

Introduction

Most of the stories in this collection are modern; a few are ancient. They were written in Hebrew, German, Yiddish, Russian and English, yet all are, to a discerning eye, very clearly Jewish. The oldest of them, *Tobit*, is pious and moral but its comedy and pathos have a familiar and contemporary flavor. Carried into exile, Tobit will not eat the bread of the gentile, he remembers God with all his heart, he defies the law of the land in observing the divine law, and gives burial to the dead of his nation. But when his son Tobias sets forth on his errand with the disguised angel his dog follows them. The presence of that dog on such an errand is a characteristic touch of Jewish wit. And the poor bride persecuted by the demon Ashmodai—seven times married she remains a virgin—is saved only because Tobias is instructed to make a dreadful stink by burning fish in the bridal chamber to rout the demon. The story is both touching and funny. Obstinate, righteous, sententious Tobit is a charming old man. His prayers are heard; an angel is sent, but the dog, trotting after the angel, is also slyly introduced—and the burning of the fish. Some two thousand years later, in the stories of Isaac Babel and Bashevis Singer, the world and the works of mankind are seen in an oddly tilted perspective very similar to that of Tobit. In a recent story by Singer, "The Spinoza of Market Street," there is another wedding. This time a dusty old scholar, devoted to Spinoza, is rejuvenated. His bride, a homely charwoman, is rescued from barrenness and from ugliness. She is transformed, becomes lovely. Happy but dazed, the old groom in the night mumbles his apologies to Spinoza for this absurd lapse from seriousness.

The religion of the Jews has appeared to the world as divinely inspired history. The message of the Old Testament, however, cannot easily be separated from its stories and

metaphors. Various commentators, unrestrained by orthodoxy and looking at the Bible with the clear or cold eye of the twentieth century, have spoken of the books of both testaments as novels. The late Ernest Sutherland Bates edited a bible "to be read as living literature" and D. H. Lawrence spoke of the patriarchs and King David as though they were fictional characters. Thomas Mann in one of his Joseph novels suggests that in having a story to tell, the nearly tragic account of the envy of his brethren (how he was given a coat of many colors; how his brothers were angry; how he was sold into Egypt by them; how his father mourned him; how he was molested by Potiphar's wife and imprisoned; how he interpreted dreams and rose to greatness; how there was a famine in the land and his brothers came to buy grain; how he revealed himself at last to them)—that in having such a story to tell Joseph may have been a greater man than the Pharaoh, his master. For there is power in a story. It testifies to the worth, the significance of an individual. For a short while all the strength and all the radiance of the world are brought to bear upon a few human figures.

Hamlet, dying, says to his friend:

O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,
 Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.
 If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
 Absent thee from felicity awhile,
 And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
 To tell my story.

In defeat, a story contains the hope of vindication, of justice. The storyteller is able to make others accept his version of things. And in the stories of the Jewish tradition the world, and even the universe, have a human meaning. Indeed, the Jewish imagination has sometimes been found guilty of overhumanizing everything, of making too much of a case for us, for mankind, and of investing externals with too many meanings. To certain writers, Christianity itself has appeared to be an invention of Jewish storytellers

whose purpose has been to obtain victory for the weak and the few over the strong and numerous. To such accusations Jews would apply the term *bilbul*. A *bilbul* is a false charge; literally, a confusion.

For the last generation of East European Jews, daily life without stories would have been inconceivable. My father would say, whenever I asked him to explain any matter, "The thing is like this. There was a man who lived . . ." "There was once a scholar . . ." "There was a widow with one son . . ." "A teamster was driving on a lonely road . . ."

An old man lived all alone in the forest. He was the last of his family and he was so sick and feeble that he could hardly cook his gruel. Well, one cold day he had no more firewood and he went out to gather some. He was stooped and old and he carried a rope. In the woods he spread the rope on the snow and he laid his fuel on it and tied a knot but he was too weak to lift the bundle. This was too much for him. He lifted his eyes and called to Heaven. "Gott meiner. Send me Death." At once he saw the Angel of Death coming toward him. And the Angel said to him, "You sent for me, what do you want?" And the old man thought quickly and said, "Yes, as a matter of fact I did. I can't get these sticks up on my back and wonder if you'd mind giving me a hand."

