

TILLIE OLSEN

An Interview with Mario Materassi

This interview took place in San Francisco on August 19, 1988.

I had written to Tillie Olsen some weeks earlier, asking her for an interview. She graciously consented, although she did not know me, and invited me to her apartment on Laguna. There, at the top of the stairs, she greeted me with a bewildering bear-hug and thanked me for coming to see her. She literally swept me off my feet with her kindness and warmth. (A year later, I was to see Tillie sweep the entire assembly of A.I.S.N.A. members off *their* feet during four intense days at Capo Caccia.)

We went out to lunch at a nearby Japanese restaurant, chatted for a long time over cup after cup of green tea, and finally went back to her apartment for the interview proper. I took out my tape recorder—and immediately something went out of the warm, flowing, give-and—take conversation we had had over lunch. The previous feeling could not be recaptured. The long, involved discussion of Tillie's prose, of her sense of rhythm, of her ear for lyricism, could not be resumed. Very likely, the tape recorder all too sternly reminded us that we were now to sit down to business. The recorded interview suffers somewhat from the change in tone.

Anyone who has had the privilege of listening to Tillie Olsen speak knows that ellipses and repetitions, logical leaps and subterranean associations are essential to the communication of her ideas. It was important, therefore, that Tillie's characteristic, almost hypnotic circular way of addressing a question be preserved, even at the cost of an occasional unfinished sentence or of an interrupted train of thought. Accordingly, the transcript of the interview has been subjected to a minimum of editing.

Earlier today you said that Henry Roth misconstrued—or distorted, I think you said—the reality of the Thirties as far as the "silencing" influence of the Communist Party on him was concerned. You said that you disagree with that.

Well, I did not express myself with clarity then, if I used only the word "distorted." Because I have no doubt that he speaks with absolute integrity: that's how he looks back on how he lived the time. I am being rather circular in speaking about this. I've only had a chance to skim quickly this piece in *The New Yorker* that appeared recently, in which he spoke with such vehement bitterness and sorrow about all those lost years that were lost, he felt, in which he attempted to please what he understood was the way he should be writing—a way that was not at all natural to him, or had to do with what he most needed to say, and credited his years of silence and the loss to us, to the treatment that he felt *Call It Sleep* had received. Am I . . . ?

This is only part of what he said. You probably read Bronsen's interview in Partisan Review.

I may have read that.

This is something that he touched upon in that interview in 1969. Nowadays, he tends to say that it was mainly a generational malaise that hit many people in the creative arts. But he does consider his having joined the Party at that particular time something that had a bad effect on his writing.

Perhaps we shouldn't talk about this at all. But I told you, my very coming to him was out of I, myself, being in the Young Communist League. *Call It Sleep* was a book that was very much read and very much loved, and it seemed to me that there was very little attention being paid to it outside of the Left. And those kinds of criticisms—well, they certainly were not a dictum that said, This is a book that is outside the pale, this is the wrong direction, and so on and so forth.

But because we have other things to talk about—as you know, I also have a book out called *Silences*, and it is a subject that has profoundly concerned me: silence, and all its variations. I called Roth's

one of the great one-book silences, as I remember, in the very first talk I gave in prehistoric times, 1962. And the reasons why so many who are first generation fell silent after having begun to write—few, of course, who wrote in that extra-ordinary way—are, of course, like everything having to do with human beings, complex, hard to discern; all those strands having to do with it If we have time I'd like to go back to that.

