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Karl Erich Grözinger, "*The Trial* and the Tradition of the Gatekeeper in the Kabbalah," *Kafka and Kabbalah*, trans. Susan Hecker Ray (New York: Continuum), chap. 2.

Cynthia Ozick, "The Year of Writing Dangerously," *The New Republic*, 8 May 1995.

Robert Alter, "Blind Beggars and Incestuous Passions," *The New York Times*, 22 December 1985.

Robert S. C. Gordon, "Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* and Responses to the Lager in Italy 1945-47," *Judaism* (Winter 1999): 49-57.

Robert C. Solemon, "The Self Turned Sour: Schopenhauer," in *Continental Philosophy since 1750* (Oxford, 1988), chap. 5.

Jacob Glatstein, "Good Night, World," translated Benjamin & Barbara Harshav.

David Rosenn, "Cynthia Ozick's Dilemma," paper written for LIT 7034 (Fall 1995).

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KAFKA AND KABBALAH

Translated by Susan Hecker Ray

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THE TRIAL AND THE TRADITION OF THE GATEKEEPER IN THE KABBALAH

Gershom Scholem once wrote the following suggestion to Walter Benjamin, who at the time was considering writing an essay on Kafka: "My advice to you, too, would be to base any study of Kafka on the Book of Job, or at least on a discussion of the possibility of a divine judgment, which is what I see as the one and only theme in all of Kafka's writings" (*Friendship*, 212).[1] Regardless of one's reaction to this type of reduction of Kafka's works, one thing is clear: it is precisely the theme of the court of law that positions Kafka unmistakably within the Jewish tradition. However, I want to repeat that this use of the term "Jewish" has to be approached with some care, for throughout its long history Judaism has always and still does accommodate a plurality of views under its roof, and these views frequently conflict violently with one another. Less true in the realm of *halakhah*, the legal tradition, but all the more so in the philosophical-theological realm is the fact that Judaism was and is the arena of a great variety of possibilities that communicate with one another, more or less. This is why one would do well to identify the specific currents within Judaism with which Kafka was most familiar. As mentioned above, I believe the conclusion will very likely be that we are talking about a popularized folkloric form of the Kabbalah that manifested itself in sermons, in prayers and in the religious

observations of daily life. This includes the narrative traditions of Jewish folk tales, especially those stemming from Eastern Europe. These latter traditions fall under the rubric of hasidic legends, but this term is not always appropriate because only some of them actually do deal with specific hasidic themes.

In an effort to make the skeptics or the unconvinced more receptive to these ideas, I would like to reverse the usual sequence and begin with the most obvious. In doing so I am fully aware that this approach goes against the scholar's expectation of a coherent and structured theoretical system that fixes every chapter to its proper place within the overall context of the topic under discussion. Nevertheless, I want to present the following thesis: *The Trial*, Kafka's most perplexing work, as well as the one most typical of his thought, bears the stamp of that type of Jewish morality literature most influenced by the Kabbalah, and it does so not only in its basic concept but in its structure and its outlook as well. In fact, the evidence is so strong that I do not think it too bold to base an entire interpretation of the novel on this similarity. However, I want to stress once again that any conformity should not prematurely ignore the differences that also exist. Kafka's *Trial* would not merit its ranking within the great tradition of Jewish literature if it did not offer something new and original under its garb of concurrence and harmony—if a completely new plant did not emerge from the well-tended beds of ancient gardens.

Kafka's authority in matters hasidic and kabbalistic was his friend Georg Langer. In the autobiographical introduction to his book of hasidic tales, originally published under the title of *Neun Tore*, Langer wrote: "I am gradually becoming familiar with the hasidic literature as well. The first book I read was *Reshit Hokhma* (*The Beginnings of Wisdom*), that kabbalistic textbook of asceticism, humility and abstention, full of glorious quotes from the mysterious Zohar. . . . *The Beginnings of Wisdom* is a work of the famous Kabbalist Eliahu de Vidas, who lived in Palestine toward the end of the seventeenth century[2]. . . . The Rabbi of Belz himself recommended I read it" (28f). This was a very accessible book, intended to admonish as well as to edify wide circles of readers and, as the reference to the Belzer Rabbi conforms, it was a well-known classic of edification literature in Eastern Europe even in Kafka's time. Traces of its influence can still be seen in the narrative tradition of that region's folk literature.

This comprehensive and as yet untranslated work of devotional literature contains a chapter under the rubric "The Fear of God" which discusses the significance of the celestial courts. What follows is an outline of the basic ideas, presented in the same sequence the author himself offers in seven pages. This deliberate reconstruction is meant to demonstrate the style and the structure characteristic of this type of kabbalistic judicial tractate. As we shall see, it will prove to be of some importance later on.

Eliahu de Vidas begins this chapter with the following words (Bl. 30b):

> [. . .] one must live in constant fear of the judgment hovering over a person every day and every hour, for this is how our sages[3] interpreted the passage in Job (7:18), where it says: "And that Thou shouldest remember him every morning, and try him every moment." Rabbi Yose's interpretation reads: Man is judged daily . . . Rabbi Natan, on the other hand, says: hourly. . . .
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> [The Talmud][4] has other things to say about this as well: . . . if a man has fallen sick and is close to death, let them say to him: Make your confession . . . , for a sick man is like him . . . whom they lead to the place of execution. If he has defenders, he will be rescued, but if not, there is no rescue. And what are the mightiest advocates? Repentance and good works!

A few lines down the author continues:

> Judgment looms over the world every day, for the world was created in judgment [i.e., according to the principle of law], and this is its foundation. Therefore let man be ever watchful against sin, for he does not know when his judgment will begin. [It may happen that] he sits in his house and his judgment begins, or he leaves the house and goes outside and his judgment begins, and he does not know whether he will come back home . . . , for the judgment goes before him . . . . (Bl. 30c)

One of the many reasons why this court is always in session and can convene at any time is the fact that, as de Vidas stresses, every

day everything can bear witness against a person, and this includes the stones and the walls of his house, the angels who constantly accompany him, his own soul, the Torah, and much, much more (*Reshit Hokhma*, c. 11, Bl. 29b–30a).[5]

> Beware all sorts of witnesses who daily testify against you. . . . Man should not say: 'Who could bear witness against me?' The stones of his house and the walls of his house testify against him. . . . Rabbi Shela says: 'Two angels accompany man and testify against him.' . . . Rabbi Hidka says: 'A man's very own soul testifies against him.' . . . And not only that, the members of his household also testify against him. . . .
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> The words of Rabbi Shela concerning the two angels who accompany man and testify against him are to be understood in this way . . . : When a man gets out of bed, two witnesses stand before him and they go with him throughout the day. [The angels admonish and warn, because] when a man stretches out his hand toward the business of the world, the witnesses cry: 'Depart from evil, and do good' (Ps. 34:15). If he listens to them, all is well, but if not, then 'Satan stands at his right hand to accuse him' (Zech. 3:1), and on high [in judgment] they all testify to his sins against him. . . . [Even a man's most secret thoughts are brought before the celestial court, for] Rabbi Aha said: 'The soul reports everything a man does in secret, in the dark and in broad daylight. The books are read before the Holy One, blessed be He, and they tell of all men's deeds.'

This tractate from the book *Reshit Hokhma* lacks the humor one occasionally finds in hasidic judicial tales[6] (about which more will be said later on); it is rather more indebted to the severity of an ascetic Kabbalah. Kafka was also acquainted with this variant, as one of his diary entries indicates (*Diaries*, 133):

> My Hebrew name is Amschel, after my mother's maternal grandfather, whom she remembers as a very pious and learned man with a long white beard who died when she was six years old. She can recall how she had to hold the toes of the corpse and beg forgiveness for whatever transgressions she may have committed against him. She also remembers the many books

> that lined her grandfather's walls. He bathed in the river every day, even in winter, when he had to chop a hole in the ice to do so.[7]

Shortly before this (December 25, 1911) Kafka made an entry very closely related to the same topic:

> Circumcision in Russia. Tablets the size of one's palm bearing the imprint of kabbalistic symbols are hung throughout the house, wherever there are doors; these protect the mother during the period between the birth and the circumcision against evil spirits which are particularly dangerous to her and her child at this time. . . . Also as protection against evil spirits during the first seven days after the birth, toward evening on every day except Friday, the belfer (assistant teacher) brings ten to fifteen children, but never the same ones, to the mother's bed; there they recite the 'Shema Israel' and are rewarded with candy. These innocent five- to eight-year- olds are supposed to be particularly effective in warding off the evil spirits that become most insistent toward evening. . . . These evil ones are wildest the day before the circumcision, and therefore the last night is a vigil when everyone sits up with the mother until dawn. (*Diaries*, 132)[8]

As we shall soon see, according to kabbalistic texts this world of spirits is also part of that omnipresent judicial world of chastisement and accusation. Kafka's scattered remarks concerning these themes attest to the attention he paid to them as well as to his objectively accurate observation and information.

But back to the tractate *Reshit Hokhma* De Vidas does not mince any words in his effort to impress upon his readers the idea of an omnipresent celestial court in constant session. This court has the power to intervene in every-day human life at any time via disease and all sorts of other afflictions; its verdict can occasionally be postponed, or else it leads immediately to death. And this, the author insists, is because the world was created with *din*, with judicial justice. The renowned and legendary theologian and mystic of Prague, Chief Rabbi Judah Löw ben Bezalel (1525–1609) (still current in the Prague consciousness under the acronym

Maharal and famous as the creator of the golem[9]), saw God's sovereign powers over the world in His judicial authority itself. Even as late as Kafka's day the preachers in the synagogues of Prague most certainly referred to the sermons Rabbi Löw published on this theme, and particularly during the autumnal High Holy Days (Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur), when even the most hardened agnostics could still be expected to attend the synagogue. In one of these sermons[10] the Maharal said: "God's Kingdom [the tenth spiritual force in the Kabbalah] is His dominion over the world, and His dominion is the way of the Law. . . . He is the Judge and the Kingdom is His regulation."

Following his introductory description of the omnipresence of the celestial courts, Eliahu de Vidas turns his attention to the various forms of divine punishment. Not unexpectedly, these correspond to the respective transgressions in human behavior. He then goes on to discuss those measures the Divine Judge established in the world in order to instill a fear of God in man. These include thunder and bad dreams, among other things. As stressed in my earlier work on Kafka, they are not to be taken lightly, but rather as God's warning to mankind (*Reshit Hokhma*, Bl. 31c). Besides dreams and thunder, de Vidas says it is primarily the *shekinah*, the "Kingdom," namely the tenth spiritual force or *sefira* mentioned above, that serves as God's admonisher in the world, for this tenth manifestation is, according to the Kabbalah, the primary venue of the celestial court. In describing the judicial function of this tenth sefirah, Eliahu de Vidas inserts a quote from the Zohar[11], reproduced here in abbreviated form (III: Bl. 239a):

> There is a highest place, which lets [the light] flow forth and which ignites all [other] lamps . . . , and out of this place goes forth a tree for stilling thirst and providing sustenance. And this precious higher tree stands above all trees . . . , this one was and is and will be, nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away . . . , for this tree is the Torah and God fixed it as inviolable . . .
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> But [after planting this tree] God set another tree below it . . . , He set it there so that whoever wants to go to the higher tree may only enter with permission. Whoever wants to enter, therefore, finds the lower tree and is afraid to approach unless he is worthy.

> For this [lower tree] is the Gatekeeper . . . and [God made him] so that the inhabitants of the earth will fear it and will not draw near, except those who are worthy to draw near—and no one else! So that men will keep the ways of the Torah and not deviate to the right or the left.

As we shall see, de Vidas uses his discussion of the celestial courts to describe the messengers of the court, its verdicts and ultimate execution via the sword of justice. Part of this theme is a representation of man before the Gates of the Torah, of man before the Gate to the Law which is guarded by a watchman. Rabbi Eliahu's depiction therefore rests upon the conventional kabbalistic identification of the sixth sefirah with the original divine form of the Written Law (the Five Books of Moses) and of the tenth sefira with the original divine form of the Oral Law, i.e., with the teachings of Jewish tradition. In other words, the celestial Oral Torah, which is the tenth manifestation of the kabbalistic sefirotic tree, is the guard along the path to the celestial Written Torah. Here, as custom has had it ever since the Kabbalah of the thirteenth century, including the Zohar, the ancient gatekeeper motif of the early hekhalot mysticism has been transposed to the original divine form of the Torah. Into this Torah a person can and should go, for that is his destiny; however, it is guarded by the gatekeeper, by the oral tradition. The Zohar and de Vidas as well depict both aspects of the divine Torah, i.e. the goal of the journey as well as the gatekeeper, as two trees. These are the trees named in Genesis, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Knowledge is the guard over the Tree of Life.[12]

To this Torah/gatekeeper tradition Eliahu de Vidas immediately appends another tradition closely related to it in a kabbalistic sense. He says:

> When a man wants to enter into Holiness, he immediately discovers several accusers. If he is not worthy, he is like a man who wants to come before the presence of the king: before he enters to see the king, he must pass through several gates, one after the other. Before every gate are set several watchmen, who guard over that treasure [of wisdom] so that no one may go in who is not worthy to enter. If it were not so, all sinners

> would enter into the secrets of the Torah. Therefore, if a sinner wants to enter in order to learn the secrets of the Torah, several avenging angels confuse him . . . , so that he does not arrive at a place which is not meant for him. If a man is good, however, all his accusers and chastisers become advocates, and they lead him into the preserved treasure. And about such [a worthy one] they cry: "Our Lord, here is a good, righteous and God-fearing man who would come before You and who has said to us: 'Open the gates of justice, that I might enter and praise the Lord!'"

This second traditional piece that de Vidas interpolates here thus adds to the Torah-gate motif that other doorkeeper motif frequently referred to in connection with Kafka. It is the idea of the heavenly halls which the mystic must pass through in order to appear before the Throne of God, a tradition that medieval kabbalists and kabbalists of early modernity took over from Jewish antiquity.

In the ancient Jewish hekhalot literature, passage through these halls was no more than a journey through concretely conceived celestial palaces. In the Kabbalah, on the other hand, this passage through the heavenly halls precedes the journey through the world of the sefirotic manifestations and can be interpreted simultaneously as a passage into the Torah, into the Law. When seen in this way, passage through the heavenly halls is one way to enter the wisdom of the Torah which leads to life, which leads to the Light of the Godhead.

A second important change with respect to the ancient Jewish talmudic hekhalot mysticism is the combining of this celestial world of halls with the idea of the court. The ancient mystical examination of the adept at the Gates of Heaven is now understood as judgment. It follows that the Kabbalah conceives of a person's path toward the true life as a path through various judicial instances. The path to life, to the Light of God, leads through hierarchically structured judicial authorities, one higher than the other. The individual instances are the keepers of the gates to the next higher hall.

The judicial authority of these celestial courts, however, is not restricted to the heavenly part of the human journey. It also

operates on earth and affects the daily life of every person even before they themselves consciously undertake the ascent through the courts. Human life on earth is held to be the vestibule of man's judicial journey, even if most people fail to recognize this fact. Life on earth determines the success of the subsequent journey through the divine world of the Torah. It also determines how high human prayers will ascend through the judicial halls, for these prayers are the predecessors, as it were, of the individual's own ascent (more about this below). This is what allows the kabbalistic handbooks to depict the daily liturgy in the synagogue as a person's ascent through the heavenly halls, whereby the individual words or letters of a prayer represent the various celestial palaces.[13]

The author of our judicial tractate does not leave us in the dark as to why he inserts the gatekeeper tradition into this context of the omnipresent court. It is meant to instill in the reader a fear of the instances that could hold up his journey to life; these are the very instances whose messengers are already guiding him on earth. Toward this end, Eliahu de Vidas continues, the judicial instances rely upon such means of chastisment as thunder and bad dreams and diseases, which they send to afflict the living. Kafka's diaries reveal just how seriously he took his own dreams, particularly those having to do with his writing, which he considered the justification of his life (cf. *Diaries*, 225, 262, 274). Even Joseph K. occasionally refers to the strange and unaccustomed weakness that suddenly overcomes him in connection with the proceedings already underway against him (*Trial*, 107). According to de Vidas, when such judicial chastisements strike a person, he must "bow to the court that controls him, and he must not oppose it stubbornly; he may not mock these chastisements nor may he disregard them" (Bl. 31d). Joseph K. had to be told pretty much the same thing: "Good Heavens! . . . that you cannot resign yourself to your position." "Don't be so obstinate, no one can defend himself against this court; you must make a confession" (*Trial*, 13, 143). By interpolating the gatekeeper tradition into his judicial tractate, Eliahu de Vidas wants to direct his readers' attention to those authorities that punish him, but which, by doing so, simultaneously want to clear the path for him to the Tree of Life—unless, of course, he proves rebellious, in which case the gate remains barred to him. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

After looking at the awe-inspiring celestial gatekeepers, our kabbalistic moralist comes to speak of the punishments the celestial court sends down to earth. Disease, thunder and bad dreams have already been mentioned. Eliahu de Vidas expands upon this topic (Bl. 32a): "Beware also, for the Holy One, blessed be He, has various messengers to execute judgment on men and to call in their debt."

