

Gordon Kuzin
Modern Jewish Lit.
Prof. David Roskies

ENVY: JEWISH IN AMERICA

I.

Edelshtein's malady

very provocative opening

An artist become anti-hero, like a common ideologue, is addicted to false dichotomies. Such dichotomies are less a matter of considered judgement than temperament. For artists-- and kal v'homer, poets-- are subject to gross vicissitudes of mood. At one moment, (s)he boasts "for my sake was the world created." And the next, "from dust do I come. To dust shall I return."

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For Edelshtein, the poet, this malady took on the following form. "In Talmud if you save a single life it's as if you saved the world. And if you save a language? Worlds maybe. Galaxies. The whole universe" (164) Now saving a whole universe is, as you might imagine, no small task. It requires big tools--a weltanschauung and modus operandi. Start with a very large distinction, something which provides definition, valence, purpose. Then, organize unique details into prefabricated categories. In this way, you succeed in creating a world view, sharp, wooden, inimical to poetry.

Edelshtein distinguished between two orders, the old and the new. The "new" he characterized by several features which appear in the opening paragraph of the story. "Writers of Jewish extraction," (In Rabbi Akiva's lingo, "fish out of water"), he found "puerile, vicious, pitiable, ignorant, contemptible, above all stupid...Amerikanergeboren--Spawned in America, pogroms a rumor, mamaloshen a stranger, history a vacuum" (129)

Let us parse the above characterization:

very fine way to proceed.

Above all stupid: the new writers hardly know anything. "You have to KNOW SOMETHING!" Whereas Edelshtein prides himself on his *yichus*--he is a self-proclaimed scion of the Vilna Gaon--the American-born, Jewish novelist is an ignoramus who mocks only himself. "*Shiksehn* on one page, *putz* on the other, and that's the whole vocabulary!...They know ten words for, excuse me, penis, and when it comes to a word for learning, they're impotent" (161).

If the writers know almost nothing, then their audience knows less than almost nothing. At the 92nd Street Y, Heine is lauded alongside Moses, Einstein, and Maimonides. Edelshtein is told, "You should write stories if you want fame" (149) The implication being that, like the painted old ladies who attended Edelshtein's talks and the Orthodox and Conservative men who constantly fell asleep, "modern" American Jews lack the training and the attention span to appreciate poetry.

Pogroms a rumor: The American Jewish writer is oblivious to or forgetful of the suffering of his/her people. "Ostraver's vomit!--that populizer, vulgarian, panderer to people who have lost the memory of peoplehood" (160) By contrast, Edelshtein's world is saturated with memories of Jewish oppression-- Babi Yar, the Doctor's plot, "Pharaoh, Queen Isabella, Haman, that pogromchik King Louis they call in history Saint, Hitler, Stalin, Nasser--" (177). "Amalekite! Titus! Nazi! The whole world is infected by you anti-Semites!" (Ibid).

Mamaloshen a stranger: The new generation has betrayed Yiddish. The children "had grown up answering in English the Yiddish of their parents. Mutes. Mutations. What right had these boys to spit out the Yiddish that had bred them, and only for the sake of Western Civilization?" (132). Like

secular Jewish lawyers nourished from generations of Talmudic dialectics, Jewish literati ignored their debt to Yiddish culture. In Israel, the state of denial was greater. "In the G-d-given State of Israel they had no use for the language of the bad little interval between Canaan and now. Yiddish was inhabited by the past and the new Jews did not want it" (135).

History a vacuum: Each of the above elements converges in this final characterization. "Yet whoever forgets Yiddish courts amnesia of history. Mourn--the forgetting has already happened. A thousand years of our travail forgotten" (157). That history has become a vacuum has two further implications which temper one another. On the one hand, to be ignorant of history is to ignore the patterns and the dangers that exist in the present. "Nowadays the Jew is forgetful, everybody with a profession...Most don't realize this quiet time is only an interval" (165) Burdened by his past, everywhere Edelshtein turns he sees a world infected by anti-semites. A person haunted by history is far less optimistic than one inebriated with the present.

On the other hand, older cultures, rooted in long, slow suffering and development, lack that strain of despair, of precipitous all or nothing, which infects newer cultures bereft of history. "*Mamalashen* doesn't produce Wastelands. No alienation, no nihilism, no dadaism. With all the suffering no smashing! No INCOHERENCE!" (163). In older cultures, there is, in the face of extremes and overwhelming conclusions, a measure of irony, skepticism, ballast.