I too am a member of that generation—and by the way, there is an anthology that's just been published called *Writing Red*, which is about women in the Thirties. It's interesting to me, naturally, for a number of reasons—but the young editors who put this book together take the fact that there were women who wrote one letter, or wrote a poem, or published very very little, but the aggregate is, you have a lot of material, looking back and reading everything from that period. So they feel that women, for instance, were not silenced in that period. Yet the fact remains, even if you statistically take the same kind of material that appeared from men who wrote—you know, there was a lot of encouragement to write letters about your experiences, and they would publish them in the various publications of the Left at that time, there was this great explosion of little magazines and the various publications, official and unofficial—if you put them in proportion, you'd see that there was a much higher percentage of men who were writing than women. And of course, in my *Silences*, statistically I was referring only to those who were considered as having come to distinguished achievement. But the effect on me was, again, there are so many sources—the roots of *Silences* are in various directions. Part of them come from being of my generation, and knowing how much was buried, and was silenced, in my generation—both men and women, but far more women than men. And objectively too, even educationally, if you look at the writers who are read in that period you'll see such a difference.

Well, let's go on. But I would like to go back and talk, if we have time, about these other things that Roth said, and the experiences of the time that he felt were silencing one

You were saying that you read Call It Sleep as soon as it came out. You had already started writing, of course.

Oh yes. I began to write—I mean, write comparatively seriously—when I was twelve or thirteen years old. That was what I most wanted to do, to be: a writer. And I think part of my fortune in even, eventually, becoming a published writer, had to do with my coming to my youthhood in the Thirties, not only because there was what we've seen in our time in this country with the various freedom movements, the audience, the readers for Black literature, for all the hyphenated literatures, Japanese-American, Chinese-American, Filipino-American, Native-American—that kind of flowering that takes place; but also because it was an affirming time for the realities of my own life which verified what I had come to believe that my parents believed. They were socialists; my father There have been two interviews—no, one was an interview, the other was an article—that were written around the Thirties on myself, in which I talked about some of these things. But I say in *Silences*—again, I'm being You're gonna have to get used to the way I speak, but I get around to the point, having filled it out before I come to the core—I say in *Silences* that whenever any of us of that class, meaning those of us who must put so much of their life into the getting of a living, and not in the professional satisfaction sense (I'm filling in what is only one sentence)—whenever any of us of that class and/or sex and/or color, generally denied enabling circumstances, come to what the world recognizes as achievement, it is not by virtue of our . . . I don't say "dazzling," but you know, very special qualities, qualities which are expressed and used in everyday life, unnoticed, unseen, I'm not quoting the sentence exactly right, but by virtue of our special luck, combined with whatever capacities we have. And I am one of those who I feel had a special luck. Objectively speaking, whatever may happen with the little writing I have published so far, but it is among the small group of . . . what I've written has persisted, some of it, almost three decades now, and it is still there

Talking about myself made me lose what I was most going to say—oh yes. And yet I am the first woman, who also was a mother, who also was of that class—color was not a factor with me—who has come to some recognized achievement, of varying degrees depending upon who you speak with: I know it's very solid with readers, teachers, librarians [laughing]. Critics is another matter. There's been

comparatively little attention paid, for various reasons. And I also say in *Silences*, at the end, the very important part should have been a long piece—again it was a question of time and money that I didn't do the piece on what is called rather loosely "creativity, potentiality, first generation"—but I say something like "born a generation before in their sex and/or class and/or color," and I start the list with Chekhov and Hardy and I have the Brontë sisters, and I come down to a Roth and a Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, etcetera etcetera. We simply would not have been writing books that anybody would read. My folks had, who themselves led fairly obscure lives, very useful ones; my father was the State Secretary of the Socialist Party for many many many many years

In Nebraska, right?

In Nebraska, not in New York. You see, that was probably also part of my luck—perhaps not—that they moved to Nebraska, they didn't stay in New York. So that my youthhood, which was so much of it involved with the Young Communist League and with the organization and so forth and so on, it was a much more U. S. America and actually, therefore, much more of a larger sense of the world than I would have had, perhaps, had I been involved in these matters in New York City. And far less factional, far less intellectual But to go back to the time before the Thirties, the belief that the (it's beginning to come back, the expression "working class": it wasn't used for so long in our country) that working people were the basic creators of all culture, of all civilization, beginning with language, ritual, development of food, clothing, shelter—the greatest inventions we've had so far—through the centuries. But that was because of, primarily, class and caste circumstances, the genius that was inherent in them never had the opportunity to express itself It's in the dedication to *Silences*.