Following the ancient talmudic tradition, de Vidas now enumerates "whole armies whom God has charged to call in the debts of mankind: wild animals, bears and lions, even such things or beings generally considered superfluous, such as snails, flies and fleas" (Bl. 32a). Among the divine messengers who bring chastisement, however, is also mankind. Every misery and every pain they inflict upon someone else is to be understood as a warning from the court—particularly those injuries inflicted by non-Jews. This also includes the actions of one's own Jewish compatriots as well as of those who do not intend evil and only involuntarily inflict pain upon another. De Vidas summarizes: "When people do evil deeds, they, the transgressors, are like the wild beasts, a scourge to strike (or: to whip) the people. When people disobey the Torah, they are marked, and the servants of the court recognize them," (Bl. 32a).

"Everything is part of the court," (*Trial*, 202) Titorelli tells Joseph K., completely in keeping with this outlook.

Exhortations of this kind are meant to insure that a person understands even the most insignificant event as a messenger of the court whose task is to admonish and chastise people during their life on earth. Having established this, the kabbalistic tractate addresses the final act of the whole process (c. 12), namely: death. The "day of death is the great judgment day, when man will be sentenced according to all his deeds." "The day on which a person departs from this world is the day of the Final Judgment, a day on which the sun turns dark," a day of darkness (Bl. 32b). What follows is one of the ways de Vidas describes this final event (Bl. 33a):

> Man goes through this world thinking it will always be his . . . , but as he continues to pass through the world, iron shackles are fixed around his neck, and before he repents, he is judged at the executioner's block along with the other accused.

> If he finds someone to defend him, he is saved from the court . . . , but if not, he is condemned by the court to depart from this world. If he lifts his eyes while still lying in the King's chains, he will see two [men] coming toward him. In his presence, they record everything he did in this world and every word that ever passed his lips. The man renders an account of everything and they write it down.
>
> [Finally]
>
> Alas this judgment and woe betide his deeds . . . for he is being judged while still in irons, and if no defender can be found, the King's executioner descends and stands before his feet, a sharp sword in his hand.
>
> The man looks up and sees the walls of a house blazing brightly in its glory. Then he sees him before him, all eyes, his garment made of flames of fire that flicker in front of this man. That's the way it is. Some people saw an angel in the market place and stood before him, while others did not see him.[14]

One is almost tempted to conclude this kabbalistic description of execution with Joseph K.'s demise: "Then the man opened his overcoat and took out of its sheath . . . a long thin double-edged sharpened butcher's knife, held it high and checked it in the light . . . [Joseph K.'s] eyes fell on the top floor of the house bordering the quarry. Like a flash of light the shutters of a window flew open, a distant and high man, weak and thin, suddenly leaned far out . . . Who was it? A friend? A good man? . . . someone who wanted to help?" (*Trial*, 321)

Are both instances a final shimmer of light and hope in the darkness of the great Judgment Day? The hope of a final advocate who might be able to postpone the verdict at the last moment?

This will conclude our summary of this popular kabbalistic tractate. It covers the omnipresence of the celestial court and its direct intervention as well as the judicial messengers and chastisements and concludes with execution, the death of the person. Inserted in the middle is the tradition of the gatekeepers before the Law and of the heavenly halls of the court. An impressive structure well suited for any synagogue sermon. Take, for example, the chapbook *Kav ha-Yashar*, originally written in Poland and printed in Yiddish and Hebrew, a book that went through between thirty

and fifty editions since its initial appearance in Frankfurt am Main in 1705 and which treated this theme rather similarly (c. 39):[15]

> God has many envoys, and numerous accusers appear day after day in the celestial court on high, testifying against a man because of his sins and transgresssions.
>
> And yet, man pays no attention to this, for he has already heaped sin upon transgression and does not believe he will be called to judgment because of them, as if Heaven paid no attention to evil-doers.
>
> But the truth is that the Holy One, blessed be He, keeps His silence until the measure is full—and the judgment (*din*) becomes more and more severe and suddenly the sentence of wrath is loosed over this man like a storm wind. . . . Thus the court's verdict descends upon man unexpectedly; suddenly his whole body trembles, burns and becomes hot, and he falls on his bed. . . . Therefore, be not arrogant, for you see that the day of your death is near . . . and the celestial court is always in session; the advocates present your good deeds, and the accusers raise their objections. . . .

Sermons on this theme (another will follow below) were particularly common in the synagogues during the autumnal period of repentance and fasting surrounding Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. Depending on the position of the moon within the solar year, these holidays begin in August with the Hebrew month Elul and continue until October, the Hebrew Tishri, and represent the annual judgment period of the Jewish religious calendar. Surely such synagogue sermons could still be heard in Prague during Kafka's day, when he used to attend occasionally.[16] It is common knowledge that even the most assimilated Jews find their way to the 'temple' during these High Holy Days, a fact Kafka also noted (*Wedding*, 115): "On the evening after Yom Kippur even the worst Jew doesn't go to the theater." Kafka was always aware of this judgment period, and this awareness was certainly an essential component of his otherwise, to his mind deplorably poor, Jewish upbringing. In his *Letter to My Father* he went so far as to say that he, his father, attended the synagogue four times a year, two of which were surely Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, which Kafka

describes on the very next page as the "High Holy Days." In a letter to Felice Bauer dated October 8, 1916, Kafka's mother wrote: "We observed the Jewish holidays like proper Jews. On New Year's we closed the shop for both days and yesterday, Yom Kippur, we fasted and prayed assiduously" (*Felice*, 721). That same year Kafka mentions the Feast of the Tabernacles (*Felice*, 732) in a letter to Felice, and on October 11, 1916, he wrote: "By the way, I hardly said a word about the New Year at home and nothing at all to you, all completely in keeping with the meaninglessness which this day holds for me now" (*Felice*, 723). (Note the "now"!) As early as September 1907 he mentioned the New Year in a letter to Hedwig W. (*Letters*, 42). However, Kafka not only noted the date of the holiday, but its content as well. On September 28, 1917 (two days after Yom Kippur, which fell on September 26 in 1916) he noted right after a reference to the meaninglessness of the previous year (*Diaries*, 333; *Critical Edition*, 839f):

> To death therefore would I consign myself. The remnants of a faith. Return to the Father. Great Day of Atonement.
>
> From a letter to F., perhaps the last (October 1). If I really examine my ultimate goal, it turns out that what I actually want is not to be a good person and meet the demands of the highest *court* [author's emphasis], but rather just the opposite, to survey the whole community of animals and men, to understand their basic preferences, desires, moral ideals, to reduce them to simple rules and then to shape myself as soon as possible in their mold so that I would become totally pleasing to all, and in fact (this is the perversity of it) so pleasing, that I might finally commit all the dirty doings inside of me openly without forfeiting their love, all the while still remaining the only sinner who won't burn.[17] All told, then, my only concern is the *human court* [author's emphasis] and what's more, I want to deceive it, but without deception.

Kafka was very taken by the theme, for this particular text turns up twice again in his notes and letters of those days, once in the October 1 letter mentioned above (*Felice*, 755) and again in a letter to Max Brod (*Letters*, 178).[18] On September 17, 1921 (New Year was September 22), he reflects: "I was never under the

pressure of any responsibility other than the one that the existence, the look, the *judgment* [author's emphasis] of other people placed upon me," (*Wedding*, 220).

On September 15, 1915, he had already made the following observation about the upcoming Yom Kippur (*Diaries*, 298; Yom Kippur fell on September 18 that year, Rosh ha-Shanah on September 9): "Scene of the Polish Jews going to Kol Nidre [the opening prayer of Yom Kippur]. The little boy walking next to his father with the prayer shawl under his arms. Suicidal, not to go to the temple."

Two days previous, in other words, likewise in the midst of the penitential days between New Year and the Day of Atonement, the period characterized by a solemn air of judgment, Kafka visited the house of the Wonder Rabbi of Grod in the Prague suburb of Zizkov. Not coincidentally, on October 21, 1911[19] he attended a performance of Abraham Scharansky's *Kol Nidre* "at the Jews" (*Diaries*, 71), and on October 1 of that year he noted: "Yesterday in the Altneu Synagogue. Kol Nidre. Muffled murmurings like the stock exchange. In the vestibule a box with the inscription: 'A gift in secret pacifieth anger' [naturally in the eyes of the celestial judges, author's note]. . . . In the Pinkas Synagogue I was moved by Judaism more deeply than ever" (*Diaries*, 47f). Kafka himself seems to have had the habit of attending services at least on the High Holy Days; Max Brod also reports of a common visit to the synagogue he and Kafka made on September 17, 1909.[20]

Is it purely coincidental that, as Malcolm Pasley asserts, it is this same span of human life in judgment that Kafka concluded in one fell swoop during these very High Holy Days of 1914?[21] Rosh ha-Shanah, New Year, fell on September 21 (it began the evening of September 20). Yom Kippur, accordingly, fell on September 30 (Kol Nidre the evening of September 29). The start of the penitential period, which begins on the first day of the month of Elul, the first day on which the shofar was sounded in the Jewish city, was Sunday, August 23. On August 15 Kafka noted in his diary: "I've been writing for a few days now, may it continue. I am no longer as completely protected and enveloped in my work as I was two years ago; nevertheless, I have found some sense; my monotonous, empty, crazy bachelor's life does have a *justification*" (*Diaries*, 263; author's emphasis). And on August 21: "Perhaps it is right to postpone work on the Russian story until after the *Trial*. In this

ridiculous hope, which obviously only deals with technical matters, I am once again working on *The Trial*" (*Diaries*, 271). "The Judgment" was also written in one sitting, this time during the night of September 22/23, 1912. Yom Kippur was September 20/21 (*Diaries*, 183).[22] Steinberg has also demonstrated that the story "In the Penal Colony" was probably written immediately before or immediately after the Yom Kippur holiday.[23]

Our summary of the judicial tractate Eliahu de Vidas included in his morality book *Reshit Hokhma* undeniably confirms the fact that the theme of a 'gatekeeper before the law' was current within the context of Jewish-kabbalistic judicial theology at least since the 16th century and that this popular book passed it on to the pious masses in Eastern Europe particularly. It is also a fact that those closest to Kafka knew of this tradition by 1915 at the latest, and most probably via Georg Langer, who began to study this work rather early in his career as a kabbalistic Hasid, which began in 1913.

It is also possible that Kafka met Langer even before 1915. In the foreword to the English language edition of Langer's book, titled *Nine Gates*, his brother, František Langer, wrote that Kafka became friends with Langer during the war and that both of them used to take walks together in Prague (xxiii). František Langer apparently does not know any further details concerning the beginning of this friendship, since he refers to Kafka's diaries on the subject. František was a physician stationed on the Eastern Front from the outbreak of the war until 1915, when he returned to Prague just in time to make his informed affidavit freeing his brother from military prison where he was being detained because of his strict Jewish way of life (refusing to eat the non-kosher military food, refusing to work on the sabbath, and particularly refusing to bear arms). As a result, Georg Langer was declared a "mental case" and released from prison (xviiif).

Around 1910 or 1911, Georg Langer turned more and more toward orthodox Judaism; he learned Hebrew and was frequently found "poring over borrowed Hebrew folios" (xiif). In 1913 he journeyed to the Galician *shtetl* of Belz to become an Hasid. He went back home for a brief period before 1914 and soon became the talk of the town, for, to the open embarrassment of his family, he returned dressed in the garb of an Hasid. His "Jewish friends in Prague" (xvii) provided him with kabbalistic literature, but he soon

returned to Belz nevertheless. He was still there when the war broke out a few months later and, after a vain attempt to flee to Hungary with the rabbi, he received his draft notice. Obediently, Georg returned to Prague. He evidently never left again after his recruitment because he soon found himself under military arrest for refusing regular service on the same grounds as before. Given this history, it is not improbable that Kafka may have had some contact with this strange, repatriated Hasid, so recently on everyone's lips, around the time the war broke out, which is to say shortly after July 28, 1914. According to František, "Kafka evidently found Jiři a kindred spirit" (xxiii). The brother's information is not always precise, however: "After his discharge from the army, Jiři returned to the Rabbi of Belz and spent the rest of the war with him" (xix). Nevertheless, by September of 1915 the two of them were already such close friends that Kafka accompanied Langer to the wonder-rabbi in Zizkov (diary entry of September 14, 1915).

Kafka certainly had some knowledge of the mystical tradition of the journey through heaven as well as of the gatekeeper tradition connected with it already prior to his acquaintance with Langer. As early as 1911, again on October 29, (*Diaries*, 81; *Critical Edition*, 204), Kafka copied down a talmudic tale he had heard from Isaac Löwy. It is the main piece of talmudic evidence for the mystical journey through heaven and its gatekeeper tradition; ever since then, this talmudic tradition has served all subsequent Jewish mystics as the original paradigm of the mystical journey through the celestial spheres. There can be no doubt that Kafka soon questioned his friend Langer, the mystic, about it. Even Löwy would have told him more than Kafka noted in his diary (*Diaries*, 81; *Critical Edition*, 209): "Löwy: Four friends became great talmudic scholars in their old age. But each one had a particular fate. One went mad, one died, Rabbi Eliezer became a free thinker at the age of forty, and the oldest of them, Akiva, who postponed his studies until his fortieth year, was the only one to attain complete knowledge . . ."

Löwy told Kafka a version of the story that combined other talmudic tales, most of them from the same pages.[24] Such was the case with the legend of the late start Rabbi Akiva made with his studies and the relation between Rabbi Meir and Elisha ben Avuyah (Aher = heretic), whom Löwy mistakenly refers to as Eliezer here. According to the talmudic versions:

> Four men entered the Garden of Paradise, Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher [Elisha Ben Avuyah] and Rabbi Akiva.
>
> Rabbi Akiva said to them: "When you come to the glittering marble stones, don't say: 'Water, water![25], for it is written [in the Bible]: 'Whoever tells lies shall not stand before my countenance.'" Ben Azzai looked and died . . . Ben Zoma looked and went out of his mind. Aher cut the growth down [that is, he turned heretic]. Rabbi Akiva ascended in peace and returned in peace. . . .
>
> The angels wanted to cast Rabbi Akiva back, too, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: "Leave this old man, he is worthy to betake of my honor." (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14b-16a; Tosefta, Hagigah 2:3–4)

The commentary of Rashi of Troyes (1040–1105), appended to all editions of the Talmud and still considered authoritative today, gives the following, now generally accepted, understanding of this talmudic passage: "They ascended into heaven with the help of one of the Names of God," i.e., with the help of an invocation.[26] This means that by 1911 Kafka was already familiar with this central component of the mystical ascent to heaven, a fact that seems all the more significant since, as we saw before and will see again, it is precisely this same theme that was also a part of the High Holy Days.

In light of these findings, namely of Kafka's awareness of the High Holy Days and their theme of judgment which found its way equally to his diaries and his stories, we are surely justified in wondering whether Kafka might not have composed his own judicial tractate based on the traditional model precisely during those High Holy Days of the Jewish calendar reserved for repentence, self-reflection and judgment. We know from his diaries that he passed much of the summer of 1914 with thoughts of death and sought *justification* for his life in the writing of *The Trial*. And in the already quoted diary entry of August 15, 1914, he did have this to say about his work on that novel: "I've been writing for a few days now, may it continue. I am no longer as completely protected and enveloped in my work as I was two years ago; nevertheless, I have found some sense; my monotonous, empty, crazy bachelor's life does have a justification. I am once again able to carry on a dialogue with myself and no longer stare into complete emptiness.

Only in this way is there any cure for me" (*Diaries*, 263; *Critical Edition*, 548).

Obviously, the conformity between texts, themes, times and attitudes discussed so far can not be dismissed as pure coincidence. It not only raises the question but seriously suggests the possibility that *The Trial* ought to be understood within the context of Jewish judicial theology, and this totally apart from the other themes Kafka introduced into this novel from European modernism. It follows that these new themes, then, would have to be seen as a reinterpretation of this ancient Jewish theme heavily relying upon modern insights or sciences concerning man, his soul, society and whatever other theme one might also discover. We shall come back to the fact that the High Holy Days represent the annual period of divine judgment of man's actions, a judgment that decides his fate in the coming year, be it life or death, happiness or chastisement. The days surrounding Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, however, are not merely a period of judgment; they simultaneously offer an opportunity to influence the verdict for the better by changing one's ways, by meditating, repenting, fasting, through prayer and ritual as well as through reconciliation with one's neighbors. Moreover, the autumnal judgment theme looks not only to the upcoming year, but far beyond that: it points to man's situation before God's Judgment Seat and the ultimate end of human life. Thanks to the Kabbalah, the latter is understood as a mystical "journey to heaven," a journey to the Torah or the Law, which is the main purpose of human life. It is a journey that is supposed to lead a person ultimately to the Light of God.

Isaac Babel and the question of identity.

The Year of Writing Dangerously

BY CYNTHIA OZICK

Identity, at least, is prepared to ask questions.

—Leon Wieseltier

A year or so before the Soviet Union imploded, S.'s mother, my first cousin, whose existence until then had been no more than a distant legend, telephoned from Moscow. "Save my child!" she cried, in immemorial tones. So when S. arrived in New York, I expected a terrified refugee on the run from the intolerable exactions of popular anti-Semitism; at that time the press was filled with such dire reports. For months, preparing for her rescue, I had been hurtling from one agency to another, in search of official information on political asylum.

