The Jewish Voice

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IT HAS been frequently observed, by both philo-Semites and anti-Semites, that the numbers of Jews participating in the various fields of intellectual life are out of all proportion to the numbers of Jews in the general population. This is a statistical reality that can hardly be denied. In the United States, for example, though Jews are rather less than 2 percent of the population, if one looks to areas of activity such as journalism and criticism, or scientific research, or academic disciplines like mathematics, history, sociology, and English literature, a fourth or a third or sometimes more than half the leaders in the field can turn out to be Jews.

The most plausible reason for this disproportionate representation is, I believe, sociocultural. But it should be emphasized at the outset that the large number of Jews in intellectual endeavors does not automatically translate into a decisive Jewish *influence* on intellectual life. For good sociological cause, many Jews have flowed into the intellectual professions; but the purported dominance of Jews in intellectual life proves in many key instances to be a mirage.

Take, for example, the intellectual trinity of Marx, Freud, and Einstein, so often invoked as evidence that Jews have been the trailblazers of modern innovative thought. Marx was a baptized Christian with a very nasty streak of anti-Semitism. To enlist him as a Jewish thinker is to succumb to a kind of Nuremberg-law mentality about intellectual history, whereby anyone with at least one Jewish grandfather is imagined somehow to perpetuate a Jewish genetic legacy, or even a unique Jewish "vision" of the world.

As for Einstein, whose very name has become a popular synonym for genius, his contributions to changing our understanding of the physical universe are hardly in doubt, but the fact remains that the majority of the important theoretical physicists in this century—Heisenberg, Planck, Lawrence, and so forth—have not been Jews. Incidentally, the illusory nature of Jewish dominance is even more evident in other fields, where the rule seems to be that there are a few achievements of the first order by Jews but it is others who predominate. In painting, for example, a Jewish apologist might proudly cite Chagall, Soutine, and Modigliani, but none of these, luminous as his work may be, reaches the level of Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse.

This leaves us, from the modern big three, with Freud, who is a special case. There is no question that Jews have largely dominated psychoanalytic theory (and practice) ever since Freud invented it nearly a century ago. Freud himself was notoriously nervous that psychoanalysis would be perceived as a "Jewish science," and that was a chief motive for his eagerness in acquiring Jung as a disciple. Freud's last work, *Moses and Monotheism*, is in fact a kind of inadvertent admission that the psychoanalytic world view is grounded in what he conceives to be a specifically Jewish historical experience.

Whether the procedures and assumptions of psychoanalysis are in fact somehow distinctively Jewish is still a matter of lively debate. It is a Jewish science at least in this sense: it was invented by a Jew, and it has flourished in social circles that have been by and large Jewish. To put it in other words, the dominance of Jews in psychoanalysis is predicated on the fact that, like the film industry, it was a *new* area of cultural endeavor where there were no existing elites and no background of longstanding appeal to other groups in the general population.

I am not, of course, minimizing the extraordinary explosion of creative energies that followed the entrance of Jews by uneven stages into the general culture of the West after their emancipation. But the notion that it has been chiefly the Jews who have determined the direction of modern thought and cultural creativity is wildly exaggerated.

SIMILARLY misguided is the idea, again very widely held, that there is a common denominator shared by Jewish intellectuals, from Lithuania to Los Angeles, which fixes their trajectory in modern culture, whatever

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contra 19th romantic idea

their areas of activity. I strongly suspect that this habit of thinking goes back to 19th-century notions of a national genius possessed by each individual people. Thus, it is claimed that the Jews, with their legacy of messianic traditions, are uniquely preoccupied with the idea of redemption—in fact, a central motif in *Christian* thought through the ages—and consequently that redemption is the key to the work of every real or imagined Jewish thinker from Marx to Freud to the German-Jewish intellectual Walter Benjamin.

A less sanguine line of commentators prefers to see the unique realm of the Jewish moral imagination as exile and alienation. In this view, the Jewish genius consists in the insistence that we are never really at home in the world, and thus in a refusal to acquiesce in the received terms of reality. The pantheon illustrating this purported wisdom of ontological exile inevitably begins with Franz Kafka, again invokes Benjamin, and in the hands of some analysts can end with such unlikely contemporaries as the French theorist Jacques Derrida and the American literary critic Harold Bloom.

