

SONDRA SHULMAN

## Yfrem's Eye

Introduced by Mario Materassi

An exacting fastidious craftswoman driven by stringent standards of excellence, Sondra Shulman, our guest in the present issue of *RSA Journal*, is a superb fiction writer with very little patience for the task of finalizing her endeavors by bringing her work out in print. In fact, in her career Ms. Shulman has broken practically all the unwritten rules of the publishing industry. She refuses to indulge in the choice of subjects which the industry favors. Her publications are few and far between. When she does publish something, whether it be a story or a novel, she does not immediately follow it up with a new piece of work, as is mandatory in the fiercely competitive worlds of publishing, but may let years go by before submitting something else. Unless she agrees with her editors, she does not conform to their recommendations and certainly does not bend to their dictates. In other words, as a writer she is difficult to "manage" and, therefore, to "market". While a number of her beautiful early stories have appeared in the magazines and in the quarterlies, since the early Seventies, a much larger number of equally splendid stories are still waiting to be sent out — and these alone would easily make one impressive volume. *Unstill Lives*, a delicate, intense tour de force concerning a love request which would have destroyed the novel's perfect balance in which Ms. Shulman justly refused to satisfy, at the conscience cost of not seeing the book in print. *The Birth of Ohio*, her exhilarating second novel, has never been shown to a publisher. Even after the very favorable reception of *Moonpeople*, a harsh, disquieting plunge into the desperate world of gambling, so far the only one of her novels to be published (1994) — the writer did

not capitalize on the critical attention she had drawn to try to promote her earlier novels; instead, she immediately launched herself into new projects — one of these being *Yfrem's Eye*, the work-in-progress of which the excerpt she kindly gave *RSA Journal* constitutes one of the episodes.

This excerpt is not the first piece of fiction by Sondra Shulman to appear in Italy. One of her published stories, "Gold Prints / Black Nothing", was included in *Scrittori Ebrei Americani* (Bompiani 1989). A previously unpublished story "Wot is Amherst?" — a little gem of irresistible Jewish humor — was included in *Figlie di Sara. Cinque racconti della nuova narrativa femminile ebraico-americana* (Passigli 1996). More important, last spring *Unstill Lives* was published in Italian as *Il giardino e la vita* (Passigli 1999, translated by Claudia Costa) — yet another instance of greater responsiveness on the part of Europeans to the work of certain American writers. It is to be hoped that the attention Ms. Shulman has attracted in this country will prompt some American publisher to fully recognize the literary worth of this most original and most accomplished writer.

Sondra Shulman's fiction, whether in the form of a novel or of a short story, displays an impressive sweep of narrative stances that range from the dramatic to the writer's complex, intense response to reality, which can be tragic as well as humorous, dispassionate as well as emotional. Interestingly, these conflicting responses do not clash, either within the individual text or in the totality of Shulman's work. In fact, the writer's superb control of her diction integrates these modes into a personal style which is always recognizable, independently of the particular stance adopted in the specific story.

It is difficult, not to say impossible, to identify any definite literary model for Sondra Shulman's unique style. At the same time, her fiction brings to mind a roster of authors who may have been part of her formative background, and who can help us place her work in the context of twentieth century literature. The richness and intensity of Shulman's lyrical rendering of her characters' relationship with their environment remind one of Virginia Woolf. Her delicate irony is evocative of Katherine Mansfield — though it must be said that Shulman is equally deft at occasional slapstick. Her capacity to create a whole world out of the flimsiest fragment of daily experience sug-

gests a sort of kinship with Grace Paley. The intricate network of internal echoes and the dazzling clusters of metaphors upon which each of her works is subtly organized recall William Faulkner's and Flannery O'Connors's analogous strategies in constructing and developing their complex narrative structures. These, however, are but suggestive literary romances, pertaining less to the level of conscious intertextual projects than to the persistence of shared aesthetic presumptions. At any rate, although by no means exclusive of others, these very names indicate that the antecedents evoked by Sondra Shulman's work are of the highest literary order.

One's hope is that the richness and the depth of her imagination, her gusto for the most complex intellectual pursuit, her magnificent craftsmanship, her keen sense of humor, as well as her unstinting dedication to her call will eventually earn Sondra Shulman the place of distinction among the writers of her generation which she justly deserves.

## Yfrem's Eye

Nothing is lost to memory. The mind is a screen on which it projects at will and without recourse to reason all that we have stored in our third, inner eye. For I believe humans are endowed with more than shows on the flesh, and each of us carries inside an ocellus no bigger than a poppy seed that was once, maybe millions of years ago, a bulging organ, vitreous and nervy, with a blinding blue iris and a lid that was like a fine mesh, that diffused but did not block out, for this was the eye that was always open to light. It is still there, shriveled and atrophied, buried beneath layers of skin and bone, like a pool that has been filled with the debris of centuries but which miraculously has managed even underground to connect to the stream that originally fed it and to hold onto a few drops of water.

For what is truly vital can only die with the end of all being. So it lives, this eye. A tiny pulsating speck still able to catch light, and in some like me, it triggers off a response the way it must have done all those eons ago when its real use was apparent.

Imbedded below the chin or on the top of the head or even in

the pelvis, it saw what the other two eyes couldn't. It helped to warn of danger, to find food and shelter, and to measure time. It stored those images that were uniquely its own. In crucial moments of decision it brought to the surface all that was not immediately evident.