1920 Diary
by Isaac Babel
translated by H.T. Willetts, edited with an introduction and notes by Carol J. Avins
(Yale University Press, 126 pp., $20)

Collected Stories
by Isaac Babel
edited and translated with an introduction by David McDuff
(Penguin Books, 364 pp., $11.95)

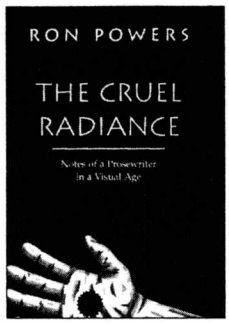
But when S. finally turned up, in black tights, a miniskirt and the reddest lipstick, it was clear she was indifferent to all that. She didn't want to be saved. What she wanted was an American holiday, a fresh set of boyfriends and a leather coat. She had brought with her a sizable cosmetics case, amply stocked, and a vast, rattling plastic bag stuffed with hundreds of cheap tin Komsomol medals depicting Lenin as a boy. She was scornful of these; they were worthless, she said. She had paid pennies for the lot. Within two weeks S., a natural entrepreneur, had established romantic relations with the handsome young manager of the local sports store and had got him to set up a table at Christmas in his heaviest traffic location. She sold the tin Lenin medals for $3 each, made $300 in a day, and bought the leather coat.

Of course she was a great curiosity. Her English was acutely original, her green eyes gave out ravishing ironic lightnings, her voice was as dark as Garbo's in *Ninotchka*, and none of us had ever seen an actual Soviet citizen up close before. She thought the telephone was bugged. She thought the supermarket was a public exhibition. Any show of household shoddiness—a lamp, say, that came apart—would elicit from her a comical crow: "Like in Soviet!" She was, emphatically, no atheist: she had an affinity for the occult, believed that God could speak in dreams (she owned a dream book, through which Jesus often walked), adored the churches of old Russia and lamented their destruction by the Bolsheviks. On the subject of current anti-Semitism she was mute; that was her mother's territory. Back in Moscow, her boyfriend, Gennadi, had picked her up in the subway *because* she was Jewish. He was in a hurry to marry her. "He want get out of Soviet," she explained.

At home she had been a Sportsdoktor: she traveled with the Soviet teams, roughneck country boys, and daily tested their urine for steroids. (Was this to make sure her athletes were properly dosed?) She announced that *everybody* hated Gorbachev, only the gullible Americans liked him, he was a joke like all the others. A historically minded friend approached S. with the earnest inquiry of an old-fashioned liberal idealist: "We all know, obviously, about the excesses of Stalinism," she said, "but what of the *beginning*? Wasn't Communism a truly beautiful hope at the start?" S. laughed her cynical laugh; she judged my friend profoundly stupid. "Communism," she scoffed, "what Communism? Naïve! Fairy tale, always! No Communism, never! Naïve!"

And leaving behind five devastated American-as-apple-pie boyfriends (and wearing her leather coat), S. returned to Moscow. She did not marry Gennadi. Her mother emigrated to Israel. The last I heard of S., she was in business in Sakhalin, buying and selling—

NTHIA OZICK's play *The Shawl*, directed by Sidney Lumet, will be produced in New York in the fall.



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and passing off as the real thing—ersatz paleolithic mammoth tusks.

Well, it is all over now—the Great Experiment, as the old brave voices used to call it—and S. is both symptom and proof of how thoroughly it is over. She represents the Soviet Union's final heave, its last generation. S. is the consummate New Soviet Man: the unfurled future of its seed. If there is an axiom here, it is that idealism squeezed into utopian channels will generate a cynicism so profound that no inch of human life—not youth, not art, not work, not romance, not introspection—is left untainted. The S. whom I briefly knew trusted nothing. In her world, there was nothing to trust. The primal Communist fairy tale had cast its spell: a *baba yaga*'s birth-curse.

In college I read *The Communist Manifesto*, a rapture-bringing psalm. I ought to have read Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry* stories, if only as a corrective companion text. Or antidote. "But what of the beginning?" my friend had asked. S. answered better than any historian, but no one will answer more terrifyingly than Isaac Babel. If S. is the last generation of New Soviet Man, Babel is the first, the *Manifesto*'s primordial manifestation.

That Babel favored the fall of the Czarist regime is no anomaly. He was a Jew from Odessa, the child of an enlightened family, hungry for a European education; he was subject to the *numerus clausus*, the Czarist quota that kept Jews as a class out of the universities, and Babel in particular out of the University of Odessa. As a very young writer, he put himself at risk when, to be near Maxim Gorky, his literary hero, he went to live illegally in St. Petersburg, a city outside the Pale of Settlement (the area to which Jews were restricted). What Jew would not have welcomed the demise of a hostile and obscurantist polity that, as late as 1911, tried Mendel Beiliss in a Russian court on a fantastic blood libel charge, and what Jew in a time of government-sanctioned pogroms would not have turned with relief to forces promising to topple the oppressors? In attaching himself to the Bolshevik cause, Babel may have been more zealous than many, but far from aberrant. If the choice were either Czar or Bolshevism, what Jew could choose Czar? (A third possibility, which scores of thousands sought, was escape to America.) But even if one were determined to throw one's lot in with the Revolution, what Jew would go riding with Cossacks?

In 1920 Isaac Babel went riding with Cossacks. It was the third year of the Civil War, revolutionary Reds versus Czarist Whites; he was 26. Babel was not new to the military. Two years earlier, during the First World War, he had been a volunteer—in the Czar's army—on the Romanian front, where he contracted malaria. In 1919 he fought with the Red Army to secure St. Petersburg against advancing government troops. And in 1920 he joined ROSTA, the Soviet wire service, as a war correspondent for the newspaper *Red Cavalryman.*

Poland, newly independent, was pressing eastward, hoping to recover its eighteenth-century borders, while the Bolsheviks, moving westward, were furiously promoting the Communist salvation of Polish peasants and workers. The Polish-Soviet War appeared to pit territory against ideology. In reality, territory—or, more precisely, the conquest of impoverished villages and towns and their wretched inhabitants—was all that was at stake for either side. Though the Great War was over, the Allies, motivated by fear of the spread of communism, went to the aid of Poland with equipment and volunteers. (Ultimately the Poles prevailed and the Bolsheviks retreated, between them despoiling whole populations.)

In an era of air battles, Babel was assigned to the First Cavalry Army, a Cossack division led by General Semyon Budyonny. The Cossack image—glinting sabers, pounding hooves—is indelibly fused with Czarist power, but the First Cavalry Army was, perversely, Bolshevik. Stalin was in command of the southern front, the region abutting Poland, and Budyonny was in league with Stalin. Ostensibly, then, Babel found himself among men sympathetic to Marxist doctrine. Yet Red Cossacks were no different from White Cossacks: untamed riders, generally illiterate, boorish and brutish, suspicious of ideas of any kind, attracted only to horseflesh, rabid looting and the quick satisfaction of hunger and lust. "This isn't a Marxist revolution," Babel privately noted; "it's a rebellion of Cossack wild men." Polish and Russian cavalrymen clashing in ditches while warplanes streaked overhead was no more incongruous than the raw sight of Isaac Babel—a writer who had already published short stories praised by Gorky—sleeping in mud with Cossacks.

Lionel Trilling, in a highly nuanced (though partially misinformed) landmark introduction to a 1955 edition of *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* (which included the *Red Cavalry* stories), speaks of "the joke of a Jew who is a member of a Cossack regiment." A joke, Trilling explains, because

> traditionally the Cossack was the feared and hated enemy of the Jew. The principle of his existence stood in total antithesis to the principle of the Jew's existence. The Jew conceived of his own ideal character as intellectual, pacific, humane. The Cossack was physical, violent, without mind or manners . . . the natural and appropriate instrument of ruthless oppression.

Yet Trilling supplies another, more glamorous, portrait of the Cossack, which he terms Tolstoyan: "He was the man as yet untrammeled by civilization, direct, immediate, fierce. He was the man of enviable simplicity, the man of the body—the man who moved with speed and grace." In short, "our fantasy of the noble savage." And he attributes this view to Babel.

As it turns out, Babel's tenure with Budyonny's men was more tangled, and more intricately psychological, than Trilling—for whom the problem was tangled and psychological enough—could have known or surmised. For one thing, Trilling mistakenly believed that Babel's job was that of a supply officer—i.e., that he was actually a member of the regiment. But as a correspondent for a news agency (which meant grinding out propaganda), Babel's position among the troops was from the start defined as an outsider's, Jew or no. He was there as a writer. Worse, in the absence of other sources, Trilling fell into a crucial—and surprisingly naïve—second error: he supposed that the "autobiographical" tales were, in fact, autobiographical.

Babel, Trilling inferred from Babel's stories, "was a Jew of the ghetto" who "when he was 9 years old had seen his father kneeling before a Cossack captain." He compares this (fictitious) event to Freud's contemplation of his father's "having accepted in a pacific way the insult of having his new fur cap knocked into the mud by a Gentile who shouted at him, 'Jew, get off the pavement.'" "We might put it," Trilling concludes, that Babel rode with Budyonny's troops because he had witnessed his father's humiliation by "a Cossack on a horse, who said, 'At your service,' and touched his fur cap with his yellow-gloved hand and politely paid no heed to the mob looting the Babel store."

There was no Babel store. This scene—the captain with the yellow glove, the Jew pleading on his knees while the pogrom rages—is culled from Babel's story "First Love." But it was reinforced for Trilling by a fragmentary memoir, published in 1924, wherein Babel calls himself "the son of a Jewish shopkeeper." The truth was that Babel was the s of the class enemy: he came from a we off family. His father sold agricultural machinery and owned a warehouse in a

business section of Odessa where numerous import-export firms were located. In the same memoir Babel records that, since he had no permit allowing him residence in St. Petersburg, he hid out "in a cellar on Pushkin Street which was the home of a tormented, drunken waiter." This was pure fabrication: in actuality Babel was taken in by a highly respectable engineer and his wife, with whom he was in correspondence. The first invention was to disavow a bourgeois background in order to satisfy Communist dogma. The second was a romantic imposture.

It did happen, nevertheless, that the young Babel was witness to a pogrom. He was in no way estranged from Jewish suffering or sensibility or, conversely, from the seductive winds of contemporary Europe. Odessa was modern, bustling, diverse, cosmopolitan; its very capaciousness stimulated a certain worldliness and freedom of outlook. Jewish children were required to study the traditional texts and commentaries, but they were also sent to learn the violin. Babel was early on infatuated with Maupassant and Flaubert, and wrote his first stories in fluent literary French. In his native Russian he lashed himself mercilessly to the discipline of an original style, the credo of which was burnished brevity. At the time of his arrest by the NKVD in 1939—he had failed to conform to Socialist Realism—he was said to be at work on a Russian translation of Sholem Aleichem.

Given these manifold intertwinings, it remains odd that Trilling's phrase for Babel was "a Jew of the ghetto." Trilling himself had characterized Babel's Odessa as "an eastern Marseilles or Naples," observing that "in such cities the transient, heterogeneous population dilutes the force of law and tradition, for good as well as for bad." One may suspect that Trilling's cultural imagination (and perhaps his psyche as well) was circumscribed by a kind of either/or: either worldly sophistication or the ghetto; and that, in linking Jewish learning solely to the ghetto, he could not conceive of its association with a broad and complex civilization.

This partial darkening of mind, it seems to me, limits Trilling's understanding of Babel. An intellectual who had mastered the essentials of rabbinic literature, Babel was an educated Jew not "of the ghetto" but of the world. And not "of both worlds," as the divisive expression has it, but of the great and variegated map of human thought and experience. Trilling, after all, in his own youth had judged the world to be rigorously divided. In 1933, coming upon one of Hemingway's letters, he wrote in his notebook:

> [A] crazy letter, written when he was drunk—self-revealing, arrogant, scared, trivial, absurd; yet [I] felt from reading it how right such a man is compared to the "good minds" of my university life—how he will produce and mean something to the world ... how his life which he could expose without dignity and which is anarchic and "childish" is a better life than anyone I know could live, and right for his job. And how far—far—far—I am going from being a writer.

Trilling envied but could not so much as dream himself into becoming a version of Hemingway—rifle in one hand and pen in the other, intellectual Jew taking on the strenuous life; how much less, then, could he fathom Babel as Cossack. Looking only to Jewish constriction, what Trilling vitally missed was this: coiled in the bottom-most pit of every driven writer is an impersonator, protean, volatile, restless, relentless. Trilling saw only stasis, or, rather, an unalterable consistency of identity: either lucubration or daring, never both. But Babel imagined for himself an identity so fluid that, having lodged with his civilized friend, the St. Petersburg engineer, it pleased him to invent a tougher Babel consorting underground with a "tormented, drunken waiter." A drunken waiter would have been adventure enough—but ah, that Dostoyevskian "tormented"!

"He loved to confuse and mystify people," his daughter Nathalie wrote of him, after decades spent in search of his character. Born in 1929, she lived with her mother in Paris, where her father was a frequent, if raffish, visitor. In 1935 Babel was barred from leaving the Soviet Union, and never again saw his wife and child. Nathalie Babel was 10 when Babel was arrested. In 1961 she went to look for traces of her father in Moscow,

> where one can still meet people who loved him and continue to speak of him with nostalgia. There, thousands of miles from my own home in Paris, sitting in his living room, in his own chair, drinking from his glass, I felt utterly baffled. Though in a sense I had tracked him down, he still eluded me. The void remained.

In a laudatory reminiscence published in a Soviet literary magazine in 1964—a time when Babel's reputation was undergoing a modicum of "rehabilitation"—Georgy Munblit, a writer who had known Babel as well as anyone, spoke of "this sly, unfaithful, eternally evasive and mysterious Babel"; and though much of this elusiveness was caution in the face of Soviet restriction, a good part of it nevertheless had to do with the thrill of dissimulation and concealment. In a speech in Moscow in the mid-1960s at a meeting championing Babel's work, Ilya Ehrenburg, the literary Houdini who managed to survive every shift of Stalinist whim, described Babel as liking to "play the fool and put on romantic airs. He liked to create an atmosphere of mystery about himself; ... was secretive and never told anybody where he was going."

Courtesy A.N. Pirozhkova

ISAAC BABEL IN 1920

-14-

(10)

Other writers (all of whom had themselves escaped the purges) came forward with recollections of Babel's eccentricities in risky times: Babel as intrepid wanderer; as trickster, rapscallion, ironist; penniless, slippery, living on the edge, off the beaten track, down and out; seduced by the underlife of Paris, bars, whores, cabdrivers, jockeys. All this suggests Orwellian experiment and audacity. Babel relished Villon and Kipling, and was delighted to discover that Rimbaud, too, was an "adventurer." Amusing and mercurial, "he loved to play tricks on people," according to Lev Nikulin, who was at school with Babel and remembered him "as a bespectacled boy in a rather shabby school coat and a battered cap with a green band and badge depicting Mercury's staff."

Trilling, writing in 1955, had of course no access to observations such as these; and we are as much in need now as Trilling was of a valid biography of Babel. Still, it is clear even from such small evidences and quicksilver portraits that Babel's connection with the Cossacks was, if not inevitable, more natural than not; and that Trilling's Freudian notion of the humiliated ghetto child could not have been more off the mark. For Babel, lamp oil and fearlessness were not antithetical. He was a man with the bit of recklessness between his teeth. One might almost ask how a writer so given to disguises and role-playing could *not* have put on a Cossack uniform.

"The Rebbe's Son," one of the *Red Cavalry* tales, is explicit about this fusion of contemplative intellect and physical danger. Ilya, the son of the Zhitomir Rebbe, "the last prince of the dynasty," is a Red Army soldier killed in battle. The remnants of his possessions are laid out before the narrator:

> Here everything was dumped together—the warrants of the agitator and the commemorative booklets of the Jewish poet. Portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side. Lenin's nodulous skull and the tarnished silk of the portraits of Maimonides. A strand of female hair had been placed in a book of the resolutions of the Sixth Party Congress, and in the margins of Communist leaflets swarmed crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse. In a sad and meager rain they fell on me—pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges.

Babel was himself drawn to the spaciousness and elasticity of these unexpected combinations. They held no enigma for him. But while the Rebbe's son was a kind of double patriot, loyal to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and loyal to a dream of the betterment of Russia, Babel tended toward both theological and (soon enough) political skepticism. His *amor patriae* was, passionately, for the Russian mother tongue. Before the Stalinist prison clanged shut in 1935, Babel might easily have gone to live permanently in France, with his wife and daughter. Yet much as he reveled in French literature and language, he would not suffer exile from his native Russian.

A family can be replaced, or duplicated; but who can replace or duplicate the syllables of Pushkin and Tolstoy? And in fact (though his wife in Paris survived until 1957, and there was no divorce) Babel did take another wife in the Soviet Union, who gave birth to another daughter. A second family was possible; a second language was not. (Only consider what must be the intimate sorrows—even in the shelter of America, even after the demise of Communism—of Czeslaw Milosz, Joseph Brodksy, Norman Manea and countless other literary refugees.) By remaining in the Soviet Union, and refusing finally to bend his art to Soviet directives, Babel sacrificed his life to his language.

It was a language he did not allow to rest. He meant to put his spurs to it, and run it to unexampled leanness. He quoted Pushkin: "precision and brevity." "Superior craftsmanship," Babel told Munblit, "is the art of making your writing as unobtrusive as possible." Ehrenburg recalled a conversation in Madrid with Hemingway, who had just discovered Babel. "I find that Babel's style is even more concise than mine.... It shows what can be done," Hemingway marveled. "Even when you've got all the water out of them, you can still clot the curds a little more." Such idiosyncratic experiments in style were hardly congruent with official pressure to honor the ascent of socialism through prescriptive prose about the beauty of collective farming. Babel did not dissent from party demands; instead he fell mainly into silence, writing in private and publishing almost nothing. His attempts at a play and a filmscript met convulsive party criticism; the director of the film—an adaptation of a story by Turgenev—was forced into a public apology.