Still others have been disposed to attribute indiscriminately to sundry Jewish thinkers a "talmudic subtlety" of dialectic reasoning, even when the writer in question has been separated by a buffer of three generations from any acquaintance with talmudic learning. Nor does this exhaust the list of supposedly Jewish mental traits. Freud himself thought of the Jews as uniquely committed to instinctual renunciation and intellectual labor. And even a writer as minutely familiar with the variegated world of Jewish culture as the influential turn-of-the-century Hebrew essayist, Ahad Ha-am, could claim that the unique defining feature of the Jewish people, and the ultimate source of its long historical persistence, was the ethical imperative.

For Ahad Ha-am, one could at least offer the excuse of closeness in time to Romantic ideologies of national identity. But all these arguments for a grand formula to explain a supposed Jewish impulse in culture are schematic, tendentious, and, at least implicitly, ideological. Compared with other groups, the Jews have never had a monopoly on redemption, alienation, ethics, analytic subtlety, God-intoxication, or anything else. Moreover, viewed in itself, traditional Jewish culture was multifaceted, heterogeneous, historically evolving; and the millions who in the modern world left it for the general culture exhibited the widest spectrum of relations both to their own antecedents and to the new world in which they became so energetically engaged.

YET the sheer vehemence of those energies deserves some reflection. When Jews began to move out of *shtetl* and ghetto, whether or not they also broke with all religious observance, they were powerfully impelled by a new horizon of economic, social, and cultural possibilities. They would no longer have to submit to the coercion of rabbinic authorities and *parnasim*, the mercantile oligarchs who dominated the traditional communities. New realms of cultural experience were opened to them (although the social realm often remained more restrictive). Instead of the limited range of vocational possibilities offered by *shtetl* life, many barely a notch above subsistence level, they could envisage entry into the trained professions with the promise of a secure economic future—indeed, with all the amenities of high bourgeois existence.

As we are reminded by patterns followed in the great East European Jewish immigration to the United States, it was very common, at least in the first generation of life in the new society, to follow the path of commerce. This is hardly surprising in light of the importance of trade in older Jewish societies. But even in the first generation, and dramatically in the second, Westernizing Jews turned to higher education, entering professions like law and medicine and, in due course, the academic world as well. This happened, I think, not because Jews were smarter than other people but rather because of a general orientation in the society from which the parents and grandparents of the new Jewish intelligentsia had come.

East European Jewry lived in a largely impoverished society where male literacy was nevertheless nearly universal and female literacy (in Yiddish though not Hebrew) was also very extensive. In a pragmatic reinterpretation of the folk saying, *toyre iz di beste skhoyre*—"learning is the best merchandise"—it was generally recognized that intellectual achievement (again, for males) was a very effective means of upward mobility. A wretched peddler's son who could demonstrate his brilliance as a talmudist might hope for the hand of a rich merchant's daughter, several years of full-time study supported by his father-in-law, and a life of material ease.

This is not to say that learning lacked its own intellectual excitement or spiritual motivation. But the practical consequence of the traditional rabbinic centering of religious life on the study of the Law was a society that made intellectual achievement a chief avenue of social advancement. It was entirely natural, then, that the refugees from and descendants of this very society would in inordinate numbers envisage a discipline of learning and intellectual labor as the most congenial means to make their way in the new open societies into which they moved.

This background of social history is useful to keep in mind because it points to the fact that the entrance of Jews into Western intellectual life was neither unique—in some ways, the new prominence of the children of Asian immigrants in American universities reflects similar cultural

antecedents—nor somehow mysterious and metaphysical. Still, it would be an excess of skepticism to claim that Jews have behaved in the intellectual world precisely like everyone else. There has been no single grand pattern, but there have been a few characteristic patterns, reflecting in different ways the distinctive background and cultural predicament of people in transition from a Jewish world to a Western one.

LET me try to identify three clusters of such recurring traits, working within the bias of my own concerns as a literary critic and limiting my examples to writers of fiction.

