

**Symbolism**

An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics

# Symbolism

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## An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics

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## Foreword from the Editors

*Symbolism* appears with this volume in a slightly changed appearance and with a different publisher's label, as it has moved from AMS Press, New York, to De Gruyter, Berlin and Boston. While the thematic trajectory of the annual remains unchanged and will continue to develop its profile and scope on the extended exploratory venture of theories and practices of the symbolic, the move mainly constitutes a regional repositioning. While distribution in America and the involvement with American scholarship remain of high importance, the exchange with European scholarship as well as with people interested in further regions worldwide will hopefully be stimulated and intensified by this relocation. New voices, new perspectives and new contributors will address new readerships without disrupting ongoing lines of inquiry and research which readers of existing volumes of *Symbolism* have come to appreciate.

At this moment of a new departure the Editors wish to take the opportunity to express their gratitude to AMS Press for more than a decade of excellent cooperation and inspiring teamwork, as well as to thank De Gruyter publishers for welcoming the annual for the recalibration described.

The editors are delighted to present the substantial double volume 12/13 as the launch pad, so to speak, for the newly refurbished annual. On the thematic side, few topics could be better suited to highlight this turn than the essays around Jewish Magic Realism assembled in this volume's focus by Axel Stähler. As becomes clear from Axel Stähler's introduction to the focus and as the following expert articles testify, Jewish Magic Realism is a most exciting special case in magic realist writing that has never received the consolidated attention which it truly deserves and which it is finally granted here. However, Jewish Magic Realism is shown to be more than just another variant in the long line of magic realist literature; with its negotiations of the Bible and of major Jewish cultural traditions it clearly emerges as a foundational exploration to the very roots of Western culture with, potentially, a world-wide impact and relevance.

This stimulating focus is thematically complemented in the general section by a study in religious symbolism in Angelica Michelis's, Hester Jones's and Andrew Shanks's contributions. Jack Stewart on Virginia Woolf's 'surrealist' imagery, Sebastian Domsch in the symbol in graphic narratives and Patrick Gill on the English elegy widen the general scope while Puschmann-Nalenz's study on the liminal in Postmodernism fits well with the liminal position of this new volume in the series of *Symbolism* annuals.

The editors thank Dr. Manuela Gerlof and Christina Riesenweber at De Gruyter for their expert guidance in the transfer of the annual and for bringing this volume about so smoothly. Axel Stähler has proved a focus editor of astounding

efficiency and inspiration, turning our cooperation into sheer pleasure. As always, Chris Wahlig in the English Seminar at the University of Muenster has been the reliable mainstay of the organisational side of *Symbolism*.

Finally, it is our pleasure to announce that Dr Florian Kläger, who has been on the Symbolism team for several years, now joins us officially as assistant editor of the annual.

Ruediger Ahrens  
University of Wuerzburg

Klaus Stierstorfer  
University of Muenster

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**Special Focus:**  
**Jewish Magic Realism**



Axel Stähler

## Introduction: A Jewish Magic Realism?

“Behold me here” – Abraham’s words in answer to the summons by his God take on in Erich Auerbach’s reading of the *akedah*, the Sacrifice of Isaac, the utmost significance.<sup>1</sup> In a dazzling analysis of the biblical narrative, Auerbach takes the stark sparseness of the hidden and formless divinity’s call – “Abraham!” – and of the old man’s submissive acknowledgement as his point of departure to ascertain a specifically Jewish mode of the literary representation of reality. “The concept of God held by the Jews,” he says, “is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things” (*M*, 8/10). The Jewish realism he perceives in the narrative of the *akedah* is one which is characterized by the reduction to the absolute essentials, it is a bare bones fragmentary representation of slivers of reality which forces the reader to fill in the gaps imaginatively; as such it is permeated with suspense and “fraught with background” – it is “hintergründig” (*M*, 12/14). Yet what the biblical narrator produced was not, as Auerbach insists, “primarily oriented toward ‘realism,’” but rather toward “truth.” In fact, the bible’s “claim to truth” is “tyrannical” in Auerbach’s reading, to the exclusion of all other claims: “The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality – it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy” (*M*, 14–15/16–17). However, the very multiplicity of meanings embedded in the fragmentary representation of the biblical narrative demands interpretation and therefore intrinsically challenges its own claim to tyrannical authority (*M*, 15/18). Thus was initiated a process of “interpretative transformation” – “ausdeutende Umformung” – which historically produced a tension and an increasing disjunction between narrative and doctrine that resulted, in Auerbach’s reading, in the transmutation of the former into “ancient legends” and of the latter into “a disembodied image” (*M*, 16/18).

It may seem counterintuitive to embark on an exploration of Jewish magic realism with an exposition of Jewish realism. Yet Erich Auerbach’s extraordinary proposition that there is an essential affinity between the Jewish perception of the world and its representation in Jewish literature would suggest *a priori* that the notion of a Jewish magic realism is a contradiction in terms which goes far beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [1953], trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1974): 9. Further references in the text, abbreviated as “*M*”; divided by a forward slash, page references to the American translation will be followed by those to the German original, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* [1946] 10th ed. (Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 2001): 10. See also Genesis 22:1.

the frequently emphasized oxymoronic nature of the term magic realism.<sup>2</sup> However, is the Jewish method of representing reality described by Auerbach really so far removed from what may be designated magic realism?

The following discussion seeks to approximate an understanding of Jewish magic realism in conversation with Auerbach's suggestions. These were advanced by the philologist in *Mimesis*, his seminal study on the representation of reality in Western literature, published in 1946, and it will be useful to recall, very briefly, the circumstances of its genesis.

It so happens that Auerbach was Jewish himself. Forced to vacate his Chair in Romance Studies at the University of Marburg in 1935 after the rise of National Socialism in Germany, the exiled philologist found refuge in Istanbul where he lived until 1946.<sup>3</sup> It is here that he wrote *Mimesis* during the decisive years of the Second World War, between May 1942 and April 1945. In the first chapter of his study, called "Odysseus' Scar," Auerbach engages in a comparative analysis of Homer's *Odyssey* and the bible (*M*, 3–23/5–27). Both are discussed as embodiments of two very different styles of the representation of reality. Recent readings of Auerbach's study, and its first chapter in particular, have re-situated *Mimesis* in its historical production context. More specifically, it has been argued that "Auerbach's juxtaposition of the two traditions, Homeric and Jewish, is a pointed and polemical one."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the suggestion is that with the "willful perversity" of his first chapter,<sup>5</sup> Auerbach effectively pursues what James I. Porter has called "a Jewish philology or a Judaizing of philology."<sup>6</sup>

This may require some further explanation. According to Auerbach, the representation of reality in the *Odyssey* is defined by "externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feelings completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little suspense" (*M*, 11/13–14). This is confronted with the stark and fragmented but psychologically profound style of the bible. The inner emotional reality suggested

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Postcolonial Discourse," in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995): 407–426, 411 and Christopher Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel: Between Faith and Irreverence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): vi.

<sup>3</sup> Earl Jeffrey Richards, "Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* as a Meditation on the Shoah," *German Politics and Society* 19.2 (2001): 62–91, 64–67.

<sup>4</sup> James I. Porter, "Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology," *Critical Inquiry* 35.1 (2008): 115–147, 120.

<sup>5</sup> Porter, "Erich Auerbach," 115.

<sup>6</sup> Porter, "Erich Auerbach," 117.

in the biblical narrative is inaccessible to the Homeric (in)sensibility which has been read as representative of the German tradition of classical philology.<sup>7</sup> In Porter's interpretation of *Mimesis*, both emerge as incommensurable. In effect, the contrast is one "between two conceptual schemes or psychologies that are being shown to be mutually untranslatable."<sup>8</sup> Porter concludes that

[b]y investing the Old Testament narrative with perspectival depth, historical possibilities, and a quest for moral truth, not ingratiating and entertaining lies, Auerbach is inverting the modern edifice of philology; he is Judaizing it and thereby enacting a kind of philological revenge in the name of a tyrannical, terrifying, all-seeing but hidden Jewish god.<sup>9</sup>

The reading of *Mimesis* as a "'Jewish' project of literature" has been challenged by Galili Shahar who suggests that

[o]ne should rather think of Auerbach's project in terms of modernist interpretation in which identities are revealed as mixed, unstable textures, and traditions are experienced from a distance, through a process of radical transformation, denial, and openness.<sup>10</sup>

By the same token, Shahar also rejects Earl Jeffrey Richards's suggestion that Auerbach's study is "a highly sublimated allegorical meditation on the contemporary murder of Europe's Jews,"<sup>11</sup> and that – for all its despondence in the face of contemporary reality – it envisages a *tikkun olam*, a mending of the world.<sup>12</sup>

It is surely advisable to observe some caution in attributing an overtly political agenda to Auerbach's study and Shahar's suggestions have their own merit. Yet to imagine the philologist musing on the representation of reality in the seclusion of his Turkish ivory tower, entirely bereft of any sense of the reality that had forced him to leave Germany and that made him reflect in the epilogue to *Mimesis* on the chances of any of his "friends of former years" to have survived (*M*, 557/518), would seem rather innocuous.<sup>13</sup> In addition to explicit, though infrequent references such as this,<sup>14</sup> Auerbach's choice of textual samples for his discussion has also been interpreted as a response to contemporary events, in

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7 Porter, "Erich Auerbach," 120.

8 Porter, "Erich Auerbach," 134.

9 Porter, "Erich Auerbach," 137.

10 Galili Shahar, "Auerbach's Scars: Judaism and the Question of Literature," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 101.4 (2011): 604–630, 624.

11 Richards, "Meditation," 62.

12 Richards, "Meditation," 86.

13 As James I. Porter has observed, Willard Trask's translation obscures the doubt expressed in the German text about the survival of Auerbach's friends, or their failure to survive, "Erich Auerbach," 119.