The *Red Cavalry* stories saw print, individually, before 1924. Soviet cultural policies in those years were not yet consolidated; it was a period of post-revolutionary leniency and ferment. Russian modernism was sprouting in the shape of formalism, acmeism, imagism, symbolism; an intellectual and artistic avant-garde flourished. Censorship, which had been endemic to the Czarist regime, was reintroduced in 1922, but the restraints were loose. Despite a

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program condemning elitism, the early Soviet leadership, comprising a number of intellectuals—Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky—recognized that serious literature could not be wholly entrusted to the sensibilities of party bureaucrats.

By 1924, then, Babel found himself not only famous, but eligible eventually for Soviet rewards: an apartment in Moscow, a dacha in the country, a car and chauffeur. Yet he was increasingly called on to perform (and conform) by the blunter rulers of a darkening repression. Why was he not writing in praise of New Soviet Man? Little by little a perilous mist gathered around Babel's person: though his privileges were not revoked (he was at his dacha on the day of his arrest), he began to take on a certain pariah status. When a leftist Congress for the Defense of Culture and Peace met in Paris, for example, Babel was deliberately omitted from the Soviet delegation, and was grudgingly allowed to attend only after the French organizers brought their protests to the Soviet Embassy.

Certain manuscripts he was careful not to expose to anyone. Among these was the remarkable journal he had kept, from June to September 1920, of the actions of Budyonny's First Cavalry Army in eastern Poland. Because it was missing from the papers seized by the secret police at the dacha and in his Moscow flat, the manuscript escaped destruction, and came clandestinely into the possession of Babel's (second) wife only in the 1950s. Ehrenburg was apparently the journal's first influential reader, though very likely he did not see it until the 1960s, when he mentioned it publicly, and evidently spontaneously, in his rehabilitation speech:

> I have been comparing the diary of the *Red Cavalry* with the stories. He scarcely changed any names, the events are all practically the same, but everything is illuminated with a kind of wisdom. He is saying: this is how it was. This is how the people were—they did terrible things and they suffered, they played tricks on others and they died. He made his stories out of the facts and phrases hastily jotted down in his notebook.

It goes without saying that the flatness of this essentially evasive summary does almost no justice to an astonishing historical record set down with godlike prowess in a prose of frightening clarity. In Russia the complete text of the journal finally appeared in 1990. Yale University Press brings it to us now in an electrifying translation, accompanied by an indispensable introduction. (It ought to be added that an informative introduction can be found also in the new Penguin *Collected Stories*; but the reader's dependence on such piecemeal discussions only underscores the irritating absence of a formal biography.) In 1975 Ardis Publishers made available the first English translation of excerpts from the journal (*Isaac Babel: Forgotten Prose*). That such a manuscript existed had long been known in the Soviet Union, but there was plainly no chance of publication; Ehrenburg, in referring to it, was discreet about its contents.

The *Diary* may count, then, as a kind of secret document; certainly as a suppressed one. But it is "secret" in another sense as well. Though it served as raw material for the *Red Cavalry* stories, Babel himself, in transforming private notes into daring fiction, was less daring than he might have been. He was, in fact, circumspect and selective. One can move from the notes to the stories without surprise—or rather, the surprise is in the masterliness and shock of a ripe and radical style. Still, as Ehrenburg reported, "the events are all practically the same," and what is in the *Diary* is in the stories.

But one cannot begin with the stories and then move to the journal without the most acute recognition of what has been, substantively and for the most part, shut out of the fiction. And what has been shut out is the calamity (to say it in the most general way) of Jewish fate in Eastern Europe. The *Diary* records how the First Cavalry Army, and Babel with it, went storming through the little Jewish towns of Galicia, in Poland, towns that had endured the Great War, with many of their young men serving in the Polish Army, only to be decimated by pogroms immediately afterward, at the hands of the Poles themselves. And immediately after that, the invasion of the Red Cossacks.

The Yale edition of the *Diary* supplies maps showing the route of Budyonny's troops; the resonant names of these places, rendered half-romantic through the mystical tales of their legendary hasidic saints, rise up with the nauseous familiarity of their deaths: Brody, Dubno, Zhitomir, Belz, Chelm, Zamosc and so on. Only two decades after the Red Cossacks stampeded through them, their Jewish populations fell prey to the Germans and were destroyed. Riding and writing, writing and riding, Babel saw it all: saw it like a seer. "Ill-fated Galicia, ill-fated Jews," he wrote. "Can it be," he wrote, "that ours is the century in which they perish?"

True: everything that is in the stories is in the *Diary*—priest, painter, widow, gun-cart, soldier, prisoner; but the heart of the *Diary* remains secreted in the *Diary*. When all is said and done—and much is said and done in these blistering pages: pillaged churches, ruined synagogues, wild Russians, beaten Poles, mud, horses, hunger, looting, shooting—Babel's journal is a Jewish lamentation: a thing t' Soviet system could not tolerate, an Ehrenburg was too prudent to reveal. The merciless minds that snuffed the identities of the murdered at Babi Yar would hardly sanction Babel's whole and bloody truths.

Nor did Babel himself publicly sanction them. The *Red Cavalry* narratives include six stories (out of thirty-five) that touch on the suffering of Jews; the headlong *Diary* contains scores. An act of authorial self-censorship, and not only because Babel was determined to be guarded. Impersonation, or call it reckless play, propelled him at all points. The *Diary* can muse, "The Slavs—the manure of history?"—but Babel came to the Cossacks disguised as a Slav, having assumed the name K. L. Lyutov, the name he assigns also to his narrator. And in the *Diary* itself, encountering terrified Polish Jews, he again and again steers them away from the knowledge that rides in his marrow, and fabricates deliberate revolutionary fairy tales (his word): he tells his trembling listeners how

> everything's changing for the better—my usual system—miraculous things are hap pening in Russia—express trains, free food for children, theaters, the International. They listen with delight and disbelief. I think—you'll have your diamond-studded sky, everything and everyone will be turned upside down and inside out for the umpteenth time, and [I] feel sorry for them.

"My usual system": perhaps it is kind to scatter false consolations among the doomed. Or else it is not kindness at all, merely a writer's mischief or a rider's diversion: the tormented mice of Galicia entertained by a cat in Cossack dress. Sometimes he is recognized (once by a child) as a Jew, and then he half-lies and explains that he has a Jewish mother. But mainly he is steadfast in the pretense of being Lyutov. And nervy: the *Diary* begins on June 3, in Zhitomir, and on July 12, one day before Babel's twenty-sixth birthday, he notes: "My first ride on horseback." In no time at all he is, at least on horseback, like all the others: a skilled and dauntless trooper. "The horse galloped well," he says on that first day.

Enchanted, proud, he looks around at his companions: "red flags, a powerful, well-knit body of men, confident commanders, calm and experienced eyes of topknotted Cossack fighting men, di silence, order, brass band." But mome later the calm and experienced eyes are searching out plunder in the neat

cottage of an immigrant Czech family, "all good people." "I took nothing, although I could have," the new horseman comments. "I'll never be a real dyonny man." The real Budyonny en are comely, striking, stalwart. Turning off a highway, Babel catches sight of "the brigades suddenly appear[ing], inexplicable beauty, an awesome force advancing." Another glimpse:

> Night ... horses are quietly snorting, they're all Kuban Cossacks here, they eat together, sleep together, a splendid silent comradeship ... they sing songs that sound like church music in lusty voices, their devotion to horses, beside each man a little heap—saddle, bridle, ornamental saber, greatcoat, I sleep in the midst of them.

Babel is small, his glasses are small and round, he sets down secret sentences. And meanwhile his dispatches, propaganda screeches regularly published in *Red Cavalryman*, have a different tone: "Soldiers of the Red Army, finish them off! Beat down harder on the opening covers of their stinking graves!" And: "That is what they are like, our heroic nurses! Caps off to the nurses! Soldiers and commanders, show respect to the nurses!" (In the *Diary* the dubious propagandist writes satirically, "Opening of the Second Congress of the Third International, unification of the peoples finally realized, now all is ar.... We shall advance into Europe and conquer the world.")

And always there is cruelty, and always there are the Jews. "Most of the rabbis have been exterminated." "The Jewish cemetery ... hundreds of years old, gravestones have toppled over ... overgrown with grass, it has seen Khmelnitsky, now Budyonny ... everything repeats itself, now that whole story—Poles, Cossacks, Jews—is repeating itself with stunning exactitude, the only new element is Communism." "They all say they're fighting for justice and they all loot." "Life is loathsome, murderers, it's unbearable, baseness and crime." "I ride along with them, begging the men not to massacre prisoners.... I couldn't look at their faces, they bayoneted some, shot others, bodies covered by corpses, they strip one man while they're shooting another, groans, screams, death rattles." "We are destroyers ... we move like a whirlwind, like a stream of lava, hated by everyone, life shatters, I am at a huge, neverending service for the dead ... the sad senselessness of my life."

The Jews: "The Poles ransacked the ce, then the Cossacks." "Hatred for the Poles is unanimous. They have looted, tortured, branded the pharmacist with a red-hot iron, put needles under his nails, pulled out his hair, all because somebody shot at a Polish officer." "The Jews ask me to use my influence to save them from ruin, they are being robbed of food and goods.... The cobbler had looked forward to Soviet rule—and what he sees are Jew-baiters and looters.... Organized looting of a stationer's shop, the proprietor in tears, they tear up everything.... When night comes the whole town will be looted—everybody knows it."

The Jews at the hands of the Poles: "A pogrom ... a naked, barely breathing prophet of an old man, an old woman butchered, a child with fingers chopped off, many people still breathing, stench of blood, everything turned upside down, chaos, a mother sitting over her sabered son, an old woman lying twisted up like a pretzel, four people in one hovel, filth, blood under a black beard, just lying there in the blood."

The Jews at the hands of the Bolsheviks: "Our men nonchalantly walking around looting whenever possible, stripping mangled corpses. The hatred is the same, the Cossacks just the same, it's nonsense to think one army is different from another. The life of these little towns. There's no salvation. Everyone destroys them." "Our men were looting last night, tossed out the Torah scrolls in the synagogue and took the velvet covers for saddlecloths. The military commissar's dispatch rider examines phylacteries, wants to take the straps." The *Diary* mourns, "What a mighty and marvelous life of a nation existed here. The fate of Jewry."

And then: "I am an outsider." And again: "I don't belong, I'm all alone, we ride on ... five minutes after our arrival the looting starts, women struggling, weeping and wailing, it's unbearable, I can't stand these neverending horrors.... [I] snatch a flatcake out of the hands of a peasant woman's little boy." He does this mechanically, and without compunction. "How we eat," he explains. "Red troops arrive in a village, ransack the place, cook, stoves crackling all night, the householders' daughters have a hard time" (a comment we will know how to interpret). Babel grabs the child's flatcake—a snack on the fly—on August 3.

On July 25, nine days earlier, he and a riding companion, Prishchepa, a loutish syphilitic illiterate, have burst into a pious Jewish house in a town called Demidovka. It is the Sabbath, when lighting a fire is forbidden; it is also the eve of the Ninth of Av, a somber fast day commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Prishchepa

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demands fried potatoes. The dignified mother, a flock of daughters in white stockings, a scholarly son, are all petrified: on the Sabbath, they protest, they cannot dig potatoes, and besides, the fast begins at sundown. "Fucking Yids," Prishchepa yells; so the potatoes are dug, the fire to cook them is lit.

Babel, a witness to this anguish, says nothing. "I keep quiet, because I'm a Russian." Will Prishchepa discover that Lyutov is only another Yid? "We eat like oxen, fried potatoes and five tumblersful of coffee each. We sweat, they keep serving us, all this is terrible, I tell them fairy tales about Bolshevism." Night comes, the mother sits on the floor and sobs, the son chants the liturgy for the Ninth of Av, Jeremiah's Lamentations: "they eat dung, their maidens are ravished, their menfolk killed, Israel subjugated." Babel hears and understands every Hebrew word. "Demidovka, night, Cossacks," he sums it up, "all just as it was when the Temple was destroyed. I go out to sleep in the yard, stinking and damp."

And there he is, New Soviet Man: stinking, a sewer of fairy tales, an unbeliever—and all the same complicit. Nathalie Babel said of her father that nothing "could shatter his feeling that he belonged to Russia and that he had to share the fate of his countrymen. What in so many people would have produced only fear and terror, awakened in him a sense of duty and a kind of blind heroism." In the brutal light of the *Diary*, violation upon violation, it is hard to yield to this point of view. Despair and an abyss of cynicism do not readily accord with a sense of duty; and whether or not Babel's travels with the Cossacks, and with Bolshevism altogether, deserve to be termed heroic, he was anything but blind. He saw, he saw, and he saw.

It may be that the habit of impersonation, the habit of deception, the habit of the mask, will in the end lead a man to become what he impersonates. Or it may be that the force of "I am an outsider" overwhelms the secret gratification of having got rid of a fixed identity. In any case, the *Diary* tells no lies. These scenes in a journal, linked by commas quicker than human breath, run like rapids through a gorge—on one side the unrestraint of violent men, on the other the bleaker freedom of unbelonging. Each side is subversive of the other; and still they embrace the selfsame river.

To venture yet another image, Babel's *Diary* stands as a tragic masterwork of breakneck cinematic "dailies," those raw, unedited rushes that expose the director to himself. If Trilling, who admitted to envy of the milder wilderness that was Hemingway, had read Babel's *Diary*—what then? And who, in our generation, should read the *Diary*? Novelists and poets, of course; specialists in Russian literature, obviously; American innocents who define the world of the '20s by jazz, flappers and Fitzgerald. And also those who protested Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* as unfair to the psyche of the Polish countryside; but, most of all, the cruelly ignorant children of the left who still believe that the Marxist utopia requires for its realization only a more favorable venue, and another go.

No one knows when or exactly how Babel perished. Some suppose he was shot immediately after the NKVD picked him up and brought him to Moscow's Lyubanka Prison, on May 15, 1939. Others place the date of his murder in 1941, following months of torture. More than fifty years later, as if the writer were seeing forth phantoms of his first and last furies, Babel's youthful *Diary* emerges. What it attests to above all is not simply that fairy tales can kill—who doesn't understand this?—but that Bolshevism was lethal in its very cradle.

Which is just what S., my ironical Muscovite cousin, found so pathetically funny when, laughing at our American stupidity, she went home to Communism's graveyard. •

Crabby & Evelyn

BY JOHN BANVILLE

Evelyn Waugh: A Biography by Selina Hastings

(Houghton Mifflin, 723 pp., $40)

At the very core of the English national character, the secret worm of despair gnaws constantly. This heartsickness may be disguised by rosy cheeks and well-cut tweeds, by displays of joviality and truculent common sense, but it will not be gainsaid. Some of the best of England's writers have chosen, with much profit, to explore this anguish at the center: Blake, and Keats and Hardy, and in our time Philip Larkin and Graham Greene. Yet it is perhaps the so-called comic writers who best capture the anomie that haunts the English soul: Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, Chesterbelloc, John Betjeman and, especially, Evelyn Waugh.

Here is Waugh's portrait of himself shortly before he died:

> My life is roughly speaking over. I sleep badly except occasionally in the morning. I get up late. I try to read my letters. I try to read the paper. I have some gin. I try to read the paper again. I have some more gin. I try to think about my autobiography. Then I have some more gin and it's lunch time. That's my life. It's ghastly.

The falling off was not sudden. From childhood on, Waugh's days had been spent in constant, terrified and vain flight from boredom. He was a lonely child ("Ascension Day never passes," he wrote in 1947, "without my thinking of the day now thirty years ago at Lancing [his public school] which was the most miserable of my life") and a troubled adolescent. After a few brief years of bliss as a student at Oxford he married young and disastrously, a mistake that left his soul permanently scarred and that may, indeed, have unhinged his mind. There was a mad tinge to Waugh's anger and grief at this time, a hint of the serious bout of delusional paranoia he would suffer in middle age, which is chronicled in the surprisingly autobiographical novel, *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold.* When he was in his 30s he married again, successfully, this time, and for a period in his middle years he was almost happy; and then his creativity deserted him.

The loss of his ability as an artist was fatal. Henry James wrote in his notebooks, "In literature we move through a blest world in which we know nothing except by style, but in which everything is saved by it." Waugh would have adapted the maxim by substituting the word "life" for "literature" and "curst" for "blest." He put his faith, and even his Faith, in the generative and redemptive power of words, and when words went dead on him, in his 60s, he ceased to be, in Oscar Wilde's grand formulation, a "lord of language." The world turned gray and he found himself, as Selina Hastings puts it, "drowning in melancholy, ill, aimless and miserable. He did no work, spending the day ' ' said, breathing on the library wind playing noughts and crosses and drinking gin."

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BLIND BEGGARS AND INCESTUOUS PASSIONS

Date: December 22, 1985, Sunday, Late City Final Edition Section 7; Page 8, Column 1; Book Review Desk
Byline: By Robert Alter; Robert Alter's most recent books are "Motives for Fiction" and "The Art of Biblical Poetry."
Lead:

A SIMPLE STORY By S. Y. Agnon. Translated and with an afterword by Hillel Halkin. 246 pp. New York: Schocken Books. $14.95.

IT is something of a mystery why this understated masterpiece by S. Y. Agnon (1888-1970) had to wait 50 years to be translated into English. All the same, one must be grateful for its appearance now and for Hillel Halkin's skillful (if at times rather free) rendering of Agnon's elegantly stylized Hebrew.