"So, you see, when it comes to dying . . .," my father said, "nobody is really ready."

Three Jews were boasting of their rabbis, and one said, "My rabbi's faith is so great and he fears the Lord so much that he trembles day and night, and he has to be belted into his bed at night with straps so that he doesn't fall out." The second said, "Yes, you have a marvelous rabbi, but he really can't be compared to my rabbi. Mine is so holy and so just that he makes God tremble. God is afraid of displeasing him. And if the world has not been going so well lately, you can figure

it out for yourselves. God is trembling." The third Jew said, "Your rabbis are both great men. No doubt about it. But my rabbi passed through both stages. For a long time he trembled, too, and in the second stage, he made God tremble. But then he thought it over very carefully and finally he said to God, "Look—why should we both tremble?"

I would call the attitudes of these stories characteristically Jewish. In them, laughter and trembling are so curiously mingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two. At times the laughter seems simply to restore the equilibrium of sanity; at times the figures of the story, or parable, appear to invite or encourage trembling with the secret aim of overcoming it by means of laughter. Aristophanes and Lucian do not hesitate to involve the Olympian gods in their fun, and Rabelais's humor does not spare the heavens either. But these are different kinds of comic genius. Jewish humor is mysterious and eludes our efforts—even, in my opinion, the efforts of Sigmund Freud—to analyze it. Recently one Jewish writer (Hymen Slate in *The Noble Savage*) has argued that laughter, the comic sense of life, may be offered as proof of the existence of God. Existence, he says, is too *funny* to be uncaused. The real secret, the ultimate mystery, may never reveal itself to the earnest thought of a Spinoza, but when we laugh (the idea is remotely Hassidic) our minds refer us to God's existence. Chaos is *exposed*.

Not all the stories in this collection approach the summits of laughter or of feeling. In some cases I have chosen the best translation rather than the best story of a given author, and I am afraid there is no way to disguise my own irreverence or my Jewish obstinacy. For instance, I do not wholly admire the stories of I. L. Peretz. This is heresy, I know, but I find them slow going; they depend too much on a kind of Talmudic sophistication which the modern reader, and I along with him, knows very little of. As for Sholom Aleichem, his language gives the Yiddish reader

indescribable pleasure, but his stories themselves are by a more general standard often weak. He was a great humorist, but a raconteur rather than a literary artist.

There are of course certain writers who can never be well translated. I remember a long afternoon during which I tried, and failed, to convince the Spanish novelist Pío Baroja that Walt Whitman was an admirable poet. "Not in Castilian," Baroja kept saying, and I suppose the most considerate non-Jewish reader in Minneapolis might take a similar view of some of our Yiddish classics in their English versions. The effort to describe their uniqueness may lead us into exaggeration and inflation, from inflation to mere piety. And from piety to boredom the path is very short. I do not see the point of boring anyone for the sake of the record. Opening a book in order to pay our respects to a vanished culture, a world destroyed to the eternal reproach of all mankind, we may be tempted to set literary standards aside. Still, a story should be interesting, highly interesting, as interesting as possible—inexplicably absorbing. There can be no other justification for any piece of fiction.

Quite understandably, to the writer in the Russian Pale it seemed most important to present Jewish life as sympathetically as possible. Because the Jews were remorselessly oppressed, all the good qualities of Jewish life were heaped up in the foreground of their stories. Raw things—jealousies, ambitions, hatreds, deceptions—were frequently withheld. The Jewish slums of Montreal during my childhood, just after the First World War, were not too far removed from the ghettos of Poland and Russia. Life in such places of exile and suffering was anything but ordinary. But whatever it was, ordinary or extraordinary, harsh or sweet, it was difficult to recognize it in the work of most modern Jewish writers. These writers generally tended to idealize it, to cover it up in prayer shawls and phylacteries and Sabbath sentiment, the Seder, the matchmaking, the marriage canopy; for sadness the Kaddish, for amusement the schnorrer, for admiration the bearded scholar. Jewish literature

and art have sentimentalized and sweetened the ghetto; their "pleasing" pictures are far less interesting of course than the real thing.