Many important Jewish writers over the past hundred years, including quite a few who wrote in Yiddish or Hebrew, have drawn much of the sharpness of their perception of historical process and contemporary reality from their own uneasy movement between two cultures. In this, of course, they resemble writers and artists from other ethnic minorities or immigrant groups in the throes of an enveloping and often painful process of acculturation, though their expression of this predicament has a distinctive Jewish coloration.

One brilliant literary reflection of this confrontation is *Red Cavalry* (1926), one of the enduring collections of short stories of this century. Its author, Isaac Babel, was born in Odessa in 1894, and had campaigned in Galicia with the Red Army in 1920. These Russian stories, based on Babel's army experience, finely etch both the splendid savagery of the Cossack troops fighting for the revolutionary cause and the pathos of a decaying Galician Orthodox Jewry laid waste by war and historical change.* Within a few years, Babel's poised ambivalences would cause him political grief under the Soviets. By the mid-30's he fell silent; in 1939 he was arrested, and he perished in the gulag two years later.

The two-way pull Babel felt—between the alien ethos of liberating violence and fierce beauty embodied by the Cossacks and the melancholy spiritual poignancy of a Galician Jewry whose values he could elegize but not embrace—has often been noted, perhaps most luminously by the critic Lionel Trilling in a 1955 essay in COMMENTARY.† What seems to me particularly compelling in the imaginative texture of the stories is not just the confrontation between Judaism and the Revolution, the old era and the new, but also the artistic vehicle through which this confrontation is effected.

Before any clash of values between Marx and Maimonides, Babel as a writer had deeply assimilated Flaubert. As a consequence, his account of the anguish of 20th-century history is a pervasively *aestheticized* one: Babel's thoroughly European modernity is reflected in his underlying assumption that the world is, above all, an occasion for aesthetic transformation (hardly a notion that would have occurred to his Jewish forebears). His battle scenes are full of highly wrought imagery, devised to catch the eye and shake preconceptions as violence is transmuted into art.

Here, for example, is a sunset scene as the cavalry rides over a blood-soaked field: "The orange sun rolled down the sky like a lopped-off head." An artillery barrage: "Fires rose obediently on the horizon, and the heavy birds of the shelling flew up out of the flames." The Cossack horsemen: "Raising a shout, the men moved on . . . , and pale steel gleamed in the ichor of the autumnal sun."

If this sort of elevation of the aesthetic is itself a new cultural orientation for a Jew, Babel also seems to assume something else: that beautifully wrought expression is a way of bringing the world into focus, a means of making the reader see concretely what is at stake in the play of historical forces. "The Rabbi's Son," the penultimate story of *Red Cavalry*, is particularly memorable in this respect. The narrator comes across a certain Elijah, son of the rabbi of Zhitomir, who has been mortally wounded in battle, fighting for the Revolution. Turning his eyes from Elijah's maimed, half-naked body, he considers the boy's belongings:

> His things were strewn about pell-mell—mandates of the propagandist and notebooks of the Jewish poet, the portraits of Lenin and Maimonides lay side by side, the knotted iron of Lenin's skull beside the dull silk of the portrait of Maimonides. A lock of a woman's hair lay in a book, the resolutions of the party's Sixth Congress, and the margins of Communist leaflets were crowded with crooked lines of ancient Hebrew verse. They fell upon me in a mean and depressing rain—pages of the Song of Songs and revolver cartridges.

In rhetorical terms, one could say that oxymoron is the central figure of the whole modern Jewish literature of transition—the juxtaposition of contradictory elements taken from mutually exclusive realms. One finds more diffuse expressions of this in writers as different as Babel's Hebrew contemporary, M.D. Berdichevsky, and the American Henry Roth, now in old age publishing the volumes of his autobiographical novel. In the passage before us, the overall effect of Babel's finely worked prose is, I think, paradoxical, and paradoxical in a way that ends by being exemplary.

The artist's eye that chooses the paired items—the iron Lenin, the silken Maimonides, and the two cultural orders for which they stand—extracts

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*The diary Babel kept in 1920, which is a vividly illuminating document, has recently been published by Yale University Press (edited by Carol J. Avins, 126 pp., $20.00).