This unrivaled major figure of modern Hebrew fiction, co-winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966, had been writing stories and novellas for almost three decades when "A Simple Story" was originally published in 1935. It was his first real novel, since the long work of fiction he had produced four years earlier, "The Bridal Canopy," is really a frame story containing a series of short tales. He would go on to write three more novels - only one of which, "A Guest for the Night," has been translated into English - each bolder than the last in its sweep of symbolic invention and its plunge into strange worlds of revelatory fantasy.
Text:

"A Simple Story," by contrast, conforms far more closely to the European realistic novel of the 19th century. In fact, some of its essential features are explicitly Flaubertian. (Agnon knew no French, but in his correspondence as early as 1915 he was extolling Flaubert, whom he could have read in German or even Yiddish translation.) The action unfolds from around 1903 to 1906 in the Galician town of Szybusz, an obvious fictional stand-in for Agnon's native Buczacz, then part of the eastern extremity of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In thematically opposing an impossible romantic longing and the material interests of bourgeois society, Agnon recalls Flaubert and other 19th-century models; a similarity also exists in their frequent use of an ironic free indirect style to lay bare the self-deceptions, mental evasions and hypocrisies of the principal characters.

The protagonist, Hirshl Hurvitz, the only son of prosperous shopkeepers, is forced to renounce his inarticulate, vaguely incestuous passion for his poor cousin Blume Nacht ("she was almost his twin"), and to accept an arranged marriage with the daughter of wealthy farmers. What follows is his progressive obsession with the lost Blume, depression accompanied by insomnia and at last flight into madness - all rendered by Agnon with extraordinary subtlety and conviction. After the psychotic episode, there would seem to be a final movement toward reconciliation as Hirshl accepts the emotional obligations of conjugality and paternity and at last experiences a sexual awakening and intimate feeling for his wife.

I have hedged my account of the denouement because Agnon's strategies of indirection are so slippery that in the end one is not quite sure how to take him. In his intelligently argued afterword, Mr. Halkin counters the consensus of Agnon criticism by proposing that we regard this as an "antimodernist" work, since it goes beyond the usual modernist hostility to bourgeois values. The novel's conclusion could suggest that soci-ety, after all, provides vitally needed stability. In this reading, eros, which the bourgeois world confines to narrow channels, is otherwise an anarchic and destructive force - a notion in fact variously intimated in "A Simple Story." My own sense is that there is more irresolution in the novel than Mr. Halkin suggests, that to the end Agnon makes us painfully aware of the terrible price Hirshl pays for his final normality. One way of seeing this is through attention to the novel's intricate structure of recurring motifs.

One suspects that Agnon learned this quasimusical technique for developing themes from "Madame Bovary" and, probably, also the early Thomas Mann. The function of motif, as in Mann, is largely psychoanalytic, though Agnon's mock-pious narrator deliberately masks the author's awareness of Freud, and it is surely a mistake for the translator to introduce an allusion to "Dr. Freud of Vienna" when the Hebrew has only a vague Talmudic term for an expert interpreter of dreams. In any case, the imagery of the novel -through similes that occur to the characters, their free association, their hallucinations and dreams - repeatedly creates apertures, small and large, in the placid surface of the narration for viewing the realm of the suppressed. Hirshl's conflicting fear of and desire for castration; his impulses to murderous aggression; his fantasies, as a passive male, of being penetrated - all are embodied in clusters of related images. Intertwined motifs of food, smells, music, birds and coins represent not only Hirshl's psychosexual torment but also the perversion of values of the society in which he is caught.

A central motif of the novel, the blind singing beggar, is drawn directly from "Madame Bovary." One recalls that when Emma Bovary leaves for her trysts with Leon Dupuis, there is a blind beggar at the coach stop who sings of sun-blessed vistas of love and that the last thing Emma hears in her death agony is the voice of this same hideously diseased figure outside her window. In "A Simple Story," the first explicit appearance of the blind beggar is in the stories told Hirshl by the neurologist Dr. Langsam as part

of the cure he effects. The beggar sings songs "without beginning or end" that induce in the listener a state of ecstasy, leading him into a realm as timeless as desire itself and outside the frame of mercantile existence, where time is money. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, Hirshl, strolling in the snow with his wife, to whom he is now reconciled, actually meets a blind musician singing just such a song. Shaking himself from a momentary trance, Hirshl brusquely says to his wife, "Let's go," but after a few steps, he turns back to throw the beggar a particularly valuable coin. T HE characteristic reticence of Agnon's narrator makes it uncertain how this crucial moment just before the end should be construed. Mr. Halkin takes it as an emblematic act of charity, a sign of Hirshl's integration into a moneyed society that is serious about its ethical obligations. But during his stay at the sanitarium, Hirshl had a hallucination of the blind beggar singing of snow (he suppresses this memory at the end), in which, just as a female figure suggesting Blume is about to offer him a piece of cake (food equaling sex plus nurture here), someone blinds him by piling mountains of coins on his eyes. Coins, then, are associated in the novel with the teeming imagery of castration, and we are surely meant to recall as well an earlier scene in which Hirshl's parents count their coins inside the shop in a strangely erotic ritual of deflected libido while young lovers embrace outside the windows.

Finally, the skein of associations carries us back to the rather ominous Hanukkah party at which Hirshl's engagement is announced. When Hirshl asks for a light, one of the coarse guests "took the cigarette from his mouth and tossed it to Hirshl like a coin to a bothersome beggar." This disturbing simile is soon followed by an elaborate anecdote about an impoverished count who is reduced to using his monogrammed cigarettes as money. The cigarette-money equation thus reinforces a whole chain of semantic overlaps associated with the coin motif - cynical contempt, dubious value, impotence, greed, diverted desire, blindness, castration. It is one small instance of how this wonderfully complex novel keeps the mind restlessly alert, contemplating in shifting perspectives the human figures and social institutions it so persuasively represents.

Robert C. Solemon, "The Self Turned Sour: Schopenhauer," in *Continental Philosophy since 1750* (Oxford, 1988), chap. 5.

5

The Self Turned Sour: Schopenhauer

> In the aesthetic mode of contemplation we have found two inseparable constituent parts—the knowledge of the object, not as individual thing but as Platonic idea, . . . and the self-consciousness of the knowing person, not as individual, but as *pure will-less subject of knowledge.*[1]
>
> Schopenhauer

The transcendental pretension of identifying ultimate reality with the self, the grandiose romantic vision of a cosmic self within the ordinary self, and the idea that the world is in some profound sense our own creation found a novel and perverse spokesman in Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860). He was professedly a Kantian, and he announced at the beginning of his greatest book, *The World as Will and Idea*, that he assumed that his readers were familiar with Kant's work (and also with his own). Personally as well as philosophically he was a pessimist and a notorious crank. He was born into a wealthy family, travelled widely, and lived well, yet insisted throughout his long and healthy life that life was no good. He was one of the first Europeans to become deeply engaged in Eastern philosophy, and one of his central ideas was the Buddhist insistence on the futility of desire. He shared with Fichte and Hegel—whom he hated—the cosmic view of the supra-self expressing itself through us, making the individual self something of a pitiful pawn. He shared with the romantics the rejection of science, and the celebration of the aesthetic and the creative. His metaphysical position was that the world is a transcendental illusion; reality is first to be found within ourselves, and then not as reason but as irrational, impersonal Will. It is the Will that throws us this way and that through desire and emotion, but it is never under our personal control. The Will is in no sense a personal Will (any more than Hegel's Spirit is

personal); it is ultimately the reality of all things, most obvious in the case of other living creatures whose lives are no more—an no less—meaningful than our own. On the rational foundatio built by Kant, Schopenhauer demonstrates that life is intrinsicall absurd. At best we might see our way through the absurdity, an achieve some sort of quasi-Nirvanic peace by denying the Wi and the futile desires that are its most immediate manifestations

If we were to take Schopenhauer at his word we might thin that he could not be more opposed to the other German idealists Despite his theoretical insistence on the absurdity of our concer for individual status he delighted in attacking his rivals in print prefacing *The World as Will and Idea* with the comment tha 'philosophy in Germany today is the product of humbug (Ficht and Schelling) and charlatanism (Hegel)'. One of the mos famous stories about Schopenhauer is that when he was teachin at the University of Berlin he deliberately scheduled his classes t conflict with Hegel's lectures, just when Hegel was at the heigh of his fame (Schopenhauer did not register a single student). Bu like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, he took Kant as his startin point, and their differences are no more than a serious family quarrrel. Like all the idealists, Schopenhauer insisted that 'all true philosophy is idealistic', and, discussing Descartes, declared that 'the only right starting point of all philosophy is the subjective, individual consciousness'. But like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, Schopenhauer also ended up moving far beyond the individual self to a cosmic force within us. He did retain Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds which the other idealists had rejected, though he certainly looked at the entire system from a most un-Kantian perspective, that of his pessimism. Where Hegel had insisted that if we look at the world rationally the world looks back at us with a rational aspect, Schopenhauer argued, in effect, that if we look at the world without rational expectations the world will look back at us irrationally. Where Hegel had claimed that, in spite of their cruelty and absurdities, human life and history still have meaning, Schopenhauer insisted that, no matter what meaning and brief satisfaction we might find in life, it was essentially absurd. It is a profound difference in terms of attitudes, but a mere parallax of

views in terms of the structure of the philosophical theory. Both defend an idealist vision of the world in which the individual is insignificant and reality is an all-embracing holistic force, culminating in human self-recognition. But Hegel views the realization of Spirit with enthusiasm; Schopenhauer eyes the impersonal cosmic will with suspicion, and sees self-recognition as just another piece of folly.

In *The World as Will and Idea*, Schopenhauer sees himself as heir to (and fulfilment of) Plato and Kant. Both philosophers developed a view of reality divided into 'two worlds', one only apparent, the other real but beyond the realm of normal human experience. For Plato, the two worlds had been the world of becoming (appearance), and the world of being and the forms. For Kant the two worlds, both of them 'real', were the phenomenal world—the world of experience, defined by causality—and the noumenal world—the world as it is in itself, accessible to us not as knowledge but only through the activities of the will. For Plato, the contemplation of the forms gives us knowledge of the real world, and in this Schopenhauer joins with him against Kant. Knowledge of the world in itself is possible, and Schopenhauer even calls the basis of such knowledge 'Ideas' (*Ideen*), a familiar translation of Plato's term for 'Forms'. Our supposed knowledge of the phenomenal world of appearances, on the other hand, is illusory. Here Schopenhauer goes beyond both Kant and Plato, and borrows his model from Eastern philosophy; the world of appearance is an illusion (albeit a 'necessary' illusion) and reality is hidden behind the 'veil of *maya*'. Science in particular is not the road to knowledge but rather a reinforcement of just those illusions which give us a false picture of the nature of reality. Schopenhauer joins with Kant in believing that access to this knowledge is to be found, not through the contemplation of objects outside us—for instance, the admiration of beauty—but by looking within ourselves, into our inner consciousness—'the single narrow door to the truth'. What one notices there is one's own will. But 'one's own will' is not really 'one's own' at all, but only a manifestion of the one universal Will. It is only this that is real, the 'thing in itself', existing independently of our perception of it.

The phenomenal world, by contrast, exists only 'as an object for a subject'. Schopenhauer begins *The World as Will and Idea* by stating, 'the world is my idea.' In other words, *esse est percipi*: 'to be is to be perceived.' Following Kant he insists that the phenomenal world is not 'given' to us but is constituted by us, through the forms of our sensibility (space and time), and the category of the understanding (which, for Schopenhauer, is the single category of causality). He does not dismiss the phenomenal world altogether (just as Plato does not dismiss the world of becoming), but there is no question that it is less real than the Will itself (of which it is also the manifestation), and that its concepts and categories are limited. The category of causality in particular cannot be applied beyond the realm of phenomena, and attempting to do so will result in great confusion. The phenomenal world is not caused by the Will (or by anything else), but within the phenomenal world everything is explained by its cause. Schopenhauer's doctoral dissertation concerned what he called (following Leibniz) 'the Principle of Sufficient Reason'—the idea that everything has an explanation. Every event in the phenomenal world, according to this principle, has a causal explanation, which leads Schopenhauer to insist that the character of the phenomenal world is such that it is defined by relations between objects, and between concepts. The world in itself, on the other hand, stands on its own, outside of space and time, and the world of relations.

The Will, the thing in itself, is not unknown to us and beyond the reach of experience. On the contrary, it is what is closest to us and most readily known. If we look inside ourselves we realize that we are immediately in touch with (are identical with) our own actions. One might suggest, as Kant did, that what we are immediately in touch with are only our own *volitions* ('acts of will'), and that the actions following these are part of the phenomenal world. But Schopenhauer insists that there is no such distinction since volition and action are one and the same; volition is evident only in action, and action would not be action without volition. This means that one's body is something more than an appearance in the phenomenal world: it is the Will objectified, not a phenomenal object. This is the key to

Schopenhauer's philosophy. He then generalizes this observation to apply to the world as a whole, which is also a manifestation or objectification of the Will.

The Will is the centre-piece of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. It is the only thing that is truly real; everything in the universe is a manifestation of the Will, just as one's body and actions are manifestations of one's own will. The Will is *one*—there can only be one since there is no multiplicity except in the phenomenal world—whose various manifestations include the force of gravity, the growth of plants, the behaviour of animals, and the celebrated powers of human reason. But this unitary cosmic Will is not at all like the benign Spirit of Hegel's system, much less the rational will of Kant's philosophy. It is a blind, brutal force that is indifferent to human survival, and to purposes of any kind. It is capable of organizing and manifesting itself in various forms (witness the order of the world) but this is arbitrary, and any order is just as good or bad as any other. The Will is not in space or time, but has manifestations in space and time (an account borrowed from Augustine's conception of God). It is not caused, but is the pointless cause of everything.

With this concept of the double knowledge we have of ourselves, as objects in nature (phenomena) and as inwardly-known manifestations of Will (thing in itself), Schopenhauer leaves Kant and starts to sound more like Plato. With regard to phenomena we can have only 'representations' (*Vorstellungen*), but of the Will in its various manifestations we are capable of having 'ideas'. Ideas, for Schopenhauer, are more like Platonic forms than Kantian concepts, which give us representations. Representations of phenomena, and scientific representations in particular, are illusory ways of perceiving the world. Understanding the world as an orderly causal mechanism is a vicious and self-deceptive way of disguising irrationality and meaninglessness. Like Plato, Schopenhauer suggests that we have access to ideas only through a special sort of intellectual insight, and not through ordinary experience, although it is an odd sort of 'intellect' that includes art but not science. Nevertheless, again like Plato, he argues that these ideas are essentially 'perceptible' (in contrast with concepts, which are in themselves strictly abstract), though we are aware of them

'in the mind's eye', in the imagination rather than through ratiocinative thinking. This is why these Platonic ideas are most accessible to us in art rather than science (an idea derived from the third Critique, and clearly at odds with Plato's theory of art as 'an imitation of an imitation'). The portraits and characters we know from art are not so much representations of actual people as they are ideas of a certain manifestation of Will. Shakespeare's Iago, according to Schopenhauer, had to be created in a single vision, not concocted out of a variety of real characters.

Like the other post-Kantian idealists Schopenhauer rejects individualism as illusory, and emphasizes the larger picture. But the many differences between individuals is too striking for even the most holistic idealist to ignore, and for Schopenhauer the uniqueness of the individual is captured in at least three ways. First he insists that each individual human being is a manifestation of the idea of humanity, but refracted through an idea of one's own. Animals, on the other hand, are manifested only as species. Thus, even though all individuals are manifestations of one and the same idea of humanity, they are prismatically manifested, differently and uniquely. Secondly, what follows from this is that every individual has his or her own *character*, which Schopenhauer insists is immutable and fixed from birth. Character turns out to be the key to ethical behaviour, as opposed to the Kantian emphasis on practical reason and categorical imperatives. Thirdly, the significance of individuality is nowhere more important or dramatic than in the case of the isolated *genius*, a central romantic notion that Schopenhauer takes from Goethe as well as Kant, and of course applies to himself.

The Will determines everything, though it in turn is not determined. In practical terms this means that everything that we do and everything that happens is determined—though not, as in more optimistic views of predestination or fate, for the sake of any ultimate purpose. There is no room for freedom of the will in Schopenhauer's system (except to say that the Will itself is free), but whatever we do as individuals is not the result of choice, but of our character, and this is determined by the Will from birth. What we call our 'acts of will' are illusions, manifestations of the Will within us, but in no sense our own or under our control. So

considered, Kant's image of practical reason is something of a philosophical joke, a self-deceptive fantasy that we are obeying something other than the dictates of our desires and 'inclinations'. Not only do we not obey the dictates of reason (which Schopenhauer insists is just another equally self-interested manifestation of the Will) but we rarely even recognize our own motivation. Long before Freud, Schopenhauer suggests the existence of unconscious motives, and insists that consciousness is 'the mere surface of the mind, of which, as of the earth, we do not know the inside but only the crust'. He adds that we often rationalize and fail to recognize our own motives, and the Will itself often hides matters from memory and recognition. Indeed he sometimes writes as if we virtually never know what we are doing, as if not only the Will is blind, but we are equally blind to its impulses inside us. For such a pathetic creature the categorical imperative is of little use.