I have it here.

Oh, that's right. "For our silenced people"—I don't explain what I meant by "silences" because I just told you the ways we were so expressive, so creative—"century after century their beings consumed

in the hard, everyday essential work of maintaining human life. Their art, which they still made—as their other contributions—anonymous; refused respect, recognition; lost."

Now, when you went through the Southwest, and saw those baskets that are now in museums and recognized as art and as a coarse part of that past in which human beings never made anything but they didn't use their art sense on, whether it was tools in the old hand days—of course the art varied from person to person, but basically the art sense is universal and is expressed there, genius for language is universal and is expressed, even now, when so much of it comes in our ears in a far more, in a way homogenized, in a way the opposite of homogenized way, than in the past. You see, that's the kind of phrase that I would really like to expand, because it's so likely to be misinterpreted. Anyway, then I went on to say, "For those of us (few yet in number, for the way is punishing), their kin and descendants, who begin to emerge into more flowered and rewarded use of our selves in ways denied to them;—and by our own achievement bearing witness to what was (and still is) being lost, silenced."

They came with their experience there, seeing a kind of enormous flowering take place, individually. In my own family we had an aunt, I mean I have an aunt, she's dead now, she died in her nineties, illiterate. Her younger brother, my father, her younger sisters, limited by lack of formal education, by their being immigrants to this country, by the kind of life they led in their country—but they were really intellectuals, they were readers, they were thinkers. The women were especially interesting, even more so than my father and those like him, because they had never had book learning or background of book learning, and it came to them against a really heartbreaking (heart-breaking both for the parents and for the children) opposition to daughters learning to read. The story of Vilna, when somebody in my father's family was trying to get schools for girls—they were that far along in the Bund, it was a somewhat later period—and he would always go to the most influential people in the town if there weren't Bundist themselves, and so he was brought by this merchant to the most eminent rabbi, and he calls in his wife, she comes in—nine months pregnant—and he asks her, How many children do you have? And she says, You know how many children we have! He says, Go

ahead, say it: how many children do you have? She says, I have nine. He says, How many *did* you have? She says, You know how many I had. Turns out she had thirteen. Then he says, But you have nine, living. Yes! And then he asks a few other questions, we don't have the time for the whole dialogue, then he turns and he says, So for what did she need to learn to read and write?

That was the way it was for centuries, and there was nothing to change until the basic changes began to happen that enabled changes in people themselves changing things—and there was the whole philosophy. I'm talking about Yiddish background now, I'm taking a long time to answer that one question, but we are covering other things too

Another one of the arguments of the time, of that particular time, was, you know, you must know, how profound the belief in the Messiah coming and the hopes for the Messiah were, and the false Messiahs—and these young people, they had these heretical ideas, they said, *We* must be the Messiahs, we have to make these changes and to make the kind of life on earth, the kind of deliverance from what we are having to come to be. Well, I'm just saying that attitudes having to do with terrible You've read in Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers*, remember? the father who couldn't understand this crazy daughter of his, she was literally breaking his heart, and in effect he was doing terrible things to her in that internecine struggle of hers to do this crazy thing of going to high school, getting an education. I mean, there wasn't a background for understanding us. I'm just saying that those changes came with enormous pain, but it was a remarkable generation, from illiteracy or near literacy.

And it wasn't only in the way they educated themselves, it wasn't only with the passion that they developed for Shakespeare, for opera, for what was considered to be high culture—not in the Jewish-like sense, but in the sense that so much of the outer world had shared in the love of the various writers—this, along with the political development that took place and the actual organization and the attempt to understand what were the motive forces in a society, what were the most powerful forces, what were the things that made pogroms happen—the old questions, you know, what is really human nature; all of the thousand and one things that opened up for the first

time there: well, they saw what I've seen in my way happen—they saw what is in human beings who otherwise would have lived the so-called rather everyday lives. These nothing lives—there is nothing there, in effect. I'm not saying any of that very well, I must say. Well, they had an inherent respect for what is in human beings to be, and for the way human beings are deformed, sometimes deformed, in the most virulent way. I remember my mother telling me (and I ran across it reading either Victor Hugo or the guy who wrote *The Wandering Jew*, years later) telling me about those traveling circuses that used to more or less breed kids within pottery that would deform them so they would have freaks

You said earlier that at twelve or thirteen you started doing some serious writing. You must have had literary models.