14 For further examples, see Porter, "Erich Auerbach," 117–121.

particular the prominent reflection on the *akedah*.<sup>15</sup> As Richards argues, Auerbach sought “to find concrete examples from the past that function as figural analogies to contemporary history.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, *Mimesis* offers “fragments of figural insight”<sup>17</sup> which may then – in analogy to the fragmentary character of the biblical narrative – be read as an attempt to represent the reality or, perhaps, rather the “truth” of his own times.

Reality, though central to Auerbach’s study, is a concept which the philologist quite deliberately chooses not to delimit with either an “arduous” and “tiresome” definition or an “unusual” and “clumsy” terminology (*M*, 556/510). Instead, his “method of textual interpretation” (*M*, 556/510) reinforces the notion of the context-determined constructedness of representations of reality. The two psychologies mentioned by Porter are clearly delineated by Auerbach in “Odysseus’ Scar” as binary oppositions and they patently inform alternative systems of “comprehending reality,” or “Wirklichkeitsauffassung” (*M*, 16/18–19).

With the notion of alternative systems of comprehending reality, we have finally reached the point of intersection with magic realism. There is, of course, a fine distinction between alternative realities and alternative systems of comprehending reality. More specifically, and adapting a thought of Emmanuel Levinas, the absolutely other is, and remains, inaccessible because as soon as comprehension sets in, it ceases to be other.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, magic realism – understood to be “accepting both realistic and magical perspectives of reality on the same level”<sup>19</sup> – does not so much offer the representation of alternative realities but rather the narrative reconciliation of different systems of comprehending reality.

Christopher Warnes has similarly emphasized the crucial importance of the capacity of magic realism “to resolve the tension between two discursive systems usually thought of as mutually exclusive.”<sup>20</sup> In his “basic” definition, magic realism is characterized as “a mode of narration that naturalises or normalises the supernatural,” which means that “real and fantastic, natural and supernatural, are coherently represented in a state of equivalence.”<sup>21</sup> To Warnes, magic realism therefore “designates a narrative strategy that stretches or ruptures altogether the

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15 See Richards, “Meditation,” 71–78.

16 See Richards, “Meditation,” 83.

17 See Richards, “Meditation,” 85.

18 See Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other” [1963], trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986): 345–359, 346.

19 Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004): 4.

20 Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, 2.

21 Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, 3.



boundaries of reality.”<sup>22</sup> This, however, seems an unfortunate way of putting it and it might be more accurate to refer, once again, to the stretching or rupturing of the boundaries of the perception or comprehension of reality rather than of reality itself.

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris accordingly suggest that magic realism may be considered as “an extension of realism in its concern with the nature of reality and its representation.”<sup>23</sup> Even if taking into account that the authors qualify their observation with the remark that magic realism simultaneously “resists the basic assumptions of post-enlightenment rationalism and literary realism,”<sup>24</sup> its implications are crucial and pervasive. For the suggestion is then that in a subtle shift realism is once again recognized as the dominating principle of representation. Different manifestations of reality may be acknowledged, but they continue to be represented in what is, then, effectively still a mimetic approach. It is a matter of *Wirklichkeitsauffassung* rather than different realities, albeit of different *Wirklichkeitsauffassungen* integrated seamlessly into the narrative, or, more accurately, of a new hybrid *Wirklichkeitsauffassung* which blends and reconciles alternative and potentially even contradictory systems and methods of the comprehension of reality.<sup>25</sup>

Inevitably, Auerbach and his identification of mimesis as the governing principle of the representation of reality in Western literature come to mind at this juncture. When Zamora and Faris identify as one epistemological objective of critical engagement with magic realism the exploration of “how Western realism is subverted, mimesis displaced by poesis,”<sup>26</sup> the question rather seems to be in how far mimesis is extended to accommodate and amalgamate different systems of comprehending reality. Similarly, they propose

that the widespread appeal of magical realist fiction today responds not only to its innovative energy but also to its impulse to reestablish contact with traditions temporarily eclipsed by the mimetic constraints of nineteenth- and twentieth-century realism.<sup>27</sup>

It seems important to recognize that Auerbach by no means confuses the representation of reality with (modern) realism; hence the title of his monumental

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<sup>22</sup> Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, vi.

<sup>23</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, “Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995): 1–11, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Zamora and Faris, “Introduction,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> See Zamora and Faris, “Introduction,” 5–6.

<sup>26</sup> Zamora and Faris, “Introduction,” 7–8.

<sup>27</sup> Zamora and Faris, “Introduction,” 2.

study. He is very clear on the emergence of (modern) realism, in the more narrow sense of a literary style, in the nineteenth century (see *M*, 491–492/458–459, 554/515). In “Odysseus’ Scar,” Auerbach furthermore notes that “as late as the European Middle Ages it was possible to represent Biblical events as ordinary phenomena of contemporary life” (*M*, 15/18). This integrative approach to the biblical narrative and the interpretive methods applied to it was altered, according to Auerbach, “through too great a change in environment and the awakening of a critical consciousness” (*M*, 15–16/18). Yet in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), an icon of magic realism, Gabriel García Márquez has one of his characters reaffirm the amalgamation of magic and reality in the bible in relation to narrations of the supernatural real: “If they believe it in the Bible,” she says, “I don’t see why they shouldn’t believe it from me.”<sup>28</sup> To re-establish contact with earlier traditions not subsumed under the label of realism therefore does not necessarily connote the rejection of mimesis altogether, because the mimetic principle as informing the periods prior to realism proper is a much more inclusive concept than the earlier quotation would have us believe.

Not a few of the texts discussed in the contributions to this special issue as Jewish magic realist writing do indeed seek to connect with earlier literary traditions, many of them of a ‘Jewish’ provenance. The Israeli writer Meir Shalev, discussed in the contribution of Efraim Sicher and Shuly Eilat, consciously seeks to re-connect with his magic realist approach to the bible. S. Y. Agnon similarly engages with religious Jewish traditions, as emerges in the essay of Vered Weiss. The notion of *gilgul*, a Kabbalistic concept of reincarnation, informs a short story by Nathan Englander, compared by Aaron Tillman to another magic realist short story by Steve Stern which uses fabulist elements reminiscent of Chasidic tales. The use of the possessing spirit of the *dybbuk* in the 1993 BBC TV adaptation of Romain Gary’s novel *The Dance of Genghis Cohn* (1968) is investigated by James Jordan. Doron Rabinovici, discussed in Axel Stähler’s essay, evokes with the figure of Mullemann in his novel *The Search for M* (1997) the specter of the Golem. Finally, Clive Sinclair’s imaginative enquiry into the great Isaac Bashevis Singer’s use of magic realism reveals a fabulism steeped in the Jewish narrative tradition.

No less pervasive, however, is the influence of more recent magic realist writing of a non-Jewish provenance. Zamora and Faris have observed that magic realism has evolved into “an international commodity.”<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the internationalization of the magic realist mode and its global dissemination in the works of

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<sup>28</sup> Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [1967], trans. Gregory Rabassa (London: Penguin, 1973): 305.

<sup>29</sup> Zamora and Faris, “Introduction,” 2.

authors such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez or Salman Rushdie have made it a pattern of engagement with reality that is readily available and accessible anywhere in the world. Evidence of the finely spun web of intertextual connections which link Jewish magic realism with other manifestations of this mode surfaces in various contributions to the special issue. Efraim Sicher and Shuly Eilat, for instance, draw a connection between the work of Meir Shalev and Salman Rushdie. The degree of importance that might be attributed to the magic realism of Bruno Schulz's work in his appropriation by a later generation of Jewish writers is investigated by Jenni Adams. Outside the established parameters of magic realism, the significance of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as an inspiration for the adoption of the magic realist mode to Doron Rabinovici and Benjamin Stein is discussed by Axel Stähler.

Is the proliferation of Jewish magic realism in recent years then no more than just a confirmation of the recent trend observed by Zamora and Faris? It seems to me that the discussion of Auerbach has suggested otherwise. Admittedly, Auerbach emphasizes the totalizing character of the biblical narrative and this aligns it with the notion, advanced by Zamora and Faris, that "realism functions ideologically and hegemonically."<sup>30</sup> Magic realism, they assert, "also functions ideologically" but, in contrast, "less hegemonically, for its program is not centralizing but eccentric: it creates space for interactions of diversity."<sup>31</sup> This is strangely reminiscent of Auerbach's analysis of the biblical narrative, from which it emerges, paradoxically, that its method of the representation and of the comprehension of reality engenders a "multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation" (*M*, 23/26). With a realism such as this, one might say, who needs magic realism?

Yet in addition to the biblical narrative and its particular method of mimesis, fantastic or fabulist elements which, depending on their context, may well be read as magic realist, have informed Jewish tradition for a very long time and a claim might even be made that it in fact contributed crucially to the emergence of magic realism. Daniel M. Jaffe has emphasized in the introduction to his anthology *With Signs and Wonders* (2003) the fabulist tradition evident in the "Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and early body of kabbalist literature."<sup>32</sup> There is a strong fabulist element in evidence for instance in the stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772–1810), collected and retold by Martin Buber in 1906. In an essay on the Chasidic rabbi and Jewish mysticism prefaced to *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman*,

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<sup>30</sup> Zamora and Faris, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>31</sup> Zamora and Faris, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel M. Jaffe, *With Signs and Wonders: An International Anthology of Jewish Fabulous Fiction* (Montpellier, VT: Invisible Cities Press, 2003): xvii.

Buber not only identified the mystic disposition as a specifically Jewish characteristic but suggests that it is, in fact, “a significant peculiarity of the Jew, which hardly seems to have changed in thousands of years, that with him one extreme quickly and powerfully enkindles another.”<sup>33</sup> Reminiscent of the claim to absolute authority ascribed by Auerbach to the biblical narrative, Buber recognizes in Chasidism – interpreted by him as “the Kabbala become ethos”<sup>34</sup> – the fervid yearning for the transformation of the world: “the absolute *must* become reality.”<sup>35</sup> Rabbi Nachman’s fabulist tales are an expression of desiring the impossible,<sup>36</sup> with magical elements inserted into representations of reality to presage in the narrative the longed-for transformation.