The most powerful illustration of the Will acting through us, according to Schopenhauer, is sexual desire. It is symptomatic that most philosophers have largely ignored sex, both as a phenomenon and as desire, and when they have discussed it (like Plato in the *Symposium*) they have often imposed the most absurd idealizations, and insisted on seeing it not as sex but as love, as the attraction of two individuals, and the promise, if not the guarantee, of happiness. But the truth is, Schopenhauer tells us, that sex is not at all personal or a matter of individual choice, but is inherently a source of suffering, however strong its initial attractions. It is the Will forcing its way through us and doing with us as it likes. It has little to do with our individual needs and notions but is rather the species as such operating through us as individuals, and using us for its own perpetuation. How else, he argues, could we possibly explain the urgency and importance we give to what otherwise would seem to be just another routine bodily activity? But the species does not care about individuals. We fall in love because the species determines what our progeny should be like, and accordingly determines our sexual tastes and appetites. The end of love, he assures us, is virtually always disillusion and disaster—but only after the will has had its way, and the species has been assured of its continuation.

We are aware of sexual desire as both the expression of ou body and as a foreign force within us, Schopenhauer argues, an once again it is the body that gives us insight as to the true nature of reality and our place within it. In the body we are aware of th small part reason plays in our actions or volitions, and just how little control we have over ourselves. While one cannot dissociate sexual desire from the individual body, sexual desire is utterly antithetical to ourselves as individuals. But just as sex illustrates how little reason or personal purpose has to do with our lives, so too we can start to appreciate how little reason and control enter into our seemingly most deliberate, rational behaviour. One key concept in ethics, especially since Kant, has been the notion of responsibility, which is to say free choice, the ability 'to do otherwise'. But because our character, which is thoroughly determined by the Will, dictates exactly how we will respond to every situation, the deliberations of practical reason are themselves no more than an aspect of character, a part of our behaviour no less determinate—and no more responsible for our subsequent behaviour—than any other action, thought, or gesture. So too our intentions and attitudes are determined by character, and one can no more choose to be saintly or not to be moody, than one can choose to have a different body. Some people are good because they have that kind of character, and others are evil for the same reason, but there is no social programme or psychological technique that will make any significant difference to them.

What makes evil people evil, however, can be clearly stated. Evil comes into the world because of our false notion of individuality, our belief that it somehow matters what happens to each of us, that status is important in social life, that desires can be satisfied, and that it is possible for an individual to have some advantage over his or her fellow-creatures and be happy. Again we find a powerful thesis borrowed from Eastern philosophy: that belief in individuality is not only a metaphysical error but an ethical disaster. We believe that it is possible to gain competitive advantage, and the result is a war of all against all. Ironically, the most successful wicked people know this, for their success in fulfilling their desires proves to them that satisfaction is impossible since every desire is followed by another. As Goethe put it in

Faust: 'from desire I rush to satisfaction, but from satisfaction I leap to desire.' Furthermore, the wicked man suffers because he knows inwardly that the cruelty inflicted on others actually falls on himself (an argument that one also finds in different forms in Kant and Hegel). So long as we suffer from the illusion of thinking that the individual ego makes any difference we are assured of leading miserable lives. All desire is suffering, and the only way to end it is to stop desiring, give up the idea of oneself as an individual, still the Will within oneself, and turn it against itself. Schopenhauer defines his pessimism as the recognition that life is a continual fluctuation between desire and boredom, and the ultimate point of his philosophy is to make us realize this, and learn to use the Will against itself to free ourselves from this frustration.

The answer to pessimism, according to Schopenhauer, is art—and philosophy. Every aesthetic experience is a temporary escape from the dictates of the Will, because aesthetic experience, as Kant had argued, gives us a disinterested appreciation of the art object and sets us at some significant distance from our normal concerns. We become 'contemplative', and experience a metaphysical shift whereby one comes to have genuine knowledge, the knowledge of Platonic ideas which are the only 'adequate' manifestations of the Will, the thing in itself. The most adequate aesthetic experience, furthermore, is to be found in the realm of music, where we experience not just manifestations of the Will but the Will itself. Music is the art form that dispenses with representation altogether, and that is why it appeals to us so profoundly. It is 'the universal imageless language of the heart'. In aesthetic, and especially musical, experience we are elevated beyond the merely empirical, beyond the obstinately wilful individual self, and by engaging with the Will as such we free ourselves of its power.

It is in art, too, that we come to appreciate the importance of genius, which Schopenhauer defines as the ability to know things independently of causality (the principle of sufficient reason). What we experience in art are ideas rather than perceptual objects. In aesthetic contemplation we remove ourselves from our normal subjective perspective, and, in Schopenhauer's

eccentric usage, become 'objective'. Equally curious, since it is not the artistic object but the idea behind the object that is critical here, the artist and the observer share the essential talent in art, not of making but of seeing. Genius is the ability to adopt this aesthetic stance, which would indicate that Schopenhauer thought that the true appreciation of art, as much as the making of it, was a very rare ability. But for most of us whatever art we can enjoy provides a temporary respite from the competitiveness and vanity of the world, a release from the power of the Will and the illusions of the individual self.

The only durable escape from the Will, however, is through philosophy. In philosophy one gives up (or ought to give up) the false optimism that everything happens for a purpose, that life is essentially good, that happiness is, after all, possible (this is why, in addition to sheer envy and competitiveness, Schopenhauer so despised Hegel). The truth is rather that of the *Upanishads*: life is suffering. The only escape is through the release of the Will, to dissolve oneself into the whole, to give up desire and the expectation that it can be fulfilled. Saints do this; it is why they become ascetic and 'deny' themselves, but becoming ascetic does not by itself release the Will. One must first see through the illusions of individuality and desire, and asceticism follows, but it is not enough to see through these illusions once or twice (we all do that, at least briefly, in a passing insight or a temporary aesthetic experience). It is not even enough to be a philosopher. Schopenhauer himself is a case in point: despite his philosophy, which he formulated as a young man, he lived a life filled with desires and their (temporary) satisfactions. But as he once commented in his own defence, it is no more necessary for a philosopher to be a saint than for a saint to be a philosopher. One cannot change one's character. At most one can look at art and accept a philosophy that minimizes one's expectations, and brings an end to our unreasonable demands for satisfaction. Philosophy can only do so much, for one cannot give instructions about how to live, and in any case, 'the translation from idea to concept is always a fall'. The end of philosophy, Schopenhauer insists, is silence.

Schopenhauer published *The World as Will and Idea* in 1819, but the immediate fame and fortune he expected did not come. He gave up university teaching soon after his foolish confrontation with Hegel, and spent the rest of his life developing his philosophy, twice rewriting his *magnum opus* and adding dozens of essays on a variety of related topics (published as *Parerga and Paralipomena*). But his anti-Enlightenment, anti-rational, anti-scientific, and pessimistic views would not find a place in the nationalistic, still-hopeful world of the early nineteenth century. After 1850, however, with the failure of popular revolutions (which Schopenhauer, needless to say, did not support), Europe seemed ready for a philosophy that called for resignation rather than hope, that recognized the evil in the world and the vanity of life, and Schopenhauer's vision of the cosmic wilful self would attract the attention of some of the most exciting philosophers in Europe.

➤ *Good Night, World*

Good night, wide world.
Big, stinking world.
Not you, but I, slam the gate.
In my long robe,
With my flaming, yellow patch,
With my proud gait,
At my own command—
I return to the ghetto.
Wipe out, stamp out all the alien traces.
I grovel in your dirt,
Hail, hail, hail,
Humpbacked Jewish life.
A ban, world, on your unclean cultures.
Though all is desolate,
I roll in your dust,
Gloomy Jewish life.

Piggish German, hostile Polack,
Sly Amalek, land of guzzling and gorging.
Flabby democracy, with your cold
Compresses of sympathy.
Good night, world of electrical insolence.
Back to my kerosene, tallowy shadow,
Eternal October, wee little stars,
To my crooked alleys, hunchbacked street-lamp,

My stray pages, my Twenty-Four-Books,
My Talmud, to the puzzling
Questions, to the bright Hebrew-Yiddish,
To Law, to deep meaning, to duty, to right.
World, I stride with joy to the quiet ghetto-light.

Good night. I grant you, world,
All my liberators.
Take the Jesusmarxes, choke on their courage.
Drop dead on a drop of our baptized blood.
And I believe that even though he tarries,
Day after day rises my waiting.
Surely, green leaves will rustle
On our withered tree.
I do not need consolation.
I go back to my four walls,
From Wagner's pagan music—to tune, to humming.
I kiss you, tangled Jewish life.
It cries in me, the joy of coming.

April 1938

➤ אַ גוטע נאַכט, וועלט

אַ גוטע נאַכט, בריייטע וועלט.
גרויסע, שטינקענדיקע וועלט.
נישט דו, נאָר איך פאַרהאַק דעם טויער.
מיט דעם לאַנגן כאַלאַט,
מיט דער פייערדיקער, געלער לאַט,
מיט דעם שטאָלצן טראָט,
אויף מײַן אייגענעם געבאָט —
גיי איך צוריק אין געטאָ.
וויש אָפּ, צעטרעט אַלע געשמדטע שפורן.
כ׳וואַלגער זיך אין דײַן מיסט,
לויב, לויב, לויב,
צעהויקערט ייִדיש לעבן.
חרם, וועלט, אויף דײַנע טרייפענע קולטורן.
כאָטש אַלץ איז פאַרוויסט,
שטויב איך זיך אין דײַן שטויב,
טרויעריק ייִדיש לעבן.

חזירישער דאַטש, פיינטלעכער ליאַך,
עמלק גנב, לאַנד פון זויפן און פרעסן.
שלאַברע דעמאָקראַטיע, מיט דײַנע קאַלטע
סימפּאַטיע-קאָמפרעסן.
אַ גוטע נאַכט, עלעקטריש צעחוצפּהטע וועלט.
צוריק צו מײַן קעראָסין, חלב׳נעם שאָטן,
אייביקן אָקטאָבער, דריבנע שטערן,
צו מײַנע קרומע גאַסן, הויקערדיקן לאַמטערן,

מײַנע שמות, מײַן סוואַרבע,
מײַנע גמרות, צו די האַרבע
סוגיות, צום ליכטיקן עברי-טײַטש,
צום דין, צום טיפן מיין, צום חוב, צום געראַכט,
וועלט, איך שפּאַן מיט פרייד צום שטילן געטאָ-לעכט.

אַ גוטע נאַכט. כ׳גיב דיר, וועלט, צושטײַער
אַלע מײַנע באַפרײַער.
נעם צו די יעזוסמאַרקסעס, ווערג זיך מיט זייער מוט.
קראַפיר איבער אַ טראָפן פון אונדזער געטויפט בלוט.
און איך האָב האָפן אַז כאָטש ער זאַמט זיך,
גייט אויף טאָג-אײַן-טאָג-אויס מײַן וואַרטן.
ס׳וועלן נאָך רוישן גרינע בלעטער
אויף אונדזער בוים דעם פאַרקוואַרטן.
איך דאַרף קיין טרייסט נישט.
אין גיי צוריק צו דלת אמות,
פון וואַגנערס געץ-מוזיק צו ניגון, ברומען.
כ׳קוש דיך, פאַרקאָלטנט ייִדיש לעבן.
ס׳ווייַנט אין מיר די פרייד פון קומען.

אפריל 1938

CYNTHIA OZICK'S DILEMMA

David Rosen
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For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. --- Deuteronomy 5:9-10

Great God! I'd rather be a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn...
-- Wordsworth

Cynthia Ozick is a tragic figure. Schooled in the traditions of highbrow Western Culture and a capable master of its literary forms, she is at once drawn to and repulsed by the very ideals that she perceives to lie at its core. In her fiction and her critical essays, Ozick returns again and again to the source of this singular paradox, which she elevates to the point of a consuming moral crisis, examining it from multiple angles, and creating a host of bravely-wrought characters and ideological postures to give voice to the incessant struggle between a principled Monotheism and the riotous Kingdom of Pan that rages within her fertile mind.

Ozick's writing is superior, and the conviction behind it intense. The tragedy emanates not from the failure of her art, but from its brutal success. Behind the dazzle of Ozick's prose and her ideas, one cannot help but glimpse the shadow of a guilt-driven compulsion. Her deep immersion in the artistic process of writing great fiction fills her with the dread that she has somehow abused her fortunate position as a link in the chain of Diaspora Jewish history, "forgotten the commandments of the Lord and gone after her heart and eyes in a lustful urge" (Num. 15:39).

One of the clearest expositions of this theme is Ozick's story, "The Pagan Rabbi," whose very title achieves the effect of much of Ozick's writing: to declare the queerness and undeniability of the encounter between Jewish sensibilities and their opposites within the same field. Surely there is no such thing as a pagan rabbi. Yet that is the title of the story and its dead protagonist.

The first thing we find out about Isaac Kornfeld is that he is dead, hanged by is own hand from a tree in a public park. The narrator of the story, whose name we never learn, is an old friend of Kornfeld's, and it is through his eyes that we evaluate the life and death of the late rabbi. One of the first bits of information we receive is not about Kornfeld or the narrator, but about their fathers, both of whom were rabbis.

These two fathers are the failed transmitters of Jewish beliefs and sensibilities to their sons. The narrator's relationship with his father is grounded in fear, attributed to a difficulty in hearing the older man's voice, made fractious and harsh by a "certain disease of the larynx." (3) Here, voice clearly serves as a trope for message, and the gulf between the narrator and his father only widens as the the narrator leaves Jewish scholarship, marries a non-Jewish woman, and slips into atheism. The rabbi sits *shiva* for his errant son, and in the end, the dismissal is mutual, as the disease progresses and the father loses his voice altogether, leaving the narrator utterly alienated from Judaism, which, in the person of his father, has "died without a word." (8)

De-coupled from his native past, the narrator finds little comfort in the non-Jewish world, represented by his wife, whose sexual unfriendliness ultimately leads to their divorce. He remains a small-time book seller, the purveyor of other people's culture, producing nothing himself and keeping "for reasons more obscure than filial" a department of Hebrew and Aramaic theological works -- sentimental deposits of the heritage he has abandoned.

While the narrator is sterile, Isaac produces both academically and as a father, begetting seven girls with his wife Sheindel, a concentration-camp survivor. His books include both scholarly monographs and responsa on matters of Jewish law, and he appears to have established himself firmly as a continuor of Jewish ways. Yet, for reasons entirely different than those of the

narrator, Isaac Kornfeld ultimately severs his connection to the past, and shames his father as well.

The source of Kornfeld's demise is not a slow alienation, but a spectacular break, a confrontation between the Hebrew and the Hellenic that shatters the vessel filled with both. Like the title of the story, Isaac Kornfeld's name alludes to the struggle that cleaves him. He is named for the first of the patriarchs who must both receive and pass on the message of monotheism. Yet his last name (corn field) hints of nature's resplendent bounty.

It is this bounty and its lure that begins to stir an alien spirit in the young rabbi. The narrator sights the first rustlings of this spirit in Kornfeld's notebook, which juxtaposes biblical interdictions of idolatry with snatches from the English Romantic poets extolling the beauty of nature. The last entry in the book is one short sentence: Great Pan lives.

Because the majority of entries in the notebook seem generally bookish, the narrator attributes no great meaning to them. But then he is presented with a long, enchanting love letter that recounts the last weeks and hours of Kornfeld's life. The letter is addressed to a wood nymph, the animated spirit of the great oak that eventually served the rabbi as gallows.

In the course of the letter, we learn that Isaac Kornfeld had become convinced that all creation possesses a soul, but that human beings cannot perceive these souls because our own souls are forever fused to our bodies. He becomes obsessed with the notion that he might succeed in encountering these invisible spirits if he could only free his own soul from the confines of his body. When one evening he succeeds in invoking the spirit of an oak tree, he begins a rapturous affair with the dryad, the passion of which indeed tears his own soul from his body.

The result is two Kornfelds, body and soul. The corporeal Isaac is the figure we have come to know, still enthralled with the nymph. Isaac's spirit, however, is an old rabbinical figure, hunched over a tractate of Mishna, lost in the sweetness of the law and utterly oblivious to the natural world. The nymph accuses Kornfeld's soul of conjuring against her: "It denies me. It denies every spirit and all my sisters...it denies all our multiplicity, and all gods diversiform...it is an enemy."

As the nymph flees the vision of Kornfeld's soul, the corporeal Isaac rushes to encounter his own being, to reject it, but the spirit insists on its devotion to the law. Abandoned by the alien culture -- just as the narrator has been abandoned by his non-Jewish wife -- and rejected by his own spirit, which he had abandoned -- just as the narrator's father had rewarded his son's betrayal with dismissal, with no possibility for succor from either side, Kornfeld strangles himself with his prayer shawl, crying out for the nymph to return.

The narrator reads of this remarkable series of events in the presence of the Rebbitzen Sheindel, who condemns her husband as a pagan, his deeds an abomination. Sheindel is European, a survivor of vanished Jewish worlds who, despite her experience in the camps, retains her piety and a hard-as-iron commitment to Judaism. She is a stern foil for the nymph, ironically named "Beauty," although her outstanding trait is rejection of pagan aestheticism. Her bitter rejection of her husband's end is too harsh for the narrator, who once thought of marrying her, but perceives that her pitiless loyalty to God is beyond his range. In a faint echo of her severity, he flushes a few houseplants down the toilet when he returns home, shaken by what he has learned.

As a meditation on the clash between Jerusalem and Athens, "The Pagan Rabbi" is ultimately a record of extremes. The narrator has rejected any

meaningful connection with Judaism, has failed in his effort to connect to the non-Jewish world, and now floats in a kind cultural grey zone, wanting all color and conviction. Sheindel, on the other extreme, rejects all involvement with that which lies beyond the fence of the law. She is, in the words of the narrator, "born to dread imagination." While possessing integrity she is a relic of the old world, and not a very sympathetic one at that. In the middle (blown apart all over the middle) is the figure of Isaac Kornfeld, the pagan rabbi. Kornfeld's failure to synthesize his Jewish and his Pagan impulses imply that such a synthesis is bound to fail, and the one who attempts it fated to abandonment by both sides. Kornfeld's is the passionate bang compared to the narrator's somewhat pathetic whimper, but both men stand as refugees from personal integration.

