6 Isaac Bashevis Singer

DCC: Saul Bellow is on record as having said that he finds the label of ‘Jewish writer’ intellectually vulgar, unnecessarily parochializing and utterly without value. Do you feel the same?

IBS: Well, I would tell you I don’t feel so strongly against it. I consider myself a Jewish writer but as a whole I call myself a Yiddish writer, because if you call a French writer by the French language and the English writer by the English language and so on, I would prefer to be called a Yiddish writer. What Jewishness is, is not clear. It may be religion. However, Yiddish is a very clear notion, so I rather call myself a Yiddish writer. But I am a Jewish writer just the same, I am proud if people call me so.

DCC: There is some debate among various ethnic groups that artists should either emphasize the uniqueness of the group or transcend this limitation. Allen Guttmann has suggested that Arthur Miller’s Focus and Laura Z. Hobson’s Gentlemen’s Agreement are respectively counterproductive and worse than trivial because both novels attempt to demonstrate that Jews and Gentiles are indistinguishable. It is necessary to affirm the Jews’ difference to other groups.

IBS: I haven’t read a single of these novels. The only thing I can tell you is that there isn’t such a thing as what an ethnic writer should do or a writer generally should do. A real writer does what he thinks is right, what he pleases, not what some professor will tell him he should do. There isn’t such a thing as an ethnic writer, all writers are ethnic, because if they are not ethnic, they are not writers. A writer does not become ethnic because he speaks a language which is spoken by five million, and he is not ethnic if he speaks a language which is spoken by a hundred million. Being ethnic means being rooted in one’s

environment and in this respect every writer is ethnic, so this whole business with the ethnic writer is a complete misunderstanding. It is only the writer who writes in a language which is spoken by many people that likes to call the writer who writes in Bulgarian or Serbian, ethnic. But in what way is he ethnic? How many people spoke English in Shakespeare’s time or in Milton’s time and how many people could read altogether? So we are either all ethnic writers or none of us is.

DCC: There is an extensive bibliography on your work, most