The Chasidic rabbi is acknowledged by Buber as a nodal point in the evolution of a Jewish narrative tradition in that he gave it recognizable literary shape:

Rabbi Nachman found an already existing tradition of Jewish folk tales and joined with it. But he is the first real storyteller [*Märchendichter*] among the Jews. All earlier tales were anonymous creation; here there is present, for the first time, the person – personal intention and personal formation.<sup>37</sup>

Facets of the fabulist narrative tradition embodied in Rabbi Nachman’s tales can be traced to modern(ist) Jewish writers, such as Franz Kafka, Bruno Schulz, and Leo Perutz who have themselves been credited with the use of the magic realist mode,<sup>38</sup> long before the more widely recognized Latin American explorations of magic realism, commencing with the works of writers such as Alejo Carpentier, Miguel Ángel Asturias, and Jorge Luis Borges in the 1940s.<sup>39</sup>

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33 Martin Buber, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* [1956], trans. Maurice Friedman (London: Souvenir P, 1974): 4; see also *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman: Ihm nacherzaehlt* [1906], fifth ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt Rutten and Loening, 1920): 5–6.

34 Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 10 and *Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, 13.

35 Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 6 and *Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, 10.

36 Buber identifies “das Wollen des Unmöglichen” as a peculiarity informing as “Pathos” the core of the Jewish soul, *Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, 7; this passage is omitted in the English translation.

37 Buber, *Tales of Rabbi Nachman*, 44–45 and *Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman*, 41.

38 See, e.g., Irene Guenther, “Magic Realism, New Objectivity, and the Arts during the Weimar Republic,” in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke UP, 1995): 33–73. For the literary influence of Rabbi Nachman and the Kabbala, see, e.g., Joseph A. Kanofsky, “Kafka, Nahman of Bratslav, and the Judaic Literary Imagination,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 52.4 (1999): 196–203 and Božena Shallcross, “‘Fragments of a Broken Mirror’: Bruno Schulz’s Retextualization of the Kabbalah,” *East European Politics and Societies* 11.2 (1997): 270–281.

39 For the “Origins of Magic(al) Realism,” see the eponymous chapter in Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*, 8–19.

All this may not be enough to dispel in the Jewish context of magic realist cultural production proposed here the suspicion articulated by Christopher Warnes that

[t]he desire to affirm the category of magical realism often takes place at the expense of developing an understanding of the particular ways in which each work of magical realism uses the mode for its own ends: texts are used to understand magical realism, rather than magical realism being used as a tool to unpack and interpret texts.<sup>40</sup>

More specifically, therefore: are the texts discussed in this volume – novels, short fiction, films, and art works – legitimately identified as examples of magic realism? In which ways can the category of magic realism then be used “as a tool to unpack and interpret” these texts? More confusingly, if they are, is there then indeed a specifically “Jewish” type of magic realism, as suggested by the essentialist notions of both Auerbach and Buber, and how can it be identified? And even further: if Jewish writers of widely different backgrounds employ the magic realist mode to articulate their concerns in so many different ways, should we be talking about Jewish magic realisms in the plural rather than in the singular? Moreover, accepting the versatility of the magic realist mode and observing its application in specific contexts, such as the postcolonial, is its use by Jewish writers and artists then intrinsically an argument for extending the category of the postcolonial to the Jewish context? As Warnes suggests, magic realism “in its postcolonial forms” can “be seen as a response to the ‘othering’ that accompanies Western colonialism.”<sup>41</sup> Does the work of Jewish writers and artists from the diaspora and, more controversially, from Israel articulate such a response? Moreover, does “Jewish” use of the mode suggest a completely new set of parameters or does the magic realist mode appear to be particularly useful and popular in some contexts because they reveal affinities with others in which the mode has been successfully employed? This, of course, leads to the question in which contexts the specifically “Jewish” use of this narrative strategy can be observed and in which ways it can, or should be, compared to its use in non-Jewish cultural production.

Besides the Jewish engagement with the fabulist and magic realist tradition mentioned above, it is in particular the response to the Holocaust which has led to the proliferation of magic realist approaches in Jewish cultural production. It has been argued that the fragmentary and figural reference to the Holocaust in Auerbach’s *Mimesis* amounts effectively to “a meditation on the difficulty, rather than the impossibility, of representing that contemporary reality of his that we

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<sup>40</sup> Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, 18.

<sup>41</sup> Warnes, *Magical Realism and the Postcolonial Novel*, 152.

now fifty years later call the Shoah.”<sup>42</sup> As Richards suggests, the textual interpretations offered in *Mimesis* demonstrate that “we can only apprehend fragments that all point to the enormity of the evil.”<sup>43</sup> With the interpretation of seemingly disparate textual evidence, originating in different systems of comprehending reality across the millennia, the representation of reality in Auerbach’s study arguably seeks to articulate a “truth” which lies far beyond its individual parts or historical authenticity and which, in effect, demands an imaginative interpretation in the same manner in which the biblical narrative of the Sacrifice of Isaac demands the imaginative recreation of the story along the few carefully chosen nodal points it presents to the reader.

It is tempting to discern a methodological affinity between Auerbach’s philological approach and more recent magic realist approaches to the representation of the Holocaust. As Jenni Adams has argued in her seminal study on *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature* (2011), in Holocaust writing the magic realist mode “enables imaginative reconstruction to take place whilst graphically signifying these constructs’ fictive dimension.”<sup>44</sup> Significantly, in the context of the postmemorial other this ensures that the magic realist mode at the same time foregrounds “both the lack of availability of the other’s experience to postmemorial knowledge, and the illusory nature of any identifications which may occur in and through the process of postmemorial reconstruction.”<sup>45</sup> As suggested, to some extent these points also apply to the admittedly oblique engagement of *Mimesis* with the Holocaust, with the obvious proviso that this is not postmemorial but comemorial, yet as such no less removed from the actual experience it arguably tries to reconstruct.

The diversity of magic realist approaches to the Holocaust in Jewish cultural production is to some extent mirrored in the contributions to this special issue. Jenni Adams explores the talismanic status of the pre-Holocaust European Jewish magic realist writer Bruno Schulz in post-Holocaust Jewish American literature, with a particular focus on Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010). Jewish American writer Dara Horn’s use of magic realism to explore issues relating to the formation of Jewish identity as marked by trauma and displacement is investigated by Meyrav Koren-Kuik. H. G. Adler’s project of turning with his novel *The Journey* (2002) to literature to shift the ground of representation from a mimetic and epistemological model in order to produce a “literary ontology” for

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<sup>42</sup> Richards, “Meditation,” 85.

<sup>43</sup> Richards, “Meditation,” 85.

<sup>44</sup> Jenni Adams, *Magic Realism in Holocaust Literature: Troping the Traumatic Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 175.

<sup>45</sup> Adams, *Magic Realism*, 175.

victims and thus to elevate art to “sacred obligation” is discussed by Kitty J. Millet. Axel Stähler argues that within the larger context of coming to terms with the past Doron Rabinovici in *The Search for M* (1997) and Benjamin Stein in *The Canvas* (2010) resort to the magic realist mode in order less to articulate trauma but rather to engage with its (trans-)generational impact and to explore its nature. On the margins of what may be designated magic realism, Sue Vice argues that the location and psychology of the protagonists of Haim Gouri’s *The Chocolate Deal* (1965), Jiří Weil’s *Life With a Star* (1964), and Piotr Rawicz’s *Blood from the Sky* (1961) adopt a symbolist approach to the events of the Holocaust, giving apparently absurd symbolism a historically specific content. Introducing another medial perspective, the use of ghosts in Elijah Moshinsky’s BBC TV production *Genghis Cohn* (1993), a comedy which deliberately conflates the real and the imagined, blurring the distinction between the two, is discussed by James Jordan. Diana Popescu enquires into the symbolic links created by the artist Samuel Bak between his painting and his autobiography, demonstrating that the magic realist mode serves to develop a memory narrative in order to render the trauma of childhood separation and loss. Developing a more critical perspective, Irmtraud Huber challenges the potentially rash reproduction in the Jewish context of familiar interpretive maneuvers, such as those connected to magic realism. She suggests that they may be in need of reassessment in the face of narratives such as Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002).

The postcolonial dimension of Jewish magic realism and in particular its subversive potential for resistance is another prominent subject in the contributions to this special issue. It is explored, for instance, by Efraim Sicher and Shuly Eilat in their comparative discussion of representations in the work of Meir Shalev and Salman Rushdie of Israel’s War of Independence and of the Partition of India in 1947, respectively, as acts of inception within love stories that question the ties of body and nation and undermine the official narrative about the birth of the nation. Vered Weiss argues that generic hybridity in the work of S. Y. Agnon, the oscillation between the imperialistically engaged Gothic and (post)colonial magic realism, reflects the unsettled essence of Jewish Israeli identity. Sociologist, writer, and postcolonial theorist Albert Memmi’s discussion of Jewish cultural production, his role as a writer, and his use of magic realism are compared by Michael Lejman so as to situate the author’s experimental fiction in the context of his life-project. Another contribution to film studies, Rachel S. Harris investigates the ways in which magic realism, filtered through a Jewish and a Mizrahi cultural lens in Marco Carmel’s *Ahoti Hayafa* (2011), is used to comment upon the physical and social marginalization of Arab-Jews within Israeli society and Israeli cinema. The fundamental dichotomy of religious and ethnic identities is further examined

by Aaron Tillman who demonstrates how magic realist and comical modes are uniquely able to illustrate the enigma of difference that permeates contemporary Jewish American literature and culture.