It is a tree that seduces Isaac Kornfeld, the tree described in the mishnaic epigraph of the story, surely a text familiar to the professor of Mishnaic history. Like the narrator and Isaac, Sheindel and the dryad, Kornfeld's body and Kornfeld's soul, the tree, too, has its doppelganger, namely the Torah, frequently called a "tree of life." This natural metaphor is notably absent from Ozick's story, for it hints at the possibility of a morally appropriate relationship between the Jewish and the natural, one in which beauty is noursihed and informed by the Jewish tradition. To explain why that is an option that Ozick makes unavailable to her characters, we turn to an eximanination of her novella *Envy; Or, Yiddish in America.*

In many ways, *Envy* is a companion piece to "The Pagan Rabbi." It, too, deals with the seductive power of the non-Jewish world and the broken chain of Jewish cultural continuity. In this piece, however, the subjects are not primarily the children, but the fathers.

Edelshtein and Baumzweig are Yiddish poets, obscure toilers in the vineyards of a dying tongue, whose obscurity is maddeningly illuminated for them by the inexplicable success of Oshtrover, a Yiddish writer of short fiction, whose work in translation is read and admired by many in the non-Jewish world. Convinced that Ostrover's success is due not to the quality of his writing, which ~~they know~~ he knows to be *drek*, but to the skill of his translator, Edelshtein desperately seeks a translator for his own work.

Edelshtein has no children, and his efforts to find an American audience through translations are a quest for both personal recognition and cultural survival. Yiddish, along with millions of those who ~~spoke~~spoke it, wrote it, and read its poetry, was killed in the camps. Jews in America were abandoning Yiddish or growing up ignorant of the language. Even Baumzweig's own children had turned their literary energies to the likes of Sir Gawain and Carson McCullers.

Like the fathers in "The Pagan Rabbi," ~~the~~ Edelshtein and Baumzweig encounter difficulty in passing on the old ways. Unlike those two rabbis, however, the Yiddish poets believe that they can join the future to the past if the proper mediator is employed, the right translation.

Edelshtein first appeals to "the spinster hack," one of Ostrover's bevy of translators. She proceeds to inform him that there is no market for his poetry, that nobody would read it even if it were translated, and that her compensation wouldn't be worth the effort. As for Ostrover's success, predicated on his reputation as a "modern" writer, the hack claims the credit for this herself.

> You ask: what has persuaded *them* that he's a "so called modern"? -- a sneer. Aha. *Who* has read James Joyce, Ostrover or I? I'm fifty-three years old. I wasn't born back of Hlusk for nothing. I didn't go to Vassar for nothing -- do you understand

me? I got caught in between, so I got squeezed. Between two organisms. A cultural hermaphrodite, neither one nor the other. I have a forked tongue. (55)

Edelshtein knows that his work would be worth the effort of translation, for it is far superior in quality to Ostrover's. Moreover, as opposed to Ostrover, a hack who wanted only to save himself, Edelshtein proclaimed he had a mission to save Yiddish itself from oblivion. (56) At least, this is what Edelshtein tells himself. Ozick casts great doubt on the nobility of Edelshtein's motives, however, and suggests that the major force driving Edelshtein to find a translator is not the preservation of Yiddish as a cultural legacy, but sheer envy of Ostrover's success, and deeper still, a thirst for the Gentile approval that success represents.

After attending a successful reading by Ostrover, Edelshtein is so consumed by jealousy that he vents his rage on Baumzweig's wife and then descends into a brooding remorsefulness over his fate as a Jewish writer. He wishes he were a Gentile and recalls a poem fragment that asks: *Who will let me begin again*?In a (fantasy?) dialogue with Ostrover, he declares: "I want to be a Gentile like you!"

What snaps Edelshtein out of this reverie is a meeting with his friend Vorofsky's niece Hannah, who happens to understand Yiddish, and even knows one or two of the old poet's works by heart. That night, he fixes on a plan to recruit Hannah as his translator, and to groom her to carry Yiddish into the next generation. Edelshtein writes her a letter in Yiddish in which he truly appears to accept the mission of saving a language he has himself declared dead many times. However, after writing it, Edelshtein again throws doubt on his motives, declaring: "What did the death of Jews have to do with his own troubles? His cry was ego and more ego...Whoever mourns the dead mourns himself." (75)

Confused, Edelshtein wanders into the night, and continues to compose a long, rambling missive to Hannah, in which he defends Yiddish as a language that understands the difference between God and artifact, a language that can enable the Jews to retain critical perspectives on themselves and the surrounding Gentile society.

Finally, by sheer luck, he finds Voronsky's building, which he recognizes, ironically, when the doorman digs a statuary urn out of the snow in front. This allusion to Keats' urn, the very temptation to greatness he has just advocated overthrowing, is filled with sand and cigarette butts -- a garbage pail. Excellent

Up in Vronsky's apartment, Edelshtein proposes his plan to Hannah: "You'll save Yiddish. You'll be like a messiah to a whole generation, a whole literature..." (93). Hannah mocks his offer, accusing Edelshtein of wanting not a translator but an heir, someone to take him over. Hannah declares herself uninterested in the type of Yiddish Edelshtein writes. Rather, she prefers the vision of Ostrover, who "knows a reality beyond realism," who has transcended Jewish parochialism and "speaks for everyone." (95)

Hannah's rejection of everything Edelshtein holds dear about Yiddish -- its stubborn insistence on real things -- for everything he despises about Ostrover's writing is so profoundly disorienting that it provokes a fit of clarity in Edelshtein: "He saw everything [Hannah had cursed] in miraculous reversal, blessed...What he understood was this: that the ghetto was the real world and the outside world only a ghetto." (96)

The envy of goysih acceptance begins to fade into a vision in which Jewish literature makes sense. He recalls Alexi, a wealthy Jewish boy he used to tutor in Poland, Kiev, Ukraine who was being groomed for literacy in non-Jewish culture, whose training and the gentile acceptance it brought he had always coveted.

Now he began to question that: "Suppose it turns out that the destiny of the Jews is vast, open, eternal, and that Western Civilization is meant to dwindle, shrivel, shrink into the ghetto of the world?" (96)

When Hannah again provokes him after this epiphany, he strikes her, physically reacting to her casual sloughing off of the burden of Yiddish: "Forget Yiddish!" he screamed at her. "Wipe it out of your brain! Extirpate it! Get a memory operation. You have no right to it, you have no right to an uncle, a grandfather. No one came before you, you were never born!"

Here Edelshtein is reversing his own fear of being left without (cultural) descendants and declaring that Hannah, who rejects the Yiddish he is trying to pass on, is like one with no forebears. After a final effort at convincing her to translate his poems, Edelshtein takes his leave of Hannah for good.

At this point, *Envy* has passed beyond *The Pagan Rabbi* to offer a glimpse of what is worth preserving in Jewish culture and the correct reasons for preserving it. Not for self-gratification, and certainly not for Gentile approval, but because the ghetto may well be the real world, because the Jewish experience in history and chain of traditions is valuable in itself. The question remains whence the Hannahs of the world, who are capable of continuing the legacy, and perhaps even translating its essence, will emerge.

Ozick ends her novella on a dark note by introducing the shadow of antisemitism. On the way out from his conversation with Hannah, Edelshtein calls a Christian telephone missionary, who proceeds to engage in an anti-Jewish diatribe that insults every aspect of Jewish culture, physiognomy, and religion. Edelshtein retorts by explaining why the Hannahs of the world are so rare: "Amalekite! Titus! Nazi! The whole world is infected by you anti-Semites! On account of you children become corrupted!

On account of you I lost everything, my whole life! On account of you I have no translator!"

Were I Cynthia Ozick's editor, I would have suggested that she change the ending of *Envy*. Attributing the absence of Hannah-disciples to antisemitism is undoubtedly partially correct, but it fails to draw the full potential of the dilemma of Diasporic Jewish continuity. Even in the absence of antisemites, it is not clear that the Hannahs would flock to the schools of their Yiddishist elders. More likely, man would be drawn to more literary, more aesthetic, more "modern" modes of expression, modes which Ozick has no trouble labelling "pagan." If so, then we are approach the territory covered in of "The Pagan Rabbi," and a fate that Ozick so clearly fears for her own work.

Because Ozick is aware that the temptation of art as idolatry is ultimately more corrosive to Jewish commitments than simple disinterest or assimilation, she is more strident in denouncing it. See, for example, the terribly harsh trio of essays in Ozick's book *Art and Ardor*, "Toward a New Yiddish," "Literature as Idol," and "The Riddle of the Ordinary."

Truly great literature invariably smooths out the harsh edges of ideology in the process of drawing believably complex and emotionally resonant characters. Cynthia Ozick has demonstrated abundantly that she is capable of great writing. A story that addresses the temptations of a writer such as herself -- Jewishly committed and knowledgeable, yet terribly drawn to high art -- would be most satisfying.

Remembrance of Ashkenazi Things Past:

Shabtai's Sacred And Profane Cosmologies

Mel Solman

"O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

"To be or not to be...."

Hamlet

"In his room Goldman struggled with his own problems and the problems of the world, and in his wonder and despair he created in his imagination the life of liberation, boldness and vitality on which he was about to embark, dwelling lovingly and happily on all its details, but in this room too he learned to renounce his new life, sorrowfully and with an oppressive feeling of failure, only to throw himself desperately again, full of longing and envy and hope, into the creation of an even wilder and better and bolder life than before, a life transcending all ordinary laws and possibilities, and between one life and another he trained himself to live his slow and certain death in perfect resignation, and even willingness, even though he longed to live for a thousand years--but the results produced by his diligent and cunning exercises were unimpressive, and he did not succeed in resigning himself to the fact that one day he would cease to exist forever, while death itself, although its existence was real and close enough to him, and although he made a habit of visualizing it to himself in all kinds of different ways, remained in the end mysterious and elusive, and therefore frightening and depressing, since despite all his efforts it did not turn into something which could be experienced or compared with anything else he had experienced...."

Past Continuous

"...the undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all..."

Hamlet

Much the way certain planets and stars distinguish themselves by contrary-wise motion all the while orbiting together within one universe, there are certain clusterings of characters in Yaakov Shabtai's Past Continuous which though diametrically opposed in outlook and temperament still move together within the rich, glorious mind of an omniscient narrator.

Crammed into the same space and time, an immense gallery of personalities is offered the reader. And as portraiture may be grouped by various schools and traditions, the major figures in Shabtai's gallery of family and friends can be gathered into two distinct parallel mythological cosmologies according to character -- one sacred, the other profane. All draw from a common pool of materials, yet it is intriguing how the interplay of ascendent yetzerim and life experience produce wholly different kinds of people.

Atop the profane cosmology is Goldman Sr., who with a perverted twist, upholds that everything has meaning and order and perfectibility. At the bottom is Caesar, with an equally perverted spin, who maintains that nothing at all has meaning and order and perfectibility.

The upper end of the sacred cosmology of the novel is peopled by Aunt Zipporah and Uncle Joel, Aunt Bracha and Uncle Shmuel, Matilda Levitan and in many ways Manfred Levankopf. It is Aunt Zipporah in particular, a stalwart, moral wife and mother, a magnificent demonstration of the possibility of meaning and

harmony and tenderness in the world, who reminds critic Irving Howe of William Faulkner's Dilsey, an equally resolute woman whose labor and determination seem to hold her world together. As this cosmology has True Good, its lower reaches have True Evil, occupied not by individuals but by the collective memory of Nazi and Stalinist horrors. The defiance of survivors and the remembrance of lost worlds by surviving relatives points backward towards this ever-present insidious abyss.

Though the characters within the sacred cosmology are not discounted or undervalued and represent an impressive counterweight to the characters of the profane cosmology, it is nevertheless Goldman Sr. and Caesar who seem to be the poles between which the story is stretched out. (Structurally the case could also be made that the novel is arrayed across the nine months between the death of Goldman Sr. and his son.)

In this the novel's primary cosmology, Goldman Sr. is a fully developed character who often comes across as an Old Testament God caricature or else a stark inflexible geriatric personification of Judaism itself or both together. He is William Blake's rendition of "Nobodaddy", the grumpy Old Man upstairs, and also the sterile medieval stereotype of stubborn, rigid, unmerciful Judaism superseded by forgiving Christianity.

The omniscient narrator meticulously depicts Goldman Sr., the architect and inhabitant of a perverse tragic image of heaven, as the foil for Caesar, the advocate for and inhabitant of a perverse comic image of hell. And in their pathetic lunar-

like orbits, Israel revolves around Caesar, and Goldman's son, the wayward Jewish Hamlet, never escapes the voyage round his father.

Much time and energy could be spent analyzing reasons for Goldman Sr.'s strident militancy against the world and the inhabitants thereof. But cataloguing his actions and their ostensible causes is akin to losing oneself in a deep dark woods -- there is seemingly no end to the anecdotal paths and trails.

A more productive strategy begins with the realization that what Goldman Sr. says and does is secondary to his very nature which shapes both word and deed. The essential nature of his character is one which constantly inclines towards confrontation. If, for our purposes, humanity can be starkly divided into the harmonizers and confrontationalists, then Goldman Sr. is the firmly in the latter camp. Seemingly minor in significance, it is Goldman Sr.'s approach to card playing which reveals the tip of the iceberg of character.

> "...He played so passionately and overbearingly that in recent years it had become almost impossible to sit down at the card table with him because he was always laying down **the law** so irately and despotically the he spoiled the game for everyone else."[1]

Regardless the circumstances -- whether over a card game or the arrangement of a stamp collection -- the fundamental inner nature which molds his disposition and consequently his behavior

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[1] Yaakov Shabtai, Past Continuous. New York, 1985, p. 43. All subsequent cited pages are indicated by bracketed numbers.

thrives on conflict. He is most true to himself in answering his basic need to find fault, to savagely criticize, to provoke arguments and to initiate one-sided feuds which last for years. Anything that smacks of harmony is something his psyche rejects, the way a body rejects implanted tissue.

Yoke that disposition towards confrontation with a paradoxical predilection for order and the result is a life primed for constant confrontation.

For Goldman Sr. the disturbance of order is a fundamental pretext for conflict, and since there is always chaos in the world, he has unlimited occasion to honor the wishes of a temperament perpetually on the brink of explosion.

If he is a caricature of Judaism, a perverse Yahweh, then Caesar is the caricature of a comic Satan representing "goy-ism" at the lower end of this cosmology. He is in fact an nonconscious pre-Adamic pagan goy Jew -- since in Shabtai's near exclusively Jewish world, the Jews have to play the goyim too. The standard pejorative definition flowing from the pejorative epithet "goyim" is: people who do not believe or do not know they should believe that man lives in a meaningful universe. Consequently they do not know that everything therefore should have meaning, and that perfection and perfectibility should be goals to strive for in living up to man's destiny as image of God. Thus, Caesar is a Jew-goy.

And yet a byproduct of the reflex-like Jewish belief that everything has meaning and everything happens for a reason is a

strident tendency to blame. If a religion-based culture holds out the ideal of perfection flowing from personal conduct and a well-lived life, it follows unavoidably that discrepancies and failures will be starkly evident. And this leads to the fingerpointing. Who is to blame for these discrepancies and failures? Who's to blame that the world isn't perfect when it should be? Why did we lose the homeland in the first place -- our fault -- not holy enough. Why the Holocaust? -- our fault -- not holy enough. The Sephardim say because the Ashkenazim neglected the study of Kabbalah. The ultra-Orthodox say it's the Zionists to blame for trying to force God's hand. Thou shalt find out who's to blame is the unstated Eleventh Commandment.

Thus as in Jewish life in general, the novel is filled with blaming, mostly emanating from Goldman Sr. ensconced in the upper end of his cosmology. And the fellow traveller of blame is inevitably overinterpretation. The decadent Kaminskaya's suicide. Her fault. In defiance of criminal law besides showing "nothing but cowardice and egotism" on her part." (75) Naomi's death. Her own fault for marrying an Englishman. For learning to drive. An act of defiance directed specifically against him, Goldman Sr. Naomi's death. Regina's fault because Naomi had married an Englishman and Regina didn't prevent it. A punishment for the illicit relationship. His son's divorce. His son's own fault. An act of defiance directed specifically against him. Regina's fault, too. His brother Lazar who went off to fight with the Loyalists in Spain against his advice and wound up a

prisoner in Siberia deserved what he got. His own fault. And since Bracha would not join in him in ostracizing Lazar when he returned home at last, outrage at her "since his anger had to be everybody's anger, just as his hate, or sorrow or love had to be everybody's hate, sorrow or love." (41)

"The tradition" as transmitted through Goldman Sr. is clearly garbled by a defective personality and distorted by a kind of cultural broken telephone. It is the Talmudic tradition which specifies the Tanach be studied as a seamless web in which everything within can be used to explain everything else. But while Koheleth could be used to illuminate Bereshet, this methodology was not envisaged for a gonif like Saul of Tarsus or for a secular mind like that of Goldman Sr. for whom everything but everything means something else and no bounds are drawn. (Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar and kiss is not just a kiss as time goes by.) Assaulting his family with this unrelenting weapon of overinterpretation, Goldman Sr. draws all life out of them, essentially devouring his own children like some pagan god.