The need, the passion, the capacity to express ourselves in what we term creative form, is inherent in human beings, and it is a large part of what *Silences* is about. I was one of the fortunate ones, in that it wasn't stamped out in me. In the last part of *Yonnonidio* there's a paragraph that is often quoted, it had Baby Bess, it's just a fruit jar lid that she picks up, she's six months old, the period before you realize you can "I can do I I I." But the passion to do, to express oneself—and language is so inherent in the makeup of the human being too; so I feel this is creativity. The little ones, they love to play, to pretend, to pretend to be adults and other people. There are all kinds of evidences, you know—little ones love to fling their bodies about, they love to sing, however tunelessly. Before we are damaged, we are very, very creative, expressive human beings. Some of us start getting damaged even before birth. But I believe that this is inherent. That's the basic thesis of *Silences*. And lives have not permitted most human beings to express what's in them. We have seen, primarily in the last century, more and more what I call the flowering of human beings. If you would take a look, objectively, in the arts, in the sciences, in the various fields in which we consider creativity to express itself, you would find in each generation greater and greater percentage of human beings that—whatever creativity was there in the generations before, was expressed in ways we have never troubled to interpret, in the bringing of food, clothing, shelter, language, religion,

ritual, art—we used our art sense in almost everything that we could. For centuries. It's universal.

You must ask me that question again, because I started to talk about something, and

You talk about "inherent" creativity. I'm interested in your own.

I often talk about my luck that enabled me, probably, to be—at least in my country as far as we know, there may be others—the first woman from my class, which was really poor working class (we often had very hungry winters), from my sex, who was also a mother, to have come to a few things that are recognized by some people as being comparatively lasting literature. So I wasn't a freak is my point. I had luck. Whatever any of us who have the wrong color, or who are women, or who are all of this together: half of the working people are women; half of the Black people are women; most of humanity have been working people—their lives have gone primarily into survival, but along with survival they have created almost everything, including most inventions, if you take the long view over the centuries. So, then we come to this modern period, where we begin to emerge. Creativity. Potentiality. First generation. You begin to see a few individuals here and there. Then you begin to see them in increasing number. There's been an enormous increase in number—although it's going backwards in our country now, in the least twenty-five years: people who are never in the arts, people who are never in the intellectual fields, people who are never in the sciences. So of course we are the basic proof of what is in human beings to be, given the circumstances that are needed. That's the basic thesis of *Silences*. And as I say in that last part, all I was presumably authorized to speak for, had any little foothold in, even if I was not a college educated scholar, was my own field, presumably: literature. But I was speaking about the whole human race. This belief was inherent in my parents' socialism. You're more interested in me, personally, but I cannot separate whatever fed, created me as a writer, what I have written at all, from these factors.

Oh, I'm not asking you to separate . . .

But you asked me at the age of twelve or thirteen, you asked about models and predecessors, and I have to tell you that there were

even before I did any reading. They were there in the kind of language I heard around me. How fortunate I was! I grew up, after we left the farm—not so much on the farm, though even there I heard (I was too young to remember the brief period in the mines), but I remember things on the farm, and part of it I suppose is being children of immigrants. My mother remained imprisoned pretty much, because she was a woman and having children fast, and in the days when everything was by hand. My father was far more fortunate, as men tended to be: here's the world—he became part of the world. But growing up in Omaha at a time when a third of our country were either immigrants or children of immigrants, I heard many, many, many different kinds of languages, I heard many, many, many original uses of language as trying to speak what was the central language. And I heard Americans, U. S. A. America, in a different way than if you came out of books, out of a good family and a good education. The Nebraska pioneers, some of whom had Old Country dialects from their various countries, from Mexico, Central America, South America, the Chinese, the few Chinese who came—I was very, very rich—and all of Europe: all of Europe. Particularly central Europe, southern Europe, and east Europe. A wonderful tuning of languages.