As will already emerge from the plurality of approaches to and aspects of magic realism in Jewish cultural production explored in its individual contributions, this special focus of this issue of *Symbolism* on Jewish magic realism does not elaborate a particular hypothesis beyond the suggestion that magic realism is, indeed, present in Jewish cultural production and that this phenomenon has not yet been sufficiently explored. Indeed, the collected essays offer the first concentrated multi-perspectival approach to the topic. When engaging with individual contributions, it will be useful to bear the questions suggested above in mind. It is not, however, the objective of this special issue to develop a systematic approach and to give specific answers to these questions. This is also reflected in the application of the term magic realism, used synonymously in this volume with that of magical realism. No particular definition was prescribed to individual contributors. Accordingly, across the volume, the term magic realism emerges rather as a semantic cluster of slightly diffuse yet intricately linked characteristics which are encompassed by the common notion of the narrative reconciliation and amalgamation of different and potentially even contradictory systems of comprehending and representing reality.

Obviously, a venture such as this cannot aim to be exhaustive, nor is its subject matter ever to be exhausted. The scope of this volume has, moreover, ineluctably been curtailed by the exigencies of an entirely unmagical reality in which unexpected health issues and chronic fatigue in the face of proliferating deadlines foiled the completion of essays, among others, on the Jewish fabulist tradition in relation to the magic realist mode and on magic realist elements in Rabbinic literature as well as on magic realism in klezmer music. Their inclusion would without doubt have added further colorful pieces to the fragmentary mosaic laid out in this volume. Yet even in their absence, it is to be hoped, that a multihued if perhaps to some extent impressionistic picture of Jewish cultural production that may be designated as magic realist will emerge.

While some of the origins of magic realism may perhaps be located in the Jewish tradition, it is of course in mid-twentieth-century Latin America that the narrative mode flourished most vibrantly and where, one imagines, its gravitational pull may be strongest. Another conspicuous absence from the volume is accordingly the magic realist writing of Latin American Jewish writers. Here, too, a contribution was envisaged but, due to unforeseen external factors, could not be completed. In conclusion, if all too briefly, mention will therefore be made of a novel by the Brazilian Jewish writer Moacyr Scliar. *The Centaur in the Garden* (1980) is not only intriguing for being an integral part of the Latin American



tradition of magic realism and yet being also “Jewish.” It is moreover significant for its negotiations of Jewishness and its use of the magic realist mode as a tool to fathom Jewish identity.

The central image is that of the Jewish narrator and protagonist born as a centaur. The plot follows the experiences of the hybrid creature from the shelter of family life in the remote pampas into a difficult freedom and finally the surgical restitution of, at least, physical normality. Yet the Jewish centaur, Guedali, remains troubled by his remembered otherness. The novel is a frequently unsettling meditation on negotiations of identity within the parameters of normality and otherness.

While the hybrid creature remains ultimately inexplicable – “Psychoanalysis, dialectic materialism, nothing; laws of supply and demand, nothing, nothing; fiction, nothing. Nothing seemed applicable to my case. I was a centaur, irremediably a centaur. And without any plausible explanation”<sup>46</sup> – the recurring images of the winged Pegasus and the thundering hooves of Cossack’s horses suggest that Guedali is the product of the dual influences of a creative force and of destruction as remembered in a collective unconscious. He is, as such, a metaphor of ‘the Jew’ in history. And as such, his natural otherness is contrasted in the course of the novel with other manifestations of hybridity.

In particular, the enforced hybridity resulting from medical experiments perpetrated on victims of the Holocaust is mentioned in relation to Guedali’s own otherness:

They made strange transplants, uniting the upper half of a man with the lower half of a woman, or the hindquarters of a goat. Fortunately these atrocious operations caused the death of the patients, who expired as human beings and were not obliged to live as monsters. (CG, 45)

The allusion is highly ambivalent. It suggests constructions of the Jew as a monstrosity to be the product of the absurd and literal translation of myth into reality, a process of the willfully perverse appropriation, and indeed inversion, of the mimetic principle, which, arguably, is a characteristic of Nazi ideology. As such it suggests also an inversion of magic realism in that it attempts to reduce the magical into the real. Yet the attempt is bound to fail because reality reasserts itself and with it the inalienable dignity of humankind. The metafictional implications are obviously ambiguous: the magic realist narrative seemingly insists on situating the magical real firmly in fiction and not in reality as this would entail the violation of the natural order.

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<sup>46</sup> Moacyr Scliar, *The Centaur in the Garden* [1980], trans. Margaret A. Neves (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2003): 44; further references in the text, abbreviated as “CG.”

Yet the challenge to a hybridity based on imaginary constructions is also extended to other conceptions of Jewishness which are based on the transformation of the imaginary into the real. Thus, the proclamation of Israeli independence in 1948 similarly appears to generate a strange and potentially monstrous otherness:

My father was enthusiastic about the new state: in Israel, he explained, live Jews from all over the world, white Jews from Europe, black Jews from Africa, Jews from India, not to mention the Bedouins with their camels – strange types (CG, 45).

Though it seems an attractive proposition, for a while, Guedali will not go to Israel where, he assumes, he might blend in without attracting too much attention. Is the suggestion that the chimera produced with the establishment of the Jewish state may be no more able to survive than the horrifying creations sprung from the perverted Nazi imagination?

Guedali eventually leaves the confines of his family's farm in search of freedom. The narrative is complicated by the fact that he later meets Tita, a centaur-ess, who is not Jewish but whose origins are in the violation of a native Indian woman by a white settler. Together, the pair eventually decide to have their equine parts removed in a surgical operation, though Guedali remains skeptical: "I had the sense of violating a work of nature that perhaps was the result of a superior will – a divine will, who knows" (CG, 81). In the end, however, Guedali goes along and the successful operation gradually effaces all physical traces of their past as centaurs. Yet in Guedali's memory his past as centaur lingers on, if ever more feebly. He begins to succumb to the narrative manipulation of Tita and their friends:

The story is as ingeniously woven as a soap opera. With one single objective: to convince me that I never was a centaur. And they're doing it, at least in part. I still see myself as a centaur, but a centaur growing constantly smaller, a miniature centaur, a microcentaur. (CG, 214)

Indeed, Guedali acknowledges the expediency of yielding to a consensual perception of reality:

Maybe it would be better [...] to accept this reality they want to impose on me: that I am a human being, that the mythological creatures that so marked my life don't exist, neither centaurs, nor sphinxes, nor winged horses. (CG, 214)

But this would mean to give up the last trace of his otherness, to completely efface his identity. It would mean to assimilate into a normality that denies individual freedom. The concluding pages of the novel abound in contradictory indicators as to the truth of Guedali's story. His quandary, whether to believe in his own unbelievable story, is palpable. Yet whatever narrator and reader will choose to

believe, the final suggestion is that Guedali will make his escape, as he did once before: “Like a centaur in the garden, ready to jump the wall in search of freedom” (CG, 216).

Arguably, *The Centaur in the Garden* is paradigmatic of a “pure” form of Jewish magic realism, if that is not also an oxymoron. It incorporates all the various influences discussed so far: it is steeped in the Latin American tradition of magic realism; a specific suggestion in this direction is given with one of the epigraphs to Scliar’s novel, a quote from Jorge Luis Borges, which alludes to the terrified perception by the Indians of the mounted *conquistadores* as single animals able to divide themselves into two.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the very title of Scliar’s novel invokes a fictitious text, “Mme. Henri Bachelier’s *Le jardin du Centaure*,” mentioned by Borges in his playful interrogation of literary authenticity in “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*.”<sup>48</sup> Yet the novel also alludes to the *akedah* when Guedali sacrifices part of himself on the operation table to effect the division of the centaur which, however, results in the destruction of the equine part, still ominously present with the haunting sound of drums fashioned from its hide. Finally, Guedali’s otherness is also reminiscent of that of Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915).

As such, Scliar’s *The Centaur in the Garden* is in itself a monument of hybridity which is reflected even in the kaleidoscopic shifting of its narrative mode. While amalgamating magical and realistic elements throughout, its magic realist character is challenged by the novel’s frame narrative which produces a sense of hesitation in the reader and thus, in the Todorovian sense, transforms the magic realist narrative into a fantastic tale.<sup>49</sup> Yet the very notion of hybridity is of course controversial in a Jewish context. We may remember Auerbach’s insistence on the autocratic claim of the bible to a truth of its own. And Jews, we know, do not – or should not – mix things which do not belong together. Is thus the oxymoronic nature of magic realism more oxymoronic still when talking about Jewish magic realism? Finally, then, a question which should perhaps have been asked first and which, in a manner, will indeed be asked first – even after all this – in that it is posed by the first contribution to this special issue. It is another question that will not elicit a simple answer: is magic realism kosher? Or is its use equivalent to the centaur’s jump over the wall of the garden? – a leap of faith beyond...

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<sup>47</sup> See the entry on “The Centaur” in Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* [1967], ed. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Vintage, 2002): 37–39, 37–38.

<sup>48</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in *Fictions* (London: Penguin, 1998): 33–43, 42.

<sup>49</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* [1970], trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975): 31–32.

Clive Sinclair

## Is Magical Realism Kosher? A Conversation

**Interviewer:** To begin at the beginning: what do you make of the term “magical realism”?

**Sinclair:** It’s an oxymoron. The two words are hardly complementary. On the contrary, they are poles apart, like Zadie and Smith. But that’s the point, of course. You only have to look to the literatures of South America and the Indian sub-continent to see that they can fruitfully co-exist. Reality saying to magic, “Get me out of here.” You could say that the dirtier the reality the greater the effect of the magic, just as a dunghill showcases a diamond. But the effect is not guaranteed, and the diamonds can easily turn to rhinestones. In which case the effect will appear artful and artificial, and even imply a certain laziness on the writer’s part, a sleight of hand to conceal a lapse of imaginative energy.