Another distortion of the tradition could be placed under the rubric of "anxiety of influence." Historian Daniel Boorstin says of Judaism in his book The Creators that it is unique among world faiths in placing an activist Creator God at its core who expects emulation. Boorstin doesn't elaborate on the consequences of this -- presumably that is the job of novelists. But when all the rejoicing over the number of Nobel Prize winners, Hollywood moguls and business tycoons subsides, what is

the lot for the remaining mere mortal Jews? The onus of dealing with a cosmically dynamic perfectionist Creator God built into the culture means many of the chosen folk become in varying degrees viciously cynically or terribly disappointed. Cynical because they look around at highly imperfect humanity and see little evidence of divine planning. And disappointed, even crushed, that they as flawed beings cannot possibly fulfill the mandate of conduct as laid out for them from above, or at the very least become Nobel Prize winners, Hollywood moguls or business tycoons themselves.

All these elements dovetail in Shabtai's great novel. It is clear that the omniscient narrator is carving out a world "after the tradition" in Robert Alter's intentionally ambiguous phrase. Secular Zionism, "after the tradition" (meaning here "in accordance with"), absorbed and expounded all the expectations unleashed by the Creator God of religion: to make a perfect egalitarian land for Jews, to fashion a totally perfect social and moral transformation, to leap through history into the future perfectly intact and renewed in one bound. The gap between the hope and the reality echoes throughout the book.

In the post-Six-Day War period in which the novel takes place, there is another sense conveyed of "after the tradition," that of an emerging Israel wherein self-sacrificing secular idealism is fading away, and nothing explains anything at all. It is a reborn land all right but one where disappearing orchards and citrus groves seem to transform before one's eyes into

concrete towers, and disappointed Labor Zionists sit about at shiva houses wondering what went wrong.

Irving Howe notes in his review of the novel's first English translation:

> "...For the plebeian veterans of Tel Aviv, stirred in their youth by a whiff of the absolute, the very process of realization brought disappointment. History gave a little but not enough, and now it has left these people--Shabtai's people--with a grief they cannot comprehend or shake off. They seldom talk about it any longer, and some of them have begun to doubt the genuiness of their own feelings, but this hardly matters since those feelings continue to oppress them."[2]

But Goldman Sr., despite elaborate pretense, is not really a disappointed idealist like many of the others. He conveniently employs ideology and/or religion as a part of an elaborate excuse. As the great despiser of "toho va-vohu" of any kind, he "believed fanatically in a world order with good and bad and no neutral ground in between, and fixed times for everything and getting up in the morning no later than seven or at the very latest eight." (13)

He brutally kills Kaminskaya's dog to restore order in his universe, so he implies. The narrator however brilliantly traces a cascade of justifications within his mind from political, social, moral social to finally the truth itself:

> "..because he was a Zionist and a Socialist and believed in plain living, hard work morality and progress... he knew what was right and good, not only for himself by also

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[2] Irving Howe, "Absalom In Israel," in Selected Writings 1950-1990 (New York, 1990), pp. 376-377.

> for others, and could not tolerate error or sin... he could not bring himself to forgive anyone, even his own family or friends... and above all because he had a tyrannical, uncontrollable desire to impose his principles on the whole world... and in the end everyone violated the proper order of things, everyone, that is, except him, since he was the representative of this order, and accordingly he never knew a single hour of peace of mind, and his whole life, which was full of hostility and humiliation passed in denunciations and accusations and arguments." (18)

Insisting on a huge wedding for his son, Goldman Sr. wanted the reception "because he had a tyrannical desire to achieve perfection." Like the stuffy, unforgiving, castigating, perfectionist Old Testament God whom he is perversely mimicking, Goldman Sr. stands virtually alone in his upper end of the demonic cosmology in all his pseudo-monotheistic vanity -- obsessed with making a ordered world and pathologically zealous in excoriating anyone who messes things up. There are others who share some of his unbalanced zeal, notably his order-driven mother and his niece Esther (daughter of Zipporah and Joel) also zealous for bitter confrontation. But none can rival Goldman Sr.'s virtuoso performance which ties all the elements of blame and overinterpretation and rage against chaos into one maniacal bundle. "Kol b'seder" for him is no mere idiomatic expression but a blueprint and an obsession.

In contrast -- in what may be the most perverse yichus in modern Hebrew literature -- Caesar's lower end of the cosmology is filled with a cluster of characters which includes his father

Erwin, his paternal grandmother Clara, his paternal grandfather David, his mistress Eliezra, his best friend Besh, his girlfriend Zahara, his girlfriend Tehilla's mean-spirited parents and the decadent Kaminskaya. There are numerous others.

Caesar the pagan, the goy-Jew, the praiser of Roman burial customs of cremation, lives a life which is totally irresponsible, betraying not the slightest consideration for anybody except himself, not his sons, not his ex-wife, not his revolving-door girlfriends. He lives on the physical plane of existence exclusively.

Perhaps having had Erwin as a father means Caesar is just a genetic chip off the old code. One can't expect a color blind man to grasp blues or yellows. Yet it could also be the return to Zion meant the return to a sultry Mediterranean climate, unleashing all the eroticism which such hot climates provokes, Leviticus notwithstanding.

For Caesar ogling pornography is a marker of his development as a human being. He worries about his looks, his growing baldness and his sexual pleasure. In him lies barely any trace of altruism. It may as well be a foreign language like Mandarin or Swahili. He lies to his own son about taking him to the movies. Then he lies again when he breaks his word. Words and language have no absolute value in his world. Since he carries in him no notion of truth, words are like a currency to be readily exchanged at any given moment in time in order to improve position or stature.

> "There was no reason why he shouldn't have his own way, and why other people shouldn't give in to him, and do it gladly too, because his deepest feeling about life was that it was fluid and formless and aimless, and everything was possible in it to an infinite degree and it could be played backward and forward like a roll of film, just as he wished...." (226)

He is, in short, the Ugly Israeli. Because his behavior is not visibly debilitative like heart disease or cancer or AIDS or paranoid schizophrenia and because there is a near universal hechsher for Don Juan-like conduct, what gets obscured is the stark reality that Caesar is sick. Caesar is a sexual addict with all the symptoms of any other addiction, be it to alcohol or heroin. He is hooked, as the narrator shows throughout the novel. For Caesar marital fidelity lasts the equivalent of a half a page. (106-107) Coupled with this rampant sexual addiction is what appears to be faulty neurological wiring, rendering him a person with virtually no attention span. His flits from subject to subject, from person to person. His proclivity for disorder matches mirror-like Goldman Sr.'s obsession with order. The havoc which Caesar inflicts on others flows from his fundamental nature. So as it was with Goldman Sr., it is a useless exercise cataloging and interpreting the content of his acts.

As intelligent as he apparently is, Goldman's son doesn't see this. The great failing of the thinking man will always be to treat the man of action as an idol. As designated Hamlet of the novel, for whom "conscience does make cowards of us all,"

Goldman's son envies Caesar for his prowess with women, much the way Lyutov/Babel admires the prowess of Cossacks. What Goldman probably admires most is what he never quite expresses -- Caesar's successful "transition" from conscience-ridden Jew to mindless "pagan goy."

In many ways, the characters of Israel and Goldman's son are emblematic of the mixed blessing of Zionism's indisputable success. One critic says, with Goldman's son particularly in mind:

> "Faith --in God or country--that makes life endurable is all but impossible to sustain where there is no hardship... Perhaps the older generation is not constitutionally different from its heirs. Perhaps it is the impersonal force of circumstances--social, economic--that is responsible for the erosions of character... The elders were faced with clear obstacles and did what had to be done. Goldman and Israel...have had no such luck. To them has fallen the task of defining the values of the culture, and they do not know where to begin."[3]

As two lost souls unable to strike the right balance in their lives, Israel and Goldman orbit around the two polarities of Goldman Sr. and Caesar like forlorn moons. Goldman's son, who moved back under his parents' roof after his three-month marriage failed, longs to move out again but doesn't, lacking the strength to escape his father's magnetic pull. Israel too weak and or selfish continues staying on rent-free in Caesar's studio apartment, orbiting his life around Caesar's trysts and sudden returns. He also vows to find his own apartment but does not.

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[3] Sven Birkerts, book review of Past Continuous, published in the May 27, 1985 issue of The New Republic.

There is in Israel, however, an inexplicable mean streak bordering on sadism. His viciousness to Ella is appalling. As meshugah as Goldman Sr. and Caesar may be, there appear to be reasons for their conduct. In Israel there is no perceivable cause.

It may be quaintly convenient to say the blossoming of self-absorbed Israelis was the unique creation of post-1967 affluence. And there follows consequently a nostalgia for the once-upon-a-time Mandate era of self-sacrifice. But latter-day Roman pagans like Caesar were there then too. They were just less visible. His father Erwin went through the motions of sacrifice for the cause. True, he had to display his selfishness in more circumscribed fashion. And it may be that economic and social deprivations of the times produced an atmosphere of self-sacrifice leading basically selfish people to act nobly in spite of themselves. But with all those structural incentives for sacrifice removed -- the wars, blockades, rations, inadequate housing -- a process of social homeostasis took over and the pseudo-noble individual found his "natural" level of selfishness which previously had been prevented from achieving full flower.

This said, it is still likely that Israel and Goldman's son would have been happier in that Mandate era subject to direct outside forces shaping their lives. Israel is mostly silent about his current aimlessness. Goldman's son does make strenuous efforts to find a spiritual path. He had hoped "to return to the bosom of Judaism" but after a year "his religion had nothing to

sustain it and it dwindled and died because it was a religion without belief, which for all his efforts and wishes Goldman was unable to achieve, except in the external intellectual sense of the necessity for faith and the desirable of the existence of God." (169) He tried Taoism. He returned to psychology, especially the Jungian. Nothing gave him solace.

He pours out his feelings at length to Uncle Lazar about the pointlessness of his own existence. He opens a discourse on suicide, claiming that it is the one true freedom, the only way to cheat death of it dominion. Quietly appalled by the paltry existence which made his nephew's statements possible, Uncle Lazar replies in riveting understatement: "I don't know," he says, "but is seems to me that a person has to endure a great deal before he can say the kind of things you've been saying."(207)

In cometary orbits, neither inherently sacred or profane, moving in and out of these two extremely different cosmologies, Uncle Lazar and Manfred seem to achieve a kind of poetic balance in their lives. Admiration for them is emitted by the text. If one cannot achieve the heights of Aunt Zipporah, these two others are the very best one can be.

Manfred functions in counterpoint to Goldman. He demonstrates how a sensitive searching soul maintains equilibrium and manages self-preservation. He too mixes and remixes the materials of his life. But unlike Goldman's son, he achieves poise and finds the possibility for action even though his

eloquent disillusionment leaves him with a faith in logic and reason akin to Churchill's belief in democracy -- the worst possible system except when compared to all the others.

> ...In his spare time [Manfred] began playing the violin again after a lapse of many years, and although he played it badly it made him more serene, while his experience of life and his skepticism, without distracting from his self-esteem, gave him a new sense of humility and the ability to forgive human foolishness, error, weakness, and unpleasantness, and this in turn enabled him to understand and accept his relationship with his second wife and his love affair with Regina, who was about his age and whom he had first met in the town of his birth when he was a boy." (67)

True, the era may make the man, but only partly so. Manfred has made peace with his life and offers up a decision to be a little less happy and little more honest. He concedes that "he does not believe in the absolute autonomy of man" (170) But that is all -- and in that honestly he therein finds peace, if not ecstasy. But the materials which constitute Manfred's balanced demeanor seems paradoxically that which drives Goldman's son over the edge. This is not enough for him to live on as he loses his mind to esoteric astronomical texts. The last conversation with Manfred comes back to haunt him re-echoing a feeling which filled him with "the nothingness and meaninglessness of the universe in the light of the infinite finiteness and complete neutrality of time and space." (378)

It is as if the Goldman's son comes to embody the famous "Pensee" by Blaise Pascal: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me." There is one other pensee even more ironic.

Pascal observes: "I have discovered that all human evil comes from this, man's being unable to sit still in a room."[4]

Goldman's fatal flaw, if you like, is that he lacks Manfred's patience. His study of Judaism lasts one year. His marriage to the beautiful Jemimah Chernov is over in three months. In fairness it could be said that having had Goldman as a father meant that nothing in his growing years was ever nourished or allowed to take root before it received destructive, scathing and obliterating criticism. If Goldman's son learned anything in his youth, it was probably that he had to make things happen quickly or not at all. And that ruled out for him vast categories of human endeavor which simply take time to mature. One can see the roots of his undoing.

Then again, it may not be a question of patience at all. He was by no means a lazy dilettante or dabbler. Perhaps it was his honesty. Perhaps it was his own limitations. Perhaps, despite his strivings, he was as limited in perception in his own world as Caesar was in his. He just could not see more.

Paradoxically, Uncle Lazar and Aunt Zipporah have been pushed to extremes by circumstances beyond their control and have come to see the most of all. The implied ingredient in their vision is innately being up to the challenge. Their ordeals transformed them, and their reward is revelation and serenity.

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[4] Blaise Pascal, Pensees Nos. 206 and 139, in Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (Boston, 1980).

Uncle Lazar's bears out the truth that the twentieth century itself has functioned like a great Jewish story. The century opens full of protagonist dreamers pursuing quests and dream ideologies incubated at the end of the 19th century. The dreamers enter into a maze of ordeals produced by tremendous forces unleashed in the years 1914 and 1917. The ordeals reach crucial moments of revelation and resolution in 1945 and 1948, at which point the surviving dreamers and questers emerge from the darkest of tunnels. It is these very dreamers having passed through all the stages of the historical unfoldings who provide the narrative pathways for the most credible stories. Stories rendered by authors prematurely prior to completion of this entire process are entirely unsatisfactory and unsatisfying and even false. Prescient Isaac Babel hints at what A.M. Klein and Yaakov Shabtai will unfold -- that the myth of the "clean slate" in revolutionary ideologies was a dangerously naive metaphor which should have remained a non-metaphorical part of the baal haboosteh's world of good housekeeping.

Past Continuous is the book Sholom Aleichem could have written had his life straddled the middle and end of this century rather than its beginning. His lineage of glorious oral tradition is carried aloft by Yaakov Shabtai. Neither author was cut from the cloth of those who had hoped for the sudden dramatic transformation of humanity. Sholom Aleichem intuitively knew it was impossible; Shabtai had only to review the events of this century to confirm it and let Uncle Lazar speak for him.

In his final words to his nephew, Uncle Lazar articulates the awareness of those who emerged at the tunnel's end.

> "...People should beware of excessively high expectations...that although there was something in men which he called the 'redemptive instinct', his life experience had taught him that there was no single act in public or private life, however right or revolutionary, which was redemptive in the sense that from a certain point onward a new era would commence in which everything would be perfectly good and work out just the way people wanted it to, and at the same time, despite this awareness, it was necessary to live **as if** redemption were possible and to strive for it...." (292)

Uncle Lazar's experience resounds with a kind of rational messianism that concurs with the sentiment: "The Messiah is always coming and never arriving." This is also captured in Jefferson's secular promise of "the pursuit of the happiness", with no implication of attainment. It goes without saying this is not the kind of "happiness" either Caesar or Israel would find understandable.

Someone who does understand is Aunt Zipporah. In one of the great moments in any literature she is wheeled into the reception hall for grandson Tsdalik's wedding, her face "shining with an intelligence and authority which were nothing but the expression of her own integrity and her confident and tireless affirmation of life with all its difficulties and suffering." Counterpoised to Goldman Sr.'s insatiable appetite for rabid confrontation are people like her who incline towards harmony, and with a kind of Rumpelstiltskin-like fineness skillfully and continually convert

dirty, insubstantial straw into gold every time. She is one of whom the narrator says: "...she built up [an idea] very gradually from the details of her education and experience, that life demanded a constant effort, since its complications and difficulties were not accidental but the very stuff of life itself." (299)

In contrast to these high moments, the novel ends bleakly with Ella ignoring Israel the way he had always ignored her with his silences. From her hospital bed, she symbolically refuses to accept her own child. And she cuts the line between likely father and son, perhaps determined to begin a new generation without influence from people such as him. In a much earlier conversation with Israel, Ella could recall no father of her own and had no relations with her mother. Her child is a kind of anti-immaculate conception. That is, she won't admit to Israel who the father is and, pressed once before by him about her past, she stated she was born having never been a virgin in the anatomical sense. All this points dramatically to the sundering of one life away from all other lives as they have been lived till then.

If any other novel concluded this way, there might be reasons for despair. But this dark ending does not have power to take hold completely because of the avalanche of characters who have come before. At some point in some strange way it is as if all the characters of the novel by sheer numbers have merged into

a collectivity greater than any one character. In so doing, they magnificently embrace that wholly unstable concoction of individualism and tribalism which constitutes Jewish identity. This collectivity comes across as one "character" dynamically alive in the mind of the omniscient narrator.

In this vein, the novel as the mind of the omniscient narrator represents a return to oral tradition with a vengeance, standing apart as an anti-book. The English text in translation compromises the Hebrew original which has none of the printing age's conventions of paragraph breaks and chapter breaks. The novel is meant to be continuous and unbroken like the Torah which is also a past continuous.

And so of all the diverse ways of looking at modern Jewish literature, I offer one more. Tracing one line of this century's literary tradition, there is the Torah, A.M. Klein and this "Third Scroll" by Yaakov Shabtai -- this wonderful, wonderful book. Despite the omniscient narrative's glorious world of miscued and mixed and poorly transmitted cultural and religious messages, there are still plenty of sacred people who do get it right. And we remember them with affection.

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