In this century, so agonizing to the Jews, some people may think it wrong to object to such lack of realism, to insist on maintaining the distinction between public relations and art. It may appear that the survivors of Hitler's terror in Europe and Israel will benefit more from good publicity than from realistic representation, or that posters are needed more urgently than masterpieces. Admittedly, say some people, *Exodus* was not much of a novel, but it was extraordinarily effective as a document and we need such documents now. We do not need stories like those of Philip Roth which expose unpleasant Jewish traits. The Jews are much slandered, much threatened, greatly sinned against—should they for these reasons be unfairly represented in literature, to their alleged advantage? The question is a very ticklish one. It could be shown, I think, that the argument based on need is also the one used by Khrushchev. The Russian oligarchy approves only of what it quaintly calls "socialist realism." It would prefer to have us read Simonov rather than Pasternak. Paradoxically, therefore, the American Jewish public buys Uris and Pasternak for entirely different reasons—*Exodus* because it is good for *us*, and *Doctor Zhivago* because it is bad for *them*. In literature we cannot accept a political standard. We can only have a literary one. But in all the free countries of the world Jewish writers are able to write exactly as they please, in French (André Schwarz-Bart), Italian (Italo Svevo), in English, or in Yiddish or Hebrew.

In Jerusalem several years ago I had an amusing and enlightening conversation with the dean of Hebrew writers, S. J. Agnon. This spare old man, whose face has a remarkably youthful color, received me in his house, not far from the barbed wire entanglements that divide the city, and while we were drinking tea, he asked me if any of my books had been translated into Hebrew. If they had not been, I had better see to it immediately, because, he said, they would survive only in the Holy Tongue. His advice I assume was

only half serious. This was his witty way of calling my attention to a curious situation. I cited Heinrich Heine as an example of a poet who had done rather well in German. "Ah," said Mr. Agnon, "we have him beautifully translated into Hebrew. He is safe." Mr. Agnon feels secure in his ancient tradition. But Jews have been writing in languages other than Hebrew for more than two thousand years. The New Testament scholar Hugh J. Schonfield asserts that parts of the Gospels were composed in a sort of Yiddish Greek, "as colorful in imagery and metaphor as it is often careless in grammatical construction."

With less wit and subtlety than Mr. Agnon, other Jewish writers worry about using the languages of the Diaspora. They sometimes feel like borrowers, compelled by strange circumstances to use a tongue of which their ancestors were ignorant. I cannot recall that Joseph Conrad, a Pole, ever felt this to be an intolerable difficulty. He loved England and the English language. I do remember that James Joyce, an Irishman, did feel such a difficulty. Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist* somewhat envies an old English Jesuit, perfectly at home in his own language. But then, young Dedalus was at this period of his life still rather parochial. In a story by Meyer Levin, one character exclaims, "I was a foreigner, writing in a foreign language . . . What am I? Native, certainly. My parents came to this country . . . they were the true immigrants, the actual foreigners. . . . But I, American-born, raised on hot dogs, I am out of place in America. Remember this: art to be universal must be narrowly confined. An artist must be a perfect unit of time and place, at home with himself, unextraneous. . . . Who am I? Where do I come from? I am an accident. What right have I to scribble in this American language that comes no more naturally to me than it does to the laundry Chinaman?"

Theories like those expressed by Mr. Levin's character, as Mr. Levin is at pains to show, about the "perfect unit of time and place" seldom bring any art into the world. Art appears, and then theory contemplates it; that is the usual order in the relations between art and theory. It cannot be

argued that the stories of Isaac Babel are not characteristically Jewish. And they were written in Russian by a man who knew Yiddish well enough to have written them in that language. Before he disappeared from view during one of Stalin's purges, Babel had been put in charge of publishing the works of Sholom Aleichem in Yiddish. Why should he have chosen therefore to write his own stories in Russian, the language of the oppressors, of Pobedonostev and the Black Hundreds? If, before writing, he had taken his bearings he could not have found himself to be "a perfect unit of time and place." He wrote in Russian from motives we can never expect to understand fully. These stories have about them something that justifies them to the most grudging inquiry—they have spirit, originality, beauty. Who was Babel? Where did he come from? He was an accident. We are all such accidents. We do not make up history and culture. We simply appear, not by our own choice. We make what we can of our condition with the means available. We must accept the mixture as we find it—the impurity of it, the tragedy of it, the hope of it.

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