Writing about Franz Kafka’s story, “Description of a Struggle,” Gabriel Josipovici suggested a reason for its incomplete state. He points to the fact that the narrator only has to wish for something for it to be so. He wishes to fly? Well, all he need do is to make swimming movements with his weary arms and he is airborne. “[O]ne wonders if the main reason why Kafka abandoned the work was that it was too easy to do this sort of thing in fiction,” writes Josipovici:

[I]f you can make the body fly just by wishing it, you can do anything – but by the same token you have done nothing. Kafka was looking for a form of art that would be true to all our desires – including the desire to escape the body – but would also be ready to examine these desires.<sup>1</sup>

If I have understood Josipovici correctly, magical realism fails if it is merely a form of escapism, if it does not interrogate the motivation and mechanics of the process. Icarus is the patron saint of magical realists who ignore reality. To put it another way; to write “with one bound he was free” does not suffice.

**Interviewer:** You mention South Americans and Indians. Is there such a thing as Jewish magical realism?

**Sinclair:** You mean: is magical realism kosher? Well, we are commanded never to mix milk and meat, or wool and linen, so the precedents are not good. Incidentally some say that the latter prohibition – *Shatnez* – is designed to avoid rekindling the fratricidal fury that caused Cain to slaughter Abel; Cain having offered flax – the origin of linen – to the Almighty, while Abel sacrificed a lamb – the

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1 Gabriel Josipovici, “It must end in the inexplicable,” (London) *TLS* (September 7, 2012): 7.

source of wool. But it seems to me that this same text – the *Tanach* – offers plenty of evidence that realism and magic do mix, being a melange of the heavenly and the quotidian.

*B'reshit*. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” Like the narrator of “Description of a Struggle,” God only has to say the words – “Let there be light” – and it is so. Great whales spring unmediated from the divine mind, followed by beasts of the earth, cattle, and finally male and female, created after His own image.

As a matter of fact, creation is such a success it is described twice. Chapter I is the macrocosmic version, short on close-ups, and reading like the overture to a nineteenth-century three-decker. Chapter II is the same, but in microcosm, focusing on a couple. Later we learn – *en passant* – that the male is called Adam, and the woman Eve. In Chapter I men and women are created simultaneously, and seemingly *en masse*: “male and female created He them.” But in Chapter II we are furnished with a great deal more detail: Adam is formed from the dust, and Eve is born of Adam’s rib. The procedure, as described, is a surgical delivery, but more ambitious than a caesarian, as you would expect when Jehovah is the obstetrician.

The created world too is distilled, and compressed into a single garden, *Gan Eden*, which is described with topographical nicety. We learn that it is irrigated by a single river, which later divides into four tributaries, one of which is the famous Euphrates; we learn that it contains trees, which are either pleasing to the eye, or bearers of nutritional fruit; we learn that Adam’s *raison d’être* is to be the garden’s custodian, and Eve’s to be Adam’s “help meet.” In this sense Adam is the chosen one; he is the prototype Jew.

Only one prohibition curtails Adam’s complete freedom: “of the tree of knowledge thou shalt not eat.” But the “subtil” serpent arouses Eve’s appetite, so that she recognizes the desirability of its fruit, eats of it, and persuades Adam to do likewise. Eve’s transgression is called (by Christians) the Original Sin, and Adam’s compliance, the Fall of Man. According to their doctrine God expels the errant pair because they have disobeyed Him, and in so doing invited evil to spoil the idyll. But this reading traduces the text. Evil is already latent, since the forbidden fruit contains knowledge of not only good but also evil. Moreover, God’s reason for the expulsion is occasioned by self-interest, as He freely admits: having eaten of the fruit “the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.” The implication of this, of course, is that death – like evil – was already afoot in the garden. But an immortal, with a working knowledge of evil, would be a dangerous rival indeed. In short, Eden wasn’t big enough for two gods. We die not because Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge, but because Adam didn’t have wit enough to sneak a quick bite from the tree of life.

Even if this episode does not contain the original sin, it is certainly the first story. I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the whole of Isaac Bashevis Singer's oeuvre is an off-shoot of seeds planted in the *Gan Eden*. Perhaps this is what I had in mind when I composed a story of my own, called "For Good or Evil." It is narrated by the tree of knowledge itself, and I like to kid myself that it meets Josipovici's exacting criteria. While still a seed the narrator struggles between incapacitating self-consciousness and instinct, but finally can resist the latter no longer, and – despite itself – begins its ascent. Once full-grown it is attracted to Eve, all her natural splendor fully revealed, but it takes the snake to sell her its fruit. The fates of Adam, Eve, and the beguiler are universally known, but that of the tree is recorded for the first time. It is felled by a flaming sword, pulped by God's mighty heel, and rolled into paper, upon which God begins to record the sum of His achievements. These are its concluding words: "Thus I, too, went into the world, for good or evil. The first book."<sup>2</sup>

**Interviewer:** I'm sure it's a wonderful story, but I'd like to push you a little further on your remarks about Singer. What did you mean by claiming that the whole of his work is engendered in *Genesis* Chapter II? And how can such a claim be justified?

**Sinclair:** Let's begin with the sexual politics; the dynamic between Adam and Eve. It is Eve who first falls for the lure of emancipation, and who leads Adam into temptation. Having tasted of the forbidden fruit first, she has the advantage of self-knowledge, knows that she is naked, and as such an object of desire. Adam, still innocent, has no idea why he is so easily manipulated. Singer's sons of Adam are all equally vulnerable, and having enjoyed their tumble, full of guilt and loathing toward their seductresses, and the lapsed world they represent. Some are so disgusted that they turn their backs upon it altogether, and return to the world of their fathers, where the cycle of prayer is unchanging.

But for the writer these devilish Eves, these Liliths, are essential; they are the *sine qua non* of story. Sans Eve there would have been no Bible; no Moses, no Joseph, no David, no Solomon; no stories, only prohibitions. And no Singer with his anguished songs of illicit pleasure and despair.

A close reading of his most famous story, "Gimpel the Fool," will provide evidence enough. Gimpel's foolishness consists of excessive credulity; that is, he believes every story his neighbors in Frampol feed him, including the one that rebrands the town whore, his bride-to-be, as a virgin. After twenty years of marriage Elka takes sick. On her death-bed she confesses to Gimpel that he is father

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2 Clive Sinclair, "For Good or Evil," in *For Good or Evil: Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1991): 272–275, 275.

to none of their children. She dies with a smile on her face, a smile of triumph (thinks Gimpel), as though to deceive him was the meaning of her brief life. But her lies have another purpose too; they have structured the story Gimpel is narrating. In effect she is a surrogate for Singer, a metaphor for the author.

When his spirits are at their lowest the devil comes to tempt Gimpel, arguing that paradise is yet another bill of goods. Won over by sulphureous sophistry Gimpel – the town baker – decides to revenge himself by peeing into the dough. But the spirit of his wife intervenes, and at last performs a good deed. Chastened by the description of her struggles in the world-to-come, Gimpel destroys the dough, quits Frampol, takes to the road, and embraces a new career: “Going from place to place, eating at strange tables, it often happens that I spin yarns – improbable things that could never have happened – about devils, magicians, windmills, and the like.”<sup>3</sup>

Gimpel’s late-life career-change is, in effect, the only legitimate offspring of his marriage to Elka. He even makes a living of sorts:

I wandered over the land, and good people did not neglect me. After many years I became old and white; I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods, but the longer I lived the more I understood that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn’t really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn’t happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year. What difference can it make? Often I heard tales of which I said, ‘Now this is a thing that cannot happen.’ But before a year had elapsed I heard that it actually had come to pass somewhere.<sup>4</sup>

In describing his working methods, Gimpel provides as good a definition of – and justification for – magical realism as you are ever likely to read. The male-female dynamic picks up another theme mooted in *Genesis*; that an Eve or an Elka – a touch of evil – is required to add friction to the slow moving wheels of the quotidian, and thereby create the unpredictable momentum of fiction.

Others have noted this strange requirement. For example, the necessity of evil enables Kabbalists to reconcile an omnipotent and merciful God with injustice and suffering. The credo is called *Tzimtzum*, and Singer provides the following definition:

God had to subdue His power and to dim His infinite light before he could create the Universe. Without this act creation would have been impossible because the light that emanated from God would have engulfed the Universe and caused it to disintegrate. Creation, like a painting

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3 Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Gimpel the Fool,” in *Gimpel the Fool*, trans. Saul Bellow and others (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006): 3–21, 21.

4 Singer, “Gimpel,” 21.

by an artist, must have both lights and shadows. The shadows are the source of all evil and the powers that hold creation together. When God created the world He had to create evil.<sup>5</sup>

Without it there would have been no world and no stories. “In other words,” Singer told Irving Howe, “the Cabala teaches us that Satan makes possible creation.” He then added: “I feel sometimes I am half a devil myself.”<sup>6</sup> The other half being a rabbi, of course.

So enamored was I with this concept that I called one of my own stories, “Tzimtzum.” It opens with the words, “Sometimes people act out of character.”<sup>7</sup> Actually the narrator is thinking of one person in particular: his wife, a teacher. Her uncharacteristic act is to become a local – and vocal – La Passionara, when semi-legit fascists attempt to hold a rally in her school. Later she acts out of character again when she commits adultery with one of her colleagues. More characteristic is her defense of a pupil – some urchin out of Caravaggio – caught molesting women in the neighborhood park. I suppose *Tzimtzum* resides in the interplay between characteristic and uncharacteristic behavior. Magical realism enters the picture in the last paragraphs when the narrator’s wife is raped in the park, whether by the angelic boy or the narrator acting uncharacteristically remains ambiguous. Either way, the rapist calls her a whore.

**Interviewer:** Isn’t this pathology made flesh, rather than magical realism per se?

**Sinclair:** No. On second thoughts, yes. Pathology made flesh is an apt definition of magical realism. It is certainly a way of empowering the powerless, turning the formerly disenfranchised into writers and righters of wrongs. And if you were to transport Gimpel’s descendants to a distant country – say America – and fill their heads with dreams of regeneration, you might get a more aggressive form of magical realism – a sort of advanced wish-fulfillment – so that Gimpel becomes Superman’s pacific grandpa.