†Cynthia Ozick, however, in a review of the *1920 Diary* (*New Republic*, May 8, 1995), has noted that in light of what we now know about Babel, Trilling made some erroneous assumptions about what kind of Jew Babel was.

from the clash of eras and values what William Butler Yeats, writing just a few years earlier, and of another revolution, called "a terrible beauty." But the details Babel selects also provide an unwaveringly sharp focus on a historical moment he himself is uniquely advantaged to see as a Jew in violent transition between two realms. Neither sentimentalizing the old, nor naively surrendering to the seductions of the new, Babel achieves a sense of rightness as his narrator takes in the contradictory possessions of the dying Communist *hasid* under a "mean and depressing rain" in the bleak light of sunset. What we are left with is a sense of two worlds divided by an unbridgeable chasm, the Jewish past suffused with a delicate beauty now antiquated or irrelevant, and the revolutionary present, perhaps with its excitements but also with its inexorable new lexicon of destruction and fear.

If Babel is representative of one large strain in modern Jewish literature, another is represented by writers who do not so much register the pangs of transition as tap the expressive resources of Jewish culture. Many of these writers have drawn upon the tonalities and rhetorical devices of vernacular Jewish culture, while some—especially, but not exclusively, those writing in Hebrew and Yiddish—have found ways to engage the concerns and thought categories of the classical tradition. Of the latter group, Franz Kafka is the most powerful as well as the most peculiar instance.

Kafka is at once an exemplary writer and one of a kind, a figure others have tried to assimilate and imitate without notable success. His name has become a byword for the modern literature of alienation, disjunction, and bafflement; the adjective "Kafkaesque" has passed into the usage of the weekly newsmagazines. Yet no other writer really reads like Kafka. I suspect that there may be several reasons for this anomaly, but the one I want to consider here is the uncanny fusion of Kafka's modernism and his Jewishness.

The modernist features of his stories and novels are evident enough: the subversion of traditional assumptions about causality and the concomitant breakdown of linear narrative; the irruption of fantasy and the surreal into the represented world; the displacement of realism by parable; the probing of the foundations of epistemology and ontology, haunted by the fear that the world may be indecipherable. One can detect similar impulses in a whole range of 20th-century writers, from Jorge Luis Borges to Guenter Grass, but what makes Kafka distinctive is that he works out this modernist project by constantly interrogating three central categories of classical Jewish thought: revelation, law, and interpretation.

Kafka, we need to remind ourselves, was an assimilated German-speaking Jew who came to his interest in Judaism rather late in his short and painful life. His businessman father had sloughed off most religious observance as well as his native Yiddish when he moved to Prague from the *shtetl* where he had grown up, and Franz's first serious encounter with Jewish culture did not occur until late 1911 (he was then twenty-eight) when a traveling Yiddish theater troupe came to Prague. He would subsequently pursue readings in Jewish history and begin to explore classical Jewish texts, and in the last six years of his life, beginning in 1918, he would make a sustained effort to acquire a competence in Hebrew. By 1911, however, he had already given shape to his distinctive stance as a writer of fiction, and with regard to the theological triad I have mentioned, it was a Jewish stance, even before the fact of his actual involvement in Jewish culture.

Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, who possessed a unique authority to make such judgments, repeatedly spoke of Kafka as a heretical or secular kabbalist; Scholem once even quoted a parable by an 18th-century anti-nomian mystic to show that it could easily have been written by Kafka. And Kafka himself, in a diary entry late in his life, speculated that his writing, which he represented metaphorically as an assault on the realm above, might, under other circumstances, have become a new Kabbalah.

It is by no means clear how or why such a spiritual kinship could have occurred. Though I find it easy enough to imagine that a Kafka born half a millennium earlier in Spain or along the Rhine would have made an excellent kabbalist or Hebrew exegete, the disposition to these vocations is surely not part of a genetic code. And so I am driven to the uneasy conjecture that certain fundamental aspects of traditional Jewish culture continue to live a kind of ghostly afterlife among Jews in the process of assimilating into a different culture.