Taking Edelshtein's stereotype in a different direction, the "new" American Jew not only lacks the above features--knowledge, suffering, language, and history, but possesses the following attributes. First and foremost, the new or the modern prizes and embodies youth. At Ostrover's

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YOUTH

reading, "the hair of a young girl glistened...Young, young! Everyone young! Everyone for Ostrover young! A modern" (143). Vorovsky proclaims, "I hate the young." For unlike them, he never laughed--"at the age of twelve I had already mastered calculus" (147) Vorovsky's daughter, Hannah, born in the year of the great divide, 1945, is amazed that Edelshtein is still alive. After all, she informs him, my grandfather who is dead used to read you (153).

In the here and now, sexuality reigns supreme. Ostrover, the modern, produces writing (for Playboy) which is "insanely sexual, pornographic, paranoid, freakish--men who embraced men, women who caressed women, sodomists of every variety, boys copulating with hens, butchers who drank blood for strength behind the knife" (134) The ushers at the reading dress "in fine jackets, skinny boys carrying books (Ostrover's), wearing them nearly, costumed for blatant bookishness, blatant sexuality, in pants crotch snug, pencilling buttocks on air, mustachioed, some hairy to the collarbone, shins and calves menacing as hammers, and girls, tunics, knees, pants, boots, little hidden sweet tongues, black-eyed" (142). The prominence or reductionism of physicality is made graphically explicit by the wives of Edelshtein and Ostrover, Mireleh and Pesha who "carried pencil-box rulers in their purses and showed each other certain hilarious measurements..." (135-6).

good

Edelstein's envy, or *ressentiment*, is rooted in impotency. On a physical plane, he "had no descendents, his grandchildren were imaginary" (160). His wife had seven miscarriages. Whether the problem lay in the "machine" or in the "oil," his seed is unable to find a 'medium" (or translator--he suspects Ostrover of sleeping with the right translators) which will bring it to fruition. Spiritually, Edelstein is unable "to reach" a new generation of

Their names too are heavily ironic!

Baumzweig
means Tree-Branch
but his tree has
no real branches.

readers. His poems, like most of the Yiddish culture which he nurtures, remain untranslated and unread. For a man who sees himself and his legacy as post-mortem (ghost), Hannah represents his last chance at generativity. On the one hand, Edelshtein "can't live in ether." For an "idealist" who fails to make contact with flawed, flesh-and-blood human beings, can not hope to produce offspring. On the other hand, as we shall soon see, one can not hope to bear fruit in another, by simply pouring oneself into and crowding out the other.

Edelshtein's indictment (autopsy)

Edelshtein is poisoned by his own spleen, the product of a surfeit of history, suffering, and unfulfilled desire. At a certain level, memory becomes toxic. Lacking an outlet, a medium of exchange or sublimation, Edelshtein seeks to discharge his ailment upon Hannah. "'Bloodsuckers," she said. "It isn't a translator you're after, it's someone's soul. Too much history's drained your blood, you want someone to take you over, a dybbuk--" (172). Edelshtein is condemned as a "parasite:" "...you eat people up with your disgusting old age--cannibals, all you care about is your own youth, you're finished, give someone else a turn!" (175). The old with their overweening memories seek to tyrannize the young, to crowd out imagination with history, and the young reply, Keep your experience and your memory and your guilt to yourself. "You don't interest me."

II.

The other side of envy

"Mamloshen doesn't produce Wastelands.

No alienation, no nihilism, no dadaism "

Where do the above ailments come from? Imagine yourself a young American, born and raised in comfortable suburbia, listening to horror stories of a holocaust survivor, or the child of a holocaust survivor. A person who has survived pogroms, concentration camps, poverty, or political oppression touches deep and tender chords. Why was (s)he born into such circumstances? What have I done to deserve the security and prosperity I enjoy? The other side of guilt is envy. How can I grow without adversity? Will I die prematurely, i.e. not having grown into the potential of my maturity?

Similarly, you meet an ordinary Israeli who has served in the army and continues to do reserve duty, or, worse, a pilot or a paratrooper or a hero from Antebbe. In the face of all that sacrifice and suffering-- "life experience"--it becomes difficult to "justify" yourself. Like Hemingway, you feel the impulse to live dangerously, rush off to a war or a bullfight or a foreign land. At a certain point, in order to look yourself or the other in the eye, you feel the temptation to seek out a "red badge of courage." If only you could acquire experience, perhaps a slight limp, without serious disability--callouses which strengthen rather than restrict movement.