**Interviewer:** I’d rather concentrate upon Singer, if it’s all the same to you. Can you expand upon the link between magical realism and Jewish mysticism? To what extent was Singer influenced by the Kabbalah?

**Sinclair:** A great extent, I’d wager. Back in 1978 – when I was in your role as the Grand Inquisitor – Singer explained to me why living in America had not diminished his belief in dybbuks, imps, and other demonic types: “I really believe that what we know about life is an infinitesimal part of life itself [...]” As his answer

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5 Isaac Bashevis Singer and Ira Moskowitz, *The Hasidim* (New York: Crown, 1973): 17.

6 Isaac Bashevis Singer and Irving Howe, “Yiddish Tradition vs. Jewish Tradition, A Dialogue,” (New York) *Midstream* (June/July 1973): 33–38, 35.

7 Clive Sinclair, “Tzimtzum,” in *For Good or Evil: Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1991): 167–181, 167.



progressed I recognized that he was sounding more and more like his creation, Gimpel the Fool:

Now, say, three hundred years ago no one would have believed that in a bit of mud there are millions of living microbes and bacteria. So many microbes in a little mud? And no one would have believed that electricity would be able to heat your room, to cool your room, to move your machines. For the last few hundred years so many powers have been discovered, so many [...] Children going to school five hundred years from now will know thousands of things which we today don't know, and which if somebody told us about then we would say, impossible. Every day impossible things become possible. So what we call actually supernatural means the things that we don't know today but we may know in the future.<sup>8</sup>

So, he concludes, referring back to the existence of ghosts and hobgoblins: "Today it is supernatural; it may one day be a part of nature."<sup>9</sup>

And yet as Dr. Ying Han points out, in her doctoral thesis, "A Study of Jewish Mysticism in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Works," whenever a character claims contact with mystical powers in his fiction, Singer invariably casts doubt: "all the seances in his novels and stories turn out to be shams."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it's as Herman Broder describes it in *Enemies: A Love Story*: "Those who doubt everything are also capable of believing everything."<sup>11</sup> A more elaborate variant is offered in the Preface to *A Little Boy in Search of God*: "In essence every mystic is a doubter. He is by nature a seeker. Mysticism and scepticism are not contradictory."<sup>12</sup> Another paradox, like magical realism itself.

It is as though Singer had internalized all the confusion and conflicts in his childhood home. His father, Pinchos Mendel, was descended from a long line of Chasidic rabbis, and sure enough became one himself. Bathsheba, Singer's mother, was no less devout, but her belief began in the head, not the heart. Her father was the headstrong Rabbi of Bilgoray, who counted himself among the *Mitnagdim*, or rationalists, fundamentally opposed to the ecstatic excesses of the Chasidim. Singer was one of four siblings; the older two – Hinde Esther and Israel Joshua – both became writers, whereas the younger – Moishe – became a mystic like his father. Pinchos Mendel's outlook was other-worldly, which meant he lacked the skills necessary to prosper in the real one. Bathsheba, more practical by far, did the best she could, but was limited by convention. In his memoir – *Of a*

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<sup>8</sup> Clive Sinclair, "My Brother and I: A Conversation with Isaac Bashevis Singer," (London) *Encounter* (February, 1979): 20–28, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Sinclair, "My Brother and I," 28.

<sup>10</sup> Ying Han, "A Study of Jewish Mysticism in Isaac Bashevis Singer's Works," Doctoral Thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University (2011): 150.

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies: A Love Story* (London: Penguin, 1996): 111.

<sup>12</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *A Little Boy in Search of God* (New York: Doubleday, 1976): ix.

*World That Is No More* – Israel Joshua speculates that the genders of his parents had been accidentally transposed in heaven, so that the paternal attributes had been placed in a woman's body, and the maternal into that of a man.<sup>13</sup>

His younger brother seconded that opinion, but with a certain unease, as any reader of his memoir, *In My Father's Court*, will recognize. In the episode entitled "Why the Geese Shrieked" a terrified congregant brings a brace of decapitated birds to Singer's father. She demonstrates the cause of her fear: when flung together the corpses howl. Equally terrified young Singer runs to his mother – not his father note – for protection. There is fear in Pinchos Mendel's eyes too, but also vindication, because he recognizes in this posthumous duet evidence that there are still "mysterious forces at work in the world."<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, Bathsheba's eyes betray no fear, "only something like sadness, and also anger." For her the dead geese are a challenge. If their cries are what they seem, then the belief of the Chasidim in miracles and wonders is sanctioned, and the rationalism of the Mitnagdim brought low. The realization fills her eyes "with something like shame." For her husband there can be but one explanation: the shrieks come from unbelievers at the gates of hell. Singer translates the look he gives Bathsheba as: "You take after *them*." In response her face grows "sullen, smaller, sharper." But then, like a madwoman, she laughs; a laugh that makes them all tremble anew. She asks the woman if the windpipes have been removed, is told they haven't, and sets to work extracting them. "On her face could be seen the wrath of the rationalist whom someone has tried to frighten in broad daylight." Watching her Pinchos Mendel's heart is chilled by the knowledge that "logic, cold logic, was again tearing down faith, mocking it, holding it up to ridicule and scorn." Bathsheba returns the geese to their owner, with the request that she whacks them together once again. Young as he is, Singer recognizes the crucial significance of the wager: "If the geese shrieked, Mother would have lost all: her rationalist's daring, her skepticism which she had inherited from her intellectual father." And yet, and yet. "Although I was afraid, I prayed inwardly that the geese would shriek, shriek so loud that people in the street would hear and come running." But the rest is only silence.

In that little scene – played out in a rabbi's kitchen – Singer seems to suggest that magic and realism are irreconcilable. Singer wants magic to triumph – who wouldn't? – but is compelled by crude science to accept a rational explanation. And when he becomes a writer he appends a version of his mother's name – Bashevis – to his own. Guided by her spirit, he exposes charlatans and others who

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<sup>13</sup> Israel Joshua Singer, *Of a World That Is No More* (New York: Vanguard, 1979): 29–30.

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *In My Father's Court* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966): 15.

claim to know God's wishes. But this is only half of Singer: as I have attempted to show in my analysis of "Gimpel the Fool," he is a binary character. And, as Dr. Ying Han shows in her thesis, he is beholden not only to Pinchos Mendel, but also to the texts that offer glimpses of a sphere outside known reality. Inspired by them, Singer seeks to smuggle magic into the quotidian, and by marrying magic and realism, thereby honor both his parents.

I discovered his work during those formative years when I first decided to set my hand to writing. In the late 1960s his books were not widely circulated in England, so it was not until I went to the University of California in 1969 that I found a whole shelf of his titles in Bookshop Santa Cruz. Magic, as well as the scent of marijuana, suffused the air in those days. On my very first visit to San Francisco, in the fall of that year, I had a Chinese meal with a young woman, and split my first Fortune Cookie. Inside was a strip of paper which read: "You have literary talent you should take pains to develop." I still have it, to confound the skeptics. After dinner we went back to her apartment on Hyde Street, where she played a record by a vocalist new to me: Buffy Sainte-Marie. The enchantress sang about vampires – the subject of my first short story, still two years in the future – and magic. "God is alive, magic is afoot," she sang (quoting Leonard Cohen), "God is afoot, magic is alive." While she sang the building shuddered, and my companion turned white, recognizing the signs of an earthquake (in fact the biggest in a couple of decades). In ignorance I listened on: "And mind itself is magic / Coursing through the flesh / And flesh itself is magic / Dancing on a clock / And time itself / the magic length of God."<sup>15</sup> It sounded beautiful. I didn't know what it meant, but I wanted it to be true. I was at an impressionable age.

Returning to Bookshop Santa Cruz I acquired a slimmed-down edition of the Zohar, which also made an impression. The Torah, I read, discloses her innermost secrets only to them who love her:

She knows that whosoever is wise in heart hovers near the gate of her dwelling place day after day. What does she do? From her palace, she shows her face to him, and gives him a signal of love, and forthwith retreats back to her hiding place. Only he alone catches her message, and is drawn to her with his whole heart and soul, and with all of his being. In this manner, the Torah, for a moment, discloses herself in love to her lovers, so as to rouse them to renewed love?

It proceeded to compare the acquisition of knowledge, textual familiarity, with disrobing a woman, progressing metaphorically from veil to veil, each one thinner than its predecessor, until all was revealed. Wow! That quote went straight

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<sup>15</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* [1966] (New York: Vintage, 1993): 157.

into my first novel, *Bibliosexuality*, which I began working on that same year, in obedience to the Fortune Cookie.<sup>16</sup>

**Interviewer:** This is academia, Mr. Sinclair, not Chinatown. No offense to Dr. Ying Han, of course. Perhaps you could enlighten us as to the exact nature of her thesis, explain just how the metaphysics of the Kabbalah underpin Singer's fiction?

**Sinclair:** May I remind you that I have already introduced the concept of *Tzimtzum*? But I'll concede that Dr. Ying Han is considerably more knowledgeable on the subject than me. In fact she begins by acknowledging an even greater expert than us both. I am referring, of course, to Gershom Scholem. Dr. Ying Han accepts his division of Jewish mysticism into unequal parts; pre and post expulsion from Spain. The second period further triplicates into Lurianic Kabbalah of the sixteenth century, Sabbatianism of the seventeenth, and Chasidism of the eighteenth. According to Dr. Ying Han, this trio – both holy and unholy – had the most profound influence upon Singer.