There is ample evidence, for instance, that Kafka was inclined to see the imperious authoritarianism of his father as a living enactment of the awesome imposition of a regimen of commandments, a revelation of binding law without the underwriting of a divine lawgiver. In his writing, he would ponder again and again the imperative authority of the law, its possible arbitrariness, the necessity of constant interpretation it imposed, the impossibility of living without it. These are compellingly Jewish concerns: it seems as though a few rare sensibilities, like Kafka's, by the very act of contemplating certain central *ideas* of Jewish tradition from a distance—even an estranged distance—are capable of replicating their inner dynamic, of reassimilating them. And so Kafka the Germanophone Czech ended up creating at least a few texts that sound as though they could have been invented by an 18th-century Polish Jewish mystic, or even by a creator of rabbinic Midrash in 5th-century Palestine.

HERE is a very short Kafka text—25 words in the German—which I would construe as a microscopic but thoroughly characteristic manifestation of this Jewish peculiarity that pervades Kafka's work and that also has implications for Jewish writers who do not otherwise resemble him. The text is entitled "The Pit of Babel" (the biblical Babel, that is), though the German *Schacht* also means "shaft," as in a mine:

> What are you building?—I want to dig a passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high.
> We are digging the pit of Babel.

The first thing that should be said about this bizarre little dialogue is that it is funny; not the least of Kafka's inimitable traits is his ability to combine a species of comedy that is variously farcical, grotesque, or nervous with the greatest spiritual intentness. Whether this marriage of humor and theology is a distinctively Jewish practice I am not sure, but Walter Benjamin, thinking of both Kafka and the Kabbalah, once suggested this might be so. At least it can be said that the Jewish fondness for approaching theological issues through narrative vehicles lends itself to this sort of paradoxical union.

"The Pit of Babel" is a neat polar reversal of the story in Genesis 11, with mine shaft substituted for tower, down for up. But why should Kafka have bothered to invent this reversal? What seems to me most intriguing about the parable is its status as a meditation on a canonical text which implicitly concedes the authority of that text. It is precisely on the presumption of such authority that the sundry varieties of Judaism ever since the Bible have been built. The Jewish approach to truth, for better or for worse, has been decisively focused on textuality (rather than, say, on empirical investigation). As a famous rabbinic formula about the Torah succinctly puts it: "Turn it over and turn it over, for everything is in it."

No modern writer has absorbed this idea more profoundly than Kafka, who weaves it into the texture of his narrative prose and dialogues and the frame of his plots. In "The Pit of Babel," the story from Genesis looms before the writer like the tower at its center, demanding that he confront it. It is a story that fascinated Kafka and one to which he returned several times. He broods over it as a post-traditional traditionalist. From the reduced existential perspective of this 20th-century writer, the grandiosity, the sheer overweening ambition, of the builders of the legendary tower is no longer conceivable. But the underlying idea of the biblical story is that man through his imperative nature cannot simply sit still: at all costs, progress, *Fortschritt*, must be made. And so, if the project of human transcendence, of scaling heaven, is no longer really imaginable, men may fling themselves into a mirror-image project of attaining what the critic Erich Heller called "negative transcendence."

The cryptic text leaves entirely open whether the downward drive is merely an act of crazy futility, digging a shaft into nothing in particular with the sole justification of movement; or the achievement through bizarre means of a sense of fulfillment; or a penetration into a netherworld of dark forces; or a burrowing (as elsewhere in Kafka) into hiddenness and safety from the dangers of the realm above. In any event, the imagination of man and world in this elegantly minuscule parable is teased out of a pondering of a canonical text, and in more diffuse forms, this is true throughout Kafka's work. No other modern writer, including those composing in Hebrew, has so pervasively annealed exegesis with narration, though in a wide variety of ways Jewish thinkers and writers in the modern era, from Freud and Emile Durkheim to the Hebrew novelist S.Y. Agnon, have shown themselves to be peculiarly fascinated with textuality and caught up in interpretation as the grand avenue to knowledge.