The figure of Uncle Melech in A.M. Klein's The Second Scroll induces envy. First, he is, in Edelshtein's terms, a knower. At a tender age, he is crowned an *Iluz*, a King of Torah learning. "Surrounded by such uncouthness, it was good to have the recollection of the young Talmudist cherishing Torah in its integrity, continuing a tradition that went back through the ages to Sura and Pumbeditha and back farther still and farther to get lost in the zigzag and lightning of Sinai" (19)

Second, he has lived life to the hilt--from the yeshiva to the Bolsheviks to Rome to North Africa to Israel. In life experience, as in ideas, he was not a monogomist. He had the courage to enter the Pardes, and emerged to enter several others.

Finally, he represents a paragon of suffering. From the pogrom in Ratno, in which he was publically flogged to the great pit of Kamenets in which he was, like Lazarus^u, resurrected, to his martyrdom, where he was ambushed and burned, uncle Melach not only witnessed, but underwent, savage horrors which torture the imagination.

With all this suffering, Uncle Melech himself envies the sufferings of others. After the Holocaust, he writes:

"Even now I do not know how it happened or by what merit it was I who was chosen, out of the thousands who perished, to escape all the strange deaths that swallowed up a generation. At times I feel--so bewildered and burdened is my gratitude--that the numbered dead run through my veins like plasma, that I must live their unexpired six million circuits, and that my body must be the bed of each of their nightmares. Then, sensing their death wish bubbling the channels of my blood, then do I grow bitter at my false felicity--the spared one! --and would almost add to theirs my own wish for the centigrade furnace and the cyanide flood (30).

Even though Uncle Melech writes, "And we were all in that burning world, even you who were separated from it by the Atlantic--that futile bucket"--the narrator knows that he was not quite there. In his poem "Elegy" (Gloss Beth), he echoes his uncles sentiment: "Named for my father's father, cousin, whose cry/ Might have been my cry lost in that dark land--" (98).

The narrator, like Uncle Melech, is constantly aware of his undeserved good fortune. Regarding the squalor of Jews in Casablanca, he is told:

"Perhaps it is necessary that there should be three categories of convenience: one for the metropole where live the French functionaries, one for the medina, the Arab slum, and one for the mellah where live the Jews" (65-66). And if this sounds bad, "Jews are much better off here than among other Muslim populations--there are, you know, almost a million Jews living under Muslim rule--and better off now than when I was a little boy" (66).

Uncle Melech envies the dead. The narrator envies Uncle Melech for his experience--his wisdom and courage and suffering. And the reader envies the narrator for his knowledge, his eloquence, and his relation to those who suffer. Edelshtein suffers a double envy, which feeds on itself. On the one hand, he envies the young their lifefulness, for they are not burdened with history. He is the embodiment of Jewish suffering waiting to disgorge itself onto youthful vessels. On the other hand, Edelstein, "an American for forty years," is obsessed with missed suffering. To Hannah, he writes "Often I have spat on myself for havng survived the deathcamps--survived them drinking tea in New York! (156).

yes!

III.

Reconciliation?

Elie Wiesel's novel The Gates of the Forest opens with the tale of the Baal Shem Tov, who, when seeing misfortune threatening the Jews, would go to a special place in the forest, light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and misfortune would be averted. Each successive generation confronting crisis attempts to intercede with heaven, the first forgetting how to light the fire, the next, the prayer, and, finally, the place itself. Even though the fire and the prayer and the place have been forgotten, and only the story can be told, still, it is sufficient.

Suppose Wiesel's Hasidic story were updated and went on: And when we are no longer able to tell the story, or can not remember what we never knew in the first place, when misfortune threatens less from without than from within, and each of us is less concerned about saving her people than saving herself...What do we do when many can no longer remember the story--standing at Sinai or on Masada, coming out of Egypt or Auschwitz, entering the Land or Ellis Island...

What do we do when some lack enough memory, and others are tormented, racked, pursued, overfull?

Hazak! Hazak! V'Nithazek!!! Be strong! Be strong! And let us strengthen one another!!! We turn to one another, listening and speaking, forging collective memory, comforting and healing one another. Stories rub up against each other and produce a fire and a prayer and a clearing in the forest. Told together, the misfortune will be averted and the miracle will be accomplished.

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Maybe.

Thus goes the drash on envy, whereby old and new, American, European, and Israeli Jews complete one another. The political philosopher, John Rawls, has argued that I do not deserve the circumstances of my birth. Nor do I deserve the "innate" talents that I inherit. "Yet one basic characteristic of human beings is that no one person can do everything that he might do; nor a fortiori can he do everything that any other person can do." Given our situations, we must select which of our abilities and possible interests we wish to pursue. "When men are secure in the enjoyment of the exercise of their own powers, they are disposed to appreciate the perfections of others,

especially when their several excellences have an agreed place in a form of life the aims of which all accept" (A Theory of Justice, p. 523).