Lurianic Kabbalah derives its name from Rabbi Isaac Luria, a sort of Jewish Socrates, in that he left no written legacy. His Plato was Rabbi Chaim Vital, who recorded his *zugerts* or sayings. It was Luria who first dreamed up the concept of *Tzimtzum*, basing it upon an earlier Kabbalistic accommodation of evil. In the new version of creation, the ten attributes of God – the *Sefirot* – were poured into *kelim* or vessels, until they were filled with divine light, but the smaller of the vessels were not fitted to contain it; overwhelmed, they overflowed and cracked. Mankind's duty, in the "finale of this vast cosmic drama" (as Dr. Ying Han calls it), is to repair the damage; *tikkun olam*, to heal the world.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, as everyone knows, Singer's heroes prove incapable of healing themselves, let alone the world. They are walking embodiments of *Tzimtzum*, wherein devils and angels battle it out, the former ably assisted by latter-day Liliths.

As a matter of fact, Lurianic Kabbalah often displays the ten attributes of God in the form of a man. His left arm is tattooed with the words *Binah*, *Gevurah*, and *Hod*; on his right are *Hokhmah*, *Hesed*, and *Netzah*. The middle line, beginning above his head, consists of *Keter* (a crown), *Da'at*, *Tiferet*, *Yesod*, and *Maikhut*. Now it happens that the words on the right side – the side of *Hesed* – represent unfettered energy, while those on the side of *Gevurah* represent restraint. The middle line stands for harmony. Did Freud know of this model when he invented his own trio: the id, the ego, and the super-ego? Is psychoanalysis more real and

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16 Clive Sinclair, *Bibliosexuality* (London: Allison & Busby, 1973): 75.

17 Ying Han, "Jewish Mysticism," 39.

less magical than the Kabbalah? Is the id and the ego easier to touch than *Hesed* and *Gevurah*? And which system helps us better understand the malfunctions of the world, and the characters with which Singer peoples it?

The chief villains of his books (murderous antisemites excepted) tend to be those who – like Sabbatai Zevi – try to second-guess divinity and hasten the end of days. They see themselves as the right arm of God. Their impatient passion generally manifests itself as political zealotry or sexual frankness, often both. The sole antidote to overflowing desire, to human excess, that Singer allows is religion, specifically the Chasidism of his father. Only in that community, constrained by ritual and commandment, can the individual live life in a self-respecting and godly manner. The trouble is that a life repressed by God's left hand lacks buzz; cannot compete with Storyville, that region where Singer became a crowned head.

Dr. Ying Han illustrates her presentation with an excellent analysis of an uncharacteristic Singer tale, "Short Friday," in which he translates these Kabbalistic concepts into that rare thing (for him), a couple in perfect harmony. Though one not blessed with children: he is a tailor, but no craftsman, she a housewife. Both are devout, but neither is scholarly. Their lives are simple, but loving and content. The eponymous day – the shortest Friday of the year – begins – as every day does – with Shmul-Leibele thanking God for life's continuance. The remainder of the day is a progression of thanksgiving, in which love for God must take precedence over his love for Shoshe. Even in the matrimonial bed, Shmul-Leibele knows that – despite his urge to seek immediate satisfaction – he must postpone copulation until words of affection have been spoken. He must praise his wife's breasts, before he can touch them. "Shmuel-Leibele and his wife love each other deeply and affectionately," observes Dr. Ying Han, "but their passion is under restraint of laws, as *Hesed* (infinite love), is balanced with *Gevurah* (law)."<sup>18</sup> The Kabbalah proposes that such congress, performed in accordance with holy writ, may "catalyze the union of God and His beloved."<sup>19</sup> God's beloved is Shekhinah, the divine presence, exiled from the Promised Land since the destruction of the Temple. Even as ordinary a tailor as Shmul-Leibele and his equally ordinary wife can, Dr. Ying Han asserts, "induce the supernal union in the divine realm," can reunite – albeit temporarily – God and Shekhinah.<sup>20</sup> Their reward? To die in conjugal bliss, having been suffocated by fumes from the stove. Their bodies may have been returned to dust, concludes Singer, but their souls have ascended unto

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<sup>18</sup> Ying Han, "Jewish Mysticism," 88.

<sup>19</sup> Ying Han, "Jewish Mysticism," 89.

<sup>20</sup> Ying Han, "Jewish Mysticism," 89.

paradise. “Short Friday” is *Genesis* without the talking snake. And without the talking snake there is no magic. This is the paradox that lies at the heart of magical realism, not to mention human existence.

**Interviewer:** I don’t recollect any talking snakes in Dickens or Tolstoy, nor in Scott Fitzgerald or Chekhov. How on earth did they manage to instruct and entertain without such uncanny devices? And if you want to stick with Jews, Saul Bellow – who translated “Gimpel the Fool” – also seemed to manage well enough without.

**Sinclair:** You haven’t been listening properly. Let me remind you of Professor Josipovici’s comments on Kafka; that a writer cannot fly without first explaining how and why. Then if he can somehow summon the imaginative energy for propulsion, actual take-off isn’t required. In this context, one could say that the words themselves become snakeskin. Think of Ramona in *Herzog*:

At this moment Ramona appeared. She thrust the door open and stood, letting him see her in the lighted frame of the bathroom tile. She was perfumed and, to the hips, she was naked. On her hips she wore the black lace underthing, that single garment low on her belly. She stood on spike-heeled shoes, three inches high. Only those, and the perfume and lipstick.<sup>21</sup>

Eve, or what? But in terms of the Kabbalah she is Herzog’s Torah, ready (to paraphrase the words of the Zohar) to disclose herself in love to her lover, so as to rouse him to renewed love.

In Singer’s *Satan in Goray* the identification between the distressed heroine – Rechele, an orphan, raised by her uncle, the town’s *shochet* or ritual slaughterer – and the scrolls is made explicit. Singer writes that when the poor girl collapses in the prayer-house, having just delivered prophetic utterances, she is lifted through the crowd, “as though she were the sacred Torah.” Lest the identification is incomplete, Singer adds: “Some even touched her with their fingertips as she passed and bore their fingers to their lips, as when a scroll is taken from the Ark.”<sup>22</sup>

Of course in 1935 – the year in which *Satan in Goray* was first published – no one had heard of magical realism. But it is hard to think of a better way to categorize the novel. It certainly begins as if it were a chronicle, or historical document, with the words: “In the year 1648.” Why 1648? That was the year in which Bogdan Chmielnicki led a revolt of Ukrainian peasants against their Polish overlords. Their behavior towards the Jews has been rationalized – the Jews were

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<sup>21</sup> Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965): 203.

<sup>22</sup> Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Satan in Goray* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1955): 157. Further references in the text, abbreviated as “SG.”

the creatures of the aristocrats, for example – but the irrational obviously played a bigger part in the killings, as it always does. Let us just say that contagious homicidal mania caused the death of about 100,000 Jews, and the destruction of the 300 or so communities in which they lived. These are the events that four-word opening sentence encompasses, corrals.

Thus, by the time the novel starts the town in which it is set – Goray – is already a ruin. Cossacks have massacred its men, and violated its women. Nor does the degradation cease there; having used the women they “ripped open their bellies and sewed cats inside” (*SG*, 4). Savage dogs, meanwhile, feast upon dismembered limbs. After these events the critical faculties of the survivors are – needless to say – severely handicapped; having witnessed such unspeakable horrors, nothing seems unimaginable or beyond the realm of possibility. If the devil can dance in their streets, why not God?

Alas, Satan likes Goray too well. His chosen partner is poor Rechele. Already subject to fits, she becomes the battleground between good and evil, the sacred and the profane. The sacred is all face, the profane a shape-shifter. The former belongs to the town’s rabbi, Benish Ashkenazi. As it happens, Singer’s maternal grandfather was the righteous Rabbi of Bilgoray, whose stern judgments all respected and feared. Rabbi Benish Ashkenazi, his fictional counterpart, is but a pale reflection; a leader whose faith and power has been shaken by the catastrophe that has befallen his community. In truth, he no longer retains the power to shield Rechele. Against him are protean forces – some in the guise of hairy and naked men – who violate Rechele, causing her to swell, vomit reptiles, bark like a dog, and moo like a cow.

Into this world of lost souls – into this post-1648 chaos – come messengers with news that their sufferings have been but the birth pangs of the Messiah, and that a man, Sabbatai Zevi, has arisen to fulfill their longings for redemption. A traveller from the Yemen reports to Rabbi Benish’s congregation that the

Great Fish that lurks in the river Nile had succumbed at the hands of Sabbatai Zevi [...]. In Miron a fiery column has been seen stretching from earth to heaven [...]. The full name of God and of Sabbatai Zevi were scratched on it in black [...]. The women who divine by consulting drops of oil have seen the crown of King David on Sabbatai Zevi’s head. (*SG*, 42)

Benish banishes the Yemenite, knowing full well that the Messiah will only appear “in God’s own time,” and that any attempt to “force the Lord” will only bring about disaster. But the damage has been done. A local Kabbalist proclaims, “Benish, the dog, denies the Messiah!” (*SG*, 49).

After the Yemenite comes Reb Itche Mates. Rabbi Benish is warned that his history is that of a forger and a seducer:

In every town he comes to he speaks upon the heart of some woman to join him in the bond of matrimony, but his purpose is to make her unclean and to give her a bad name. For after the marriage his wives all move away from him, because of his ugly ways; from too much magic working, he has himself been caught in the web, and no longer has the strength to act the man's part. (SG, 91)

But the rabbi is powerless to stop even the betrothal. As he rushes to her house a tempest tosses him in the air and smashes him down so that his bones shatter. Exit Rabbi Benish.

As predicted, Reb Itche Mates fails to consummate the marriage, and is usurped by the satanic Reb Gedaliya, who informs the people of Goray that the world has been turned upside-down, that princes and kings now come to prostrate themselves before the Jews, on account of Sabbatai Zevi, who has been universally accepted as the Messiah. Now that the End of Days had come, explained Reb Gedaliya, men were permitted to know strange women: "Such encounters might even be considered a religious duty; for each time a man and woman unite they form a mystical combination and promote a union between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Divine Presence" (SG, 147). In such a way does Reb Gedaliya traduce the sensual but constrained acts of Shmul-Leibele and his loving wife.