THE third and most widespread pattern of distinctiveness exhibited by writers with antecedents in the culture of *Yiddishkeit* is a cluster of characteristic speech habits: a certain caustically ironic tonality; a fondness for exuberant shuttling among disparate layers of diction in a language; a predisposition to turn written language into quasi-oral performance, art into *shtick*, the verbal pyrotechnics of a part into a substitute for any coherently continuous whole. Behind these speech habits stands the oral culture of Yiddish, with its delight in verbal performance and the resourceful awareness in its speakers of the disparate constituents of the language; and this culture in turn is at least partly informed by the Hebrew and Aramaic texts from late antiquity and the Middle Ages that were the fixed syllabus for the male population.

This general relation to language and discursive form is observable in writers of East European birth using one of the two languages of the culture—in Yiddish, Mendele Mokher Seforim (S.Y. Abramovitch), Sholem Aleichem, Itzik Manger, and many others; in Hebrew, Agnon, his contemporary Haim Hazaz, and many lesser lights. It is observable as well in American writers like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, at one or two generations' remove from *shtetl* life, and its impetus also drives a good deal of Jewish stand-up comedy in the American idiom. There is no better evidence than this for the contention made several decades back by the Israeli critic Dov Sadan that modern Jewish writing constitutes a single trilingual literature, with branches in Yiddish, in Hebrew, and in one or another Western language.

Benjamin Harshav, the author of a superb study of the semiotics of Yiddish culture, has beautifully summarized the characteristics of this distinctive mode of "Jewish discourse":

> [L]oquaciousness, contentiousness, oppositionalism, associativeness; answering an argument through example, anecdote, parable, or counter-question; a worrying-away at the meanings, connotations, and associations of every word or fact; seeing every little detail as symbolic of a universal problem; and the leap from a word or concrete detail to abstract generalization and theorizing. The basic principle is that what advances the discourse is not logical or narrative continuity but the totality of the represented world.

Harshav goes on to make the intriguing suggestion that Freud founded psychoanalysis on just this sort of extravagant Jewish attention to detail, which is then dislocated and radically recontextualized by the energy of interpretation. In any case, it is remarkable how many Jewish writers, some steeped in the ancestral world, others with no more than wisps of memory of it, variously carry out this project of displacing the axis of fiction from narrative to language, from event to verbal performance.

LET me illustrate this tendency from texts in two different languages a century apart.

My first example (in my own translation) is a few lines from the opening section of "The Burnt-Out Ones," a story by Mendele written in the 1890's and one of the few he composed originally in Hebrew rather than Yiddish. It is Lag ba-Omer, the only day in the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot when Jews are permitted to have weddings and other joyful events. Mendele, the narrator-bookseller, is ambling alongside his horse and wagon:

> And so I lift up my feet and walk along, looking at lovely tree and lovely field, at the grasses and the vegetables and the produce of the field. The mandrakes give off their scent, and the winged creatures chirp melodiously to me, and I listen and imagine in my thoughts the fiddle and the drum, the flute and the trumpet, the clarinet and the cymbal, all the instruments that are resounding and playing today for brides and grooms in our streets, throughout the Pale of Settlement.

This is really a performance masquerading as a description. Nothing in the scene is actually focused, only the narrator's mood in responding to the scene, or, more specifically, his play with language in responding to it. The Hebrew, a generation before the language again became a vernacular, is given the vitality of a spoken language because Mendele extrudes its heteroglot character, making it analogous to the heteroglossia of Yiddish with its Germanic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Slavic components.

The narrator looks at a highly unspecific "lovely tree and lovely field" because he remembers the injunction in *The Sayings of the Fathers*, "He who walks on the way and says, 'How lovely is this tree, how lovely is this field,' incurs mortal guilt." This recollection-through-reversal of a dour rabbinic pronouncement is then conjoined with a lyric citation from the Song of Songs, "The mandrakes give off their scent." This, in turn, as Mendele's imaginings move from nature to the Jewish street, is confronted with the catalogue of *klezmer* instruments, featuring vernacular-sounding loan words like *tzimbil*, cymbal, and *pandura*, actually a Greek word that means syrinx or shepherd's flute in the Talmud but which I would guess is used in this context by Mendele for a clarinet.