I was part of a movement. Among my early memories was the great packing house strike that got broken, and I had that lesson and potentiality. This was part of my life. People who know something to speak of, and they come to voice—it's happened in human history throughout. It registered with me. I stuttered, I had to do a lot of listening. I say, that's part of my great luck, to distinguish me from those who were lost in my generation. And you grow up in a generation, you are very conscious of it, particularly if you keep relationships over the years or if you look back at those with whom you were in that grade school at that time when only a small percentage went beyond the eighth grade, so you're in the everyday work world. That was part of why I said the Thirties verified so much of what my parents believed—of people who were "nothing people," just like you saw in, say, the Civil Rights Movement time in this country. People like Fanny Lou Hamer—I'm not talking about a third generation like Martin Luther King, as eloquent, as great. A sharecropper mother of so many, and all of a sudden here is this woman with this great

organizational capacity, with this voice, with this capacity to say things like nobody else was saying them. You know, it's there all the time. But everything in your life, and ever more so in that America I grew up in, made you feel like dirt if you weren't somebody who was somebody. Well, you have a belief that is the exact opposite of what—that you are one of those . . . I always think of Camus' . . . what Camus said about his illiterate mother: she was of that most ancient and honorable race who had created almost everything on this earth, etcetera. At times, he said in that journal entry how he could not look at his mother when he was a great man and he'd go back—how little they could talk about, in a way. All the things that were in his head, all the things he's lived, what were they to this woman? And yet he recognized she might have been he. You're very close, when you are first generation, to what might have been your life. If you have socialist parents who have certain beliefs, you're given that. You can't use it in our country—most children of socialist parents didn't—as a shield against all kinds of things to put you down, even if you don't understand that that was also part of my luck. And I had other such lucks. But that particular luck of being in Omaha at that particular time in an industrial city, a packing house city that was very tied in with agriculture and farming—and where there was a lot of migration, that ancient form of human beings trying to come to a better life than the one they had led

Am I making sense in talking about these things?

And then, when I finally did begin to read, I was a very passionate reader, and books of course brought me all the world that was not my immediate world. But I was fortunate, without articulating it, that I knew that there were other things to write about, and I felt I had something to give. Often you become silenced because, you know, they are so great, and they seem to dominate—what have you got? Especially when it's not something that there's respect for Well, then you come into the Thirties. Things get turned around. All those writers who had loathed their country and become expatriates, suddenly come back because they have to, they are poor, and they discover a U.S.A. they never really Even if some of them came from that, like Katherine Anne Porter, in truth, just a generation back, which she always lied about who she came from, she was so ashamed!

Shame was what you felt, shame was a very important factor if you weren't born into all of that But the Thirties, you could not escape, you could not help but see that there was something to these "nothing people."

The Ashcan School

Well, it was very different from the Ashcan School, because

I meant, the idea behind the Ashcan School.

. . . . because this country was being changed by the actions of hundreds of thousands of human beings, the way human beings always have made changes. And also, along with that, there were suddenly these people, you know, in an area like San Francisco, who came out of seemingly nothing or nowhere, without the education, without the credential for leadership, and proved to have extra-ordinary capacity. I'm talking about what actually happened on job after job, on situation after situation, along with who was involved in the great anti-war, anti-Fascist-Nazi movement of the Thirties. I'm skipping a lot.