With every passing day Reb Gedaliya encourages more license, at the same time as silencing his opponents, burning books, and even resorting to violence. Nor does the news that Sabbatai Zevi has converted to Islam embarrass him in the least: "This dog barks lies and deceit. Not Sabbatai Zevi, but Sabbatai Zevi's shadow was converted. There is an explicit passage in the Zohar! The Messiah has ascended to Heaven! He will soon descend and redeem us" (SG, 194). Finally, he declares that the generation welcoming the Messiah must be utterly sinful.

It is his wretched ornament, poor put-upon Rechele, who pays for his sins. A dybbuk enters her and sports with her body in the most shameful of ways – none of which the reader is spared – until he is done with her, whereupon the evil spirit exits "in a flash of fire from that same place," in a gross parody of birth. I suspect Singer experienced certain misgivings about causing Rechele such undeserved humiliation and degradation. Perhaps that is why he chose to deliver the novel's horrid climax in the form of a witness statement, as if to absolve himself and his imagination of responsibility. It shows that from the first Singer knew perfectly well that the form of magical realism he practiced was indeed unkosher. As I have tried to explain, such mixed feelings, such misgivings, remained with him throughout his career. But there was no denying the fact that his inclinations resembled those of Reb Gedaliya. He knows that it is wrong, but he cannot resist what his father called "sweetened poison," the forbidden fruit of literature, in which evil – as it was in the creation of the world – becomes a *necessary* evil.



Throughout *Satan in Goray* there is a tension between restraint and license; between Rabbi Benish and Reb Gedaliya, of course, but also between the Talmud, which teaches by reason and example, and the Kabbalah, which seeks knowledge through intuition and poetic imagery. These, in turn, lead to the disciplined mind, and the unrestrained imagination. As a writer, Singer feeds upon the unrestrained imagination; in short, he uses the same devices to ensnare the reader as the disciples of Sabbatai Zevi use to enrapture their hearers. But at his back Singer could always hear the hooves of the Cossacks hurrying near, not to mention the jackboots of the Nazis. Like it or not, Hitler also practiced a form of magical realism.

**Interviewer:** Really, Dr. Sinclair! Let me be frank. I know the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer inside out, and I have familiarized myself with one of your novels: *Blood Libels*, in fact. In my opinion it is not magical, barely realistic, and – according to Singer – not Jewish either. Perhaps you are familiar with his response to a question about Jewish writers:

To me there are only Yiddish writers, Hebrew writers, English writers, Spanish writers. The whole idea of a Jewish writer, a Catholic writer, is kind of far-fetched to me. But if you force me to admit that there is such a thing as a Jewish writer, I would say that he is a man who is really immersed in Jewishness, who knows Hebrew, Yiddish, the Talmud, the Midrash, the Hassidic literature, the Cabbala, and so forth. And if he writes, in addition, about Jews and Jewish history and Jewish life, we can call him a Jewish writer. We can also call him just a writer. But a writer who happens to be Jewish and writes in English, is an English writer; if he writes in Spanish, he's a Spanish writer; or in French, a French writer.<sup>23</sup>

By this definition Singer is a Jewish writer, and you are not. Furthermore, your novel, if I may say so, is not the work of an original mind, but the bastard child of better mens' books. Everything about it is second-hand, not simply its Jewishness. And its shocks are the shocks of a frightened child. In my opinion your entire oeuvre is juvenilia.

**Sinclair:** Well, you are certainly right to characterize the author of *Blood Libels* as a scare-baby. I've always identified with the boy referred to at the beginning of "The Turn of the Screw," who upon waking from a nightmare, calls for his mother, not that she might comfort him, but that she might share his fear. Of what was I frightened? Let's begin with my innards, and work out from there. In particular I was frightened of what I called my devilish kidneys; presciently, as it turned out. I was right to predict a civil war among my organs.

My less self-interested fear concerned the future of Israel. As I saw it in the early 1980s, Ariel Sharon – architect of Israel's disastrous invasion of Lebanon –

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<sup>23</sup> Harold Flender, "An Interview with Isaac Bashevis Singer," in *Isaac Bashevis Singer: Conversations*, ed. Grace Farrell (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992): 36–48, 36.

was a dictator-in-waiting. If only, [...]. Things have deteriorated so badly since then, that now he seems more like Israel's King Arthur, slumbering on until – at the moment of greatest danger – he receives the call to save his nation, to save it from those who have replaced his brutal empiricism with an even more brutal ideology.

However, you would be right to characterize the destruction of Anglo-Jewry by the arch-fiend Bruno Gascoyne and his crazed followers, the Children of Albion, as a fictional device, not a paranoid fantasy magically made real; one that grew from the demands of the story, not my deepest fears. And you would also be right to recognize in its finale a debt to Isaac Bashevis Singer – one of your better men – whose description of pogroms in *Satan in Goray* served as an inspiration for my own. Nor, God help us, are they far-fetched, anything other than real. Only this morning I heard on the *BBC World Service* that Syrian Army irregulars had introduced rats and mice into the vaginas of women they had just raped.

No doubt you will see this admission as less than an expression of gratitude, and more of an attempt to shift the moral responsibility for a diseased imagination to another. So let me make it clear; I plead guilty for every word I have ever written. And I would like to add – in my own defense – that some combinations, whole paragraphs even, show evidence of beauty, even originality.

In particular, I should like to take credit for what the narrator of *Blood Libels* calls the “psychosomatic approach to history.”<sup>24</sup> Seeing the macrocosm in his own hypochondria, he introduces the concept thus:

Just as the mind, knowing the symptoms, has no need of bacillus or virus to counterfeit an illness, so history does not need facts to proceed. What people believe to have happened is more important than what actually did. Without a shred of evidence Gascoyne has persuaded the British to accept the ancient libels and forced the government to set up a Commission of Inquiry. In the meantime his followers continue to kill Jews with impunity, convinced they are purging the body politic. My own body, I may add, is still plagued by the flu virus, against which it seems to have no resistance.

Thereby leaving open the possibility that the events he has just described are not real, but the product of a feverish mind, and a febrile imagination.

But “ambiguity” is not a strong enough word to encompass what I hope to achieve when I write. Allow me to echo Coleridge, who wrote of his ambition, “to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of

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24 Clive Sinclair, *Blood Libels* (London: Allison & Busby, 1985): 188.

disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”<sup>25</sup> I too would wish to create in my readers a semblance of that poetic faith.

Once I wrote a story called “Bedbugs,” in which an Anglo-Jewish lecturer teaches a course on World War I poetry to a class of German students.<sup>26</sup> Because he is Jewish, and they are German, he takes a perverse pleasure in focusing on the work of Isaac Rosenberg. During a bout of illicit intercourse with the most attractive of the females, some lines from Rosenberg’s “Louse Hunting” enter his mind unbidden. In early drafts they remained just that: words. Then my imagination gave me a push, and pointed out that they would be much better spoken by Rosenberg’s ghost. And so he appears to the adulterous lecturer, dressed for the trenches, as the former plunges his bayonet of flesh into Inge. I have discussed this story on numerous occasions. Many have found fault with it, but no one has yet said, “But Mr. Sinclair, there are no such things as ghosts.”

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25 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, eds. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984): 6.

26 Clive Sinclair, “Bedbugs,” in *Bedbugs* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982): 9–21.

Sue Vice

## Universalism and Symbolism in Holocaust Fiction

*This article analyzes three novels from the 1960s, each of which adopts a symbolist approach to the events of the Holocaust. While Haim Gouri's novel *The Chocolate Deal* (1965) focuses on the reactions of survivors to the immediate post-war world, Jiří Weil's *Life With a Star* (1964) represents the life of a man in what is clearly occupied Prague, and Piotr Rawicz's *Blood from the Sky* (1961) details the efforts of its protagonist to evade the Nazis in Ukraine. None of these novels details the universe of the concentration camps, each eschews specific historical detail and ends ambiguously, in a way that has led critics to argue that their concern is philosophical and that they depict the existential plight of humans in an indifferent universe. I argue that, on the contrary, the location and psychology of the novels' protagonists gives apparently absurd symbolism a historically specific content.*

In this article, I analyze three examples of Holocaust fiction, all of which have been critically feted yet are also practically neglected: Haim Gouri's *The Chocolate Deal* (1965), Jiří Weil's *Life With a Star* (1964) and Piotr Rawicz's *Blood from the Sky* (1961).<sup>1</sup> While Weil's work has a champion in the form of Philip Roth and Rawicz the critical advocacy of Anthony Rudolf,<sup>2</sup> Gouri's work has yet to find a mentor of this kind. I argue that this combination of high regard with actual disdain can be ascribed to the novels' ambivalent generic status, one that arises from style as well as content. One of these novels was written by an Israeli who worked with displaced persons after the war, the other two by Holocaust survivors; however, none takes a testimonial or conventionally realist approach to the events of the

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1 For instance, Haim Gouri's journalism but not his fiction is mentioned in David G. Roskies and Naomi Diamant, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis UP, 2012); in her review of Weil's *Life With a Star* Hilary Daninhirsch refers to the author as "one of the most remarkable Jewish writers that you've never heard of," *Jewish Chronicle* (September 10, 2011); and although Rawicz is praised in passing, his work has not been analyzed by such critics of Holocaust literature as Lawrence Langer: see Sue Vice, "Fascination et malaise: La réception du *Sang du ciel* au Royaume-Uni et aux États Unis," in *Un ciel de sang et de cendres: Piotr Rawicz et la solitude du témoin*, eds. Anny Dayan Rosenman and Fransiska Louwagie (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2013): 111–129.

2 See Philip Roth's preface to Jiří Weil, *Life With a Star*, trans. Rita Klímová with Roslyn Schloss (London: Flamingo, 1988); and Anthony Rudolf's new edition of the English-language translation of Piotr Rawicz, *Blood from the Sky*, trans. Peter Wiles (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2004).