To continue our drash on envy, perhaps Rawl's notion of "the Idea of Social Union" can be extended to inter-generational envy. (We do not choose the circumstances of our birth, or the degree of suffering or opportunity which they entail...) Still, Rawls' vision presupposes a number of things which are missing from our literary analysis, particularly Ozick's story about envy. Those who envy, by definition, are not "secure in the enjoyment of the exercise of their own powers," nor do they feel their "excellences have an agreed place in a form of life the aims of which all accept."

Pshat is more elusive. For a relationship between two "partners," where one is seen as experienced and overfull and the other as green and empty--a hollow vessel to be filled--by necessity breeds condescension and contempt. The opposition itself is highly specious--namely that experience and suffering belong to one partner and not the other, that in Europe and Israel suffering is true and deep and in America it is artificial and internal. By this pseudo-logic, America is a land of neurosis, where Jews suffer peurile crises of identity and excess. Our European ancestors and Israeli brethren are or were too busy living existential crises to have them. sp.

The crudity of the opposition is not surprising. After all, artists, whether poets or story-tellers, prophets or philosophers, have predilections towards extremes. That they do not necessarily represent the *vox populi*, the voice of the people, is borne out by the fact that the color, character, and sheer magnitude of what they see as crises often have little to do with what most see as concrete necessity.

This is an important caveat when when we consider the argument that creativity and renewal can only be the products of a deep sense of loss or

crisis. The thesis itself seems rather sound. Necessity, lack, opposition fuel devotion: "I did know thee in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. When they were fed, they became full; they were filled and their heart became exalted; therefore they have forgotten me" (Hoshea 13:4-6). Moses' warning to the children of Israel could easily be applied to the above stereotype of modern American Jews: "When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and your flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your G-d--who freed you from the land of Egypt..." (Deut. 8:12-14). Finally, consider the not entirely jocular lament of a first generation American parent who "made it" in America: the one thing I had which I was never able to give my children was poverty.

What, then, is the *cavod*, the dignity and the weight (or the burden) of the American Jew? How do American Jews face the European or Israeli Jews "secure in the exercise of their own powers?" Perhaps once it was possible to be steeped in one's Jewish and American identities and feel the two to be beautifully intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Once there was a beautiful marriage between Social Justice and Law. Once there were two Exodus stories, two revolutions which went hand in hand.

And now...Sweet syncretism, hallow universalism, the melting pot, denial of Jewish particularity all belie the wisdom and suffering of Jewish history. For all of Philip Roth's annoyance with or contempt for Jewish parochialism, he is not willing to dissolve the bonds of Jewish peoplehood. How can an American Jew empathize with the suffering of a European or Israeli Jew, learn from that suffering, but reject its isolationist conclusions? You feel the way you do precisely because you have lived

through your own circumstances. Whereas, my experience has been a different one. It allows me to live amongst and strive alongside my non-Jewish neighbors without Edelshtein's villification, with hope, as well as a healthy measure of caution. It is true that some people are so open minded *wow!* that their brains fall out. While others are so close minded they suffocate.

In between the two, the following challenges emerge:

(1) The struggle to Judaize, through a deep commitment to Jewish sources and Jewish history, American values such as democracy, pluralism, equality, pragmatism. This means integrating what Sargent Marx and Roth both admire in America-- justice as fairness--treating people on the basis of merit, hard work or sacrifice--and not obliterating one's own identity or connection to one's people. (2) The need to discover and create Jewish joy and meaning, which are not merely products of or reactions to outside oppression. The tyranny of past Jewish history and suffering is that it crowds out the present, preventing the new generation from confronting itself and its need for joy and meaning. To accomplish this requires overcoming what David Hartman calls Judaism's "original sin:" being born late. (3) Finally, in order to achieve "an agreed place in a form of life the aims of which all accept"--i.e. shared respect--respect must ^{be} given not only to awareness of history and suffering, but also to openness. Following John Dewey, to value openness means not to disparage it for its innocence or its naïveté, but to see in adaptiveness the potential for growth. The ability to risk and to trust are assets that flow from secure relationships, engendering gratitude and confidence.

An exquisite, moving essay and a superb analysis of the varied & various texts as well. I've made a copy for my files A/A

"Happy is the teacher who inspired such thoughts..."