A moment later in the story, in a shift of levels that is thematic as well as stylistic, the revery of melodious celebration will be broken into by the appearance of a band of wretched refugees, "staff in hand and pack on shoulder," from a burnt-out *shtetl*. But the story is anyway only a loose frame, while the real interest lies in the inventive activity of a linguistic virtuoso ringing the changes on the Hebrew language. Meaning, vision, and readerly pleasure are all realized not through the concatenation of narrative or through any sustained discursive argument but in the flash of verbal detail, the inventive orchestration of the different strata of the language with their different textures, associations, and value systems.

NOW let us look at three characteristic sentences from a distant literary descendant of Mendele's, Philip Roth. In *Operation Shylock* (1993), the narrator, who shares the name and essential biography of Philip Roth, is baffled by his encounter in Jerusalem with a charlatan who is a dead ringer for him, and who calls himself Philip Roth. Here is the narrator reflecting on the sexy mistress of the other Philip Roth when she comes to see him at his hotel:

> And I wanted to hear her talk because of the beguilingly ambiguous timbre of her voice, which was harmonically a puzzle to me. The voice was like something you've gotten out of the freezer that's taking its own sweet time to thaw: moist and spongy enough at the edges to eat, otherwise off-puttingly refrigerated down to its deep-frozen core. It was difficult to tell just how coarse she was, if there was a great deal going on in her or if maybe there was nothing at all and she was just a petty criminal's obedient moll.

Roth's language of course cannot have the historical range of Mendele's, but he, too, gets some of his liveliest effects by playing one linguistic register against another. The language of the first sentence is decorously literary and finely poised in the effort of making discriminations ("beguilingly ambiguous timbre," "harmonically a puzzle"). Then Roth switches to a colloquial register ("like something you've gotten out of the freezer that's taking its own sweet time to thaw"), and flaunts the comic incongruity of the image: a

(6)

voice as a frozen cake. At the same time, there is a kind of wit in the deliberately grotesque simile, for the narrator evinces an exploratory sexual interest in the woman—the cake is associated with appetite, and taking its own sweet time to thaw comically intimates resistance or frigidity.

The woman in question, however, is not *realized* as a character, in the way that Flaubert or—very differently—Henry James would do. What comes across instead is the narrator's verbal performance, the zest and zaniness with which he zeroes in on her voice, converting it into a cake that is moist and spongy at the edges but may have a deep-frozen core. Both the strength and the weakness of this passage, and much of Roth's writing as far back as *Portnoy's Complaint* (1968), are in the energy of its verbal improvisations; so that instead of character, event, and moral or conceptual development, we get a series of *shtiklach*, the best of them displaying stylistic and attitudinal fireworks, many bearing the signs of self-indulgence.

THIS variegated story of Jews engaging the models of Western culture surely suggests no single edifying moral. Indeed, my last pair of examples may lead one to wonder whether in some instances Jews may have made themselves masters of what might amount to minor veins in the general culture. But if one grants that the sustaining power of an increasingly international culture abides in its capacity to accommodate different perspectives, Jewish writers, in all the variety of their sundry relations to their own antecedents, have added palpably to the richness of the whole. Modern literature would surely be diminished without the humane, unblinking comedy of Sholem Aleichem—enacted through the most wittily resourceful deployment of "Jewish discourse"—or without Kafka's theologically intense fables of the commentator's despair, or even without the wisecracking, street-smart, wryly reflective narrators of Saul Bellow's novels, so peculiarly given to metaphysical musings.

It seems reasonable to assume that these different freights of consciousness carried by Jews from their own cultural sphere into modernity are a transitional phenomenon, the hallmark of writers acclimating themselves in one world while still variously remembering another. What may be a little surprising is that such traits of transition should exhibit so great a persistence. It is odd, and instructive, that a third-generation American like Philip Roth, who knows only fragments of Yiddish, should have absorbed some of the tonalities and discursive strategies of the Yiddish-speaking ancestral world, or that a native Israeli writer like the talented Meir Shalev, a generation younger than Roth, should be able to create a fictional world where the magic-realist fantastication of Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and Italo Calvino rubs shoulders with the ghost of Sholem Aleichem.

Jews have added if not a dominant then a distinctive voice to the mixed chorus of modern culture. And at least in the area of literary expression, it seems as though there are still writers, including some younger ones, who find the distinctiveness well worth preserving.