But what I was trying to say is that it wasn't only my love for language, my love for literature, that moved me towards wanting to express myself. It wasn't only that I was a stutterer, and therefore had to listen. It was this extra-ordinary period to grow up in. I heard great orators like Gene Debbs, on whose lap I sat after I presented him red roses when he spoke. Language in the old oral sense, and use of language by people who didn't have written language, was very much part of my consciousness—which helped keep a respect for what is in people. And a lot of American slang—I suppose Italian, too, wasn't created from up there: it came from down below.

I'm speaking about language, now, I'm speaking about organization—where would the human race be without the capacity to organize? I don't mean organize in a labor sense, or in a movement sense, but to organize any human activity. And that, too, is what *Yonnondio* is about—to go back and trace that We had a neighbor who was always going to write the history of the lath, the whole history of humanity from the development of the lath, from the very dawning of

the need for it through the modern day—a different sense of what goes on.

Anyway, I had a lot, without knowing it, that I wanted put there in books I loved so much—because I *loved*: I mean, reading was the world for me besides the world in which I had to live. And yet my world, seldom, seldom, seldom was there any of that; and especially not in what I was given to read in the very superb high school I went to. Well, that was part of my luck, because I crossed the tracks and went to the academic high school, where the famous Fonda family of Henry went, where all wealthy Omahans, except the most élite—they would not dream of sending their kids (it was *that* period) back East to a prep school, they had to prove that the Middle West could educate as well as the prep schools—of course they didn't quite do that, but

Anyway, maybe you should ask me another question. But I was very lucky in my youthhood in spite of having many things that were terrible in it. And I credit that luck, that peculiar luck—and including the luck of coming to my youthhood in the Thirties, which verified my own parents' belief in what is in human beings to be, both when they can somewhat shape circumstances, and when circumstances enable human beings to be the best that's in them to be.

A lot more to be said, but I'm not going to say it—a few of these things I've said otherwise. But I did love reading and writing and poetry, and I went to a high school Well, I also had a few wonderful We read, in the beginning, the McGuffey Readers, which were based on the old idea that you fed kids the best, so that I encountered some great names as well as some not so great names—they were kind of done away with. And that's enough on the subject of my writing. I had a teacher, called Sarah Voltaire, I paid tribute to. I was in her English 9 class fairly early—this was for the little handpicked group in that high school; but I was a problem for her because I came from across the tracks, and I myself did not realize that there was a lot about me that was rather repulsive to that lady, but anyway That was where I first really experienced what somebody in a wonderful book called *Hidden Injuries of Class*-class, and somewhat being Jewish, though with a few exceptions (I can think of only one in my time there), the only Jews that went to Central High were

the ones who already were the sons and daughters of doctors and lawyers and professionals, who would have nothing to do with me.

So you had two sets of cards staked against you. You were Jewish, and you came from across the tracks.

But that was also my enormous luck.

I mean, in their eyes. What created the hidden injuries.

Oh, yes. On the other hand, I wrote the school humor column. So I had a little bit of what is known as character. But I don't want to talk too much about high school days.

Mrs. Olsen, I think I took enough of your time

We probably never got around to anything, including Yiddishkeit. I feel that the generation of my mother and father—that socialist, Bundist, later many of them Communist generation—have been pretty much extinguished from visibility. And I feel that their legacy, which is the legacy in the title piece in *Tell Me a Riddle*, was at a profound cost, because they had to go against their blood, kin, their own fathers, often their own mothers. If I had time, I'd tell you some of my father's stories with his unlettered mother. When he left, fled, from czarist prison, he thought that he hated his father, and he had some reason to, but Anyway, I think that their vision actually has proved to be, in spite of the times we have lived and are still living through, the truest vision of human possibility and hope, and the only one that makes sense for our time now, before going through the final Holocaust. And it is that universal sense that we have to come back to, and some of what was in my mother's last dying vision. It's in there—but we didn't really begin, in a way we only began to begin. I had thought we would I am very U.S.A. American in many ways that most of what's termed Jewish-American writers are not, because of the kind of life I've led. And it has also made me feel, live—has confirmed for me, intellectually as well as in other ways—that kind of heritage