Sometimes I think that maybe in the twenty-first or twenty-second century, if we haven't by that time blown ourselves to smithereens, a young researcher with the aid of instruments we have not yet imagined, will one day be peering into the human brain and discover hanging on a neuron or floating down a vein, a speck no bigger than a grain of salt that no one else has before noticed. He will magnify it to the hundredth degree and see that its shape is circular and that on one end can be glimpsed a glint of blue. Then he will magnify it to a hundred times more and see nerves leading in and out, wavy lines thinner and finer than stamens, and after the third magnification he will no longer be able to deny what he is looking at, for it will all be there—retina, sclera, cornea and from the iris a shock of azure that seems to be filched from the sea spray or the jay's wing or the glisten of lapis on a day stalked with sun.

And if the instrument he or she is using is strong enough, he or she or maybe a combination of them both — who knows what men and women will be like at this time?—will be able to see in the third and formerly unheard of eye what a painter, a poet, a pianist, a philosopher and actor—anyone who allows himself to fly free on the currents of the imagination—has always seen since time began. And though when it is finally discovered, because of its function, it will be named Botticelli's or Plato's or Milton's eye, to me it is and will always be Yfrem's eye.

Yfrem is my grandfather, Yfrem Bernstein, who, lying in his coffin at his own funeral, was called the greatest living Yiddish actor. Because even dead a part of Yfrem still lived and now I know what that part was for it survives in me. His eye.

As I look at my newly gessoed canvas, beating as if it had a heart, a fleck of color between blue and green lands right in the center of my painting. If I had taken a ruler and measured to this exact point, I could not have been more precise. Here is what determines flux and flow, here is where perspective begins and color first diffuses. Here is where stars are seeded or the sun was born. Here is

my grandfather's legacy. Not just the eye, for everyone has it, but the knowledge that it is there and can, should and must be used. For what Yfrem Bernstein strived for in every single role he played, no matter if it was hero, villain, outcast, or slave, was vision.

I continue with the eye's nucleus, an infinitesimal point that encompasses the whole. It is a point I have reached many times before and from which I will once again begin, for a modern painting, like a modern novel, is made inconsecutively and follows the rhythms of the maker without formal plot but with a determination to arrive at what might be called the end. In the process a picture may be painted or a story may be told but what is not the main motive in the work, for narrative in any form is merely the road on which all life travels.

Besides, who living after Einstein can separate space from time and work on the old continuum? And who knows, maybe there are some right now who have added even another dimension, for neither the world nor the way we see it stops.

My grandfather once performed for Einstein. One January night when it was so cold the snow froze in the sky, Yfrem Bernstein, wearing only a light overcoat and no hat took the train from Pennsylvania Station to Philadelphia where he was met by one of the Professor's students, who drove my grandfather the rest of the way over frozen roads to Princeton.

But this is another story. I enlarge and darken Yfrem's eye, waving it into a cloudy circle, the size of a real eye. I spike in a dot of black where the pupil might be, to mark my grandfather's encounter with that great genius and then I go on, deepening the iris and wafting it into ellipses. First blue, then green and finally purple with bits of the other colors showing through.

It angles upwards, a flower grasping for sun. Its movements give me the cue. Quickly I define its form, three sharp petals shooting high, three drooping sepals, a thick green stem, sword shaped leaves and underneath the iris, the clotted earth black-brown, with undertones of red.

Above, the sun branches into slender wands. One ray stronger and surer than all the others pierces the flower's heart, that ping of black pupil that still remains intact, despite all the paint and swirls

around it. Morning dew catches the light's sting and suddenly a rainbow appears. Still wet, streaky and strident, it arcs over the canvas. Any color I want is mine. All I have to do is choose.

I start with the top band, red. But my hand slips and suddenly my brush is awash in a river of orange. Tumultuous and without warning, the water rises and rushes forward. Bobbing up and down in the swell is a yellow dog's ear chewed at its tip, a dented green fender, a purple, worm-eaten cabbage, Maybe they will sink and maybe they will be left there floating, the debris of a spectrum disappeared, and with a roar louder than a lioness when a cub is at risk or thunder when the lightning splits up the sky so wide open that every window for miles around becomes fluorescent, the orange overpowers all the other colors and, deluge that it is, drowns everything in sight.

I shake, as if I, too, have been swept away and have only myself to hold onto. Any minute now, I may go under and I feel the despair of those who have been caught in a surprise flood and who wake in the middle of the night to find themselves drifting away as if their beds were rafts, while around them, drifting too, are the remnants of their houses and what was in them, beams, doors, moldings, light switches, a fan, rocking chairs—all the trappings of permanence and stability. The painting offers me no hope, for it is the deluge. I stop work.

The river I have painted has turned into an ocean. Far away its waves break on an unknown shore. Once again I hear the menacing thunder, the lioness's rage. For sight does not obliterate sound but unites with it in a primal insistency that drives my work.

Outside the sun has almost set. It reflects back on its burning skin those same tones which, given too free a rein, would overpower all life. Tomorrow, I think, as I wipe off my pallet and clean my brushes, I will have to subdue this watery inferno and the sun, as if agreeing, lowers itself into the depths.