, 145) *suggests* that it is Foer's Jewishness he is responding to first and foremost, the address to a vegetarian we might imagine being 'Kind of funny to be writing about *meat*, then'. Either way, at least on a surface level, the pretence of a cultural difference as cover for an ethical or emotional one upholds the former difference (the difference of Jewishness) whilst obscuring the latter (the difference of the vegetarian). In addition, there is an underlying sense of gendered antagonism in the interaction, the rapport between Mario and Foer is deflated by Foer's abstention from the masculine performance of meat-eating, once again evoking the historical gendering of Jewishness and vegetarianism as un-masculine or effeminate signifiers.

This all goes to show the complex negotiation of attitudes in even brief social interactions involving food.

I'd like to conclude with the case of Isaac Bashevis Singer, a Jewish-Polish refugee who settled in America and who is perhaps the most famous proponent of a distinctly Jewish vegetarianism, at least in fiction. Singer's short story 'The Slaughterer' (1967) is a key text in vegetarian and vegan thought more widely. It tells the story of Yoineh Meir, a young man living in Kolomir (now in Ukraine) who dreams of being a rabbi but is instead given the job of *shochet* (ritual slaughterer), a job which he does not enjoy. Although Yoineh tries to reassure himself that his slaughtering is both biblically and morally justified, it is a task which torments him:

Yoineh Meir could find no consolation. Every tremor of the slaughtered fowl was answered by a tremor in Yoineh Meir's own bowels. The killing of every beast, great or small, caused him as much pain as though he were cutting his own throat. Of all the punishments that could have been visited upon him, slaughtering was the worst.²

The worst comes for Yoineh during the Hebrew month of Elul, which is a time for penitence and reflection, culminating in Yom Kippur (the day of atonement). This time is particularly busy for Yoineh as people bring animals to him to be ritually slaughtered as sacrificial offerings. After a dream in which Yoineh is tormented by a Dybbuk (demon in Jewish folklore) something in him snaps:

Yoineh Meir went to the pantry where he kept his knives, his whetstone, the circumcision knife. He gathered them all and dropped them into the pit of the outhouse. He knew that he was blaspheming, that he was desecrating the holy instruments, that he was mad, but he no longer wished to be sane. He went outside and began to walk towards the river, the bridge, the wood. His prayer shawl and phylacteries? He needed none! The parchment was taken from the hide of a cow. The cases of the phylacteries were made of calf's leather. The Torah itself was made of animal skin. "Father in Heaven, Thou art a slaughterer!" a voice cried in Yoineh Meir. "Thou art a slaughterer and an Angel of Death! The whole world is a slaughterhouse!" ('The Slaughterer', p. 215)

Yet, even in this crying against God, Yoineh holds on to an essential theology which leads to his crisis, reasoning that:

² Singer, Isaac Bashevis. 'The Slaughterer' trans. Mirra Ginsburg in *Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2011) pp. 207-216 (pp. 208-209)

By rights, everything should rise from the dead: every calf, fish, gnat, butterfly. Even in the worm that crawls in the earth there glows a divine spark. When you slaughter a creature, you slaughter God... ('The Slaughterer', p. 213)

This image of the divine spark draws on the mystical belief in sparks of divine energy which reside in all earthly objects and beings, and which can be reunited through good deeds and prayer. In a fit of lamentation, Yoineh drowns himself, and the story concludes with the villagers 'hastily dispatch[ing] two messengers to bring a new slaughterer.' ('The Slaughterer', p. 216)

In comparison to Foer, Singer is far more strident in his conclusions. More controversially, Singer's short story 'The Letter Writer' contains the following reflection from its protagonist Herman Gombiner: 'All [...] creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka.'³ This phrase would give Charles Patterson his title for *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (2002) which explicitly links the ideological and physical apparatuses of the Holocaust to the industrial slaughter of animals. It is provocative and problematic territory to traverse, we might think of Carol J. Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) and its parallel analyses of meat-eating, sexism, and racism. It is an argument I think Foer would shrink away from as *Eating Animals* settles on a far more ambivalent attitude to the act of killing itself, never quite resolving the tension between a welfarist and a liberationist perspective.

It is interesting to reflect on the more radical critique given by Singer, the first generation religious Jew and refugee, and the more opaque analysis from Foer who is of the third generation of American Jews. What both writers offer is an intense attention to the question of eating animals as it intersects with cultural identity and practice. But whilst Singer's characters lament the whole world as a slaughterhouse, Foer seems to respond with a guilty shrug. Singer's critique feels expansive, reaching out to the world. Foer looks inwards, delving into a far less dramatic world of consumer responsibility, and personal conscience.

³ Singer, Isaac Bashevis. 'The Letter Writer' trans. Alizah Shevrin & Elizabeth Shub in *Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2011) pp. 250-276 (p. 271)

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