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Introduction

The Vanishing Jew: On Teaching Bellow's *Seize the Day* as Ethnic Fiction

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The secular Jew is a figment; when a Jew becomes a secular person he is no longer a Jew. This is especially true for makers of literature.
 – Cynthia Ozick¹

Even when he succeeds in detaching himself fairly completely from Jewish life, [the Jewish writer] continues to exhibit all of the restless, agonizing rootlessness that is the Jew's birthmark.
 – Irving Howe²

This whole Jewish writer business is sheer invention – by the media, by critics and by “scholars.”
 – Saul Bellow³

A FEW YEARS AGO, visiting at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, I taught *Seize the Day* in an introductory undergraduate course on “The American Novel.” The students, mostly native and immigrant Israeli Jews, had already read a number of “standard” American works – Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* – and we were closing the course with two “ethnic” texts, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (which we had just finished) and Bellow's short novel. The idea was to acquaint these Israeli students not only with selected works of American fiction but also with the culture of the American academy, to recreate for them the multiculturalist challenge that has invigorated American literary study in recent years, leading us to reformulate canons and, even more important, to re-examine critical assumptions about the relationship between culture and imagination. The strategy for discussing *Seize the Day* was to begin with the series of familiar Americanist oppositions

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that we had already raised in relation to the other novels – romance and realism, past and present, success and failure, material and spiritual, alienation and commitment, individual and community – and then to proceed to the “Jewish” question, to see if and how it changed our view of the novel.

I have to admit that I recall very little about the first part of the discussion. I suppose it went predictably. No doubt we compared Tommy Wilhelm’s spiritual struggle to that of Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, his financial fall to that of Howells’ Lapham, his “drowning” to that of Melville’s Pip. And so on. A lively discussion with a group of bright and interested students, locating Tommy in a history of American literary characters and *Seize the Day* in “the great tradition” of American novels.⁴

But I do remember well what happened when I asked, “Is this a work of ethnic literature? Is this a *Jewish* as well as an American novel?” The students were uniformly, resolutely skeptical. Some even seemed surprised at the question. They knew, to be sure, that Bellow himself was Jewish. They realized as well that all the characters in the story were nominally Jewish – Adler, Rubin, Perls, Rappaport, Tamkin. Most noticed the passing reference to Yom Kippur and caught the few allusions to the Holocaust. And yes, Tommy’s grandfather called him by the Yiddish name Velvel. Still, they judged, *Seize the Day* was not a Jewish novel, at least not in the way *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was African American. Hurston plunges the reader into a fictional world in which ethnicity is palpable, a world rich in Black dialect and folkways. But the ethnicity of *Seize the Day* seemed to them at most incidental.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised at the response. After all, most students (and teachers, too) judge the ethnicity of literary works in a straightforward, no-nonsense way. They usually employ two simple criteria. First, the author must belong to the ethnic group in question. Second, the work must display recognizable ethnic content: most important, the ethnic identity of the characters should be clear. Saul Bellow’s Jewishness is a genealogical fact. And so, in a fictional sense, is Tommy Wilhelm’s. However, Tommy doesn’t look Jewish or sound Jewish. He doesn’t speak Hebrew or Yiddish. He doesn’t eat Jewish food,

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and he has a non-Jewish girlfriend. (It's unclear whether his wife is Jewish.) He *forgets* Yom Kippur and recalls the Holocaust only in passing. He only vaguely recalls the Jewish prayer for the dead. And he never mentions Israel. The first time a substantive Jewish issue is raised in relation to Tommy – a full two-thirds of the way into the novel, Dr. Tamkin asks him whether he has experienced antisemitism as a traveling salesman – he responds, “I can’t afford to notice.”⁵ A vague sense of longing (or belonging) remains, but one would be pressed even to call it nostalgia. He does not even actively *reject* Judaism. The reason he drops his Jewish family name is not so much to escape Jewishness as a father “who has no religion” (86). “By definition,” writes Sam Girgus, and my students would certainly agree, “the ethnic novel dramatizes group identity and connection.”⁶ But Tommy’s Jewishness doesn’t even seem to be at issue. It is only – emphatically *only* – a genealogical fact. So from the students’ point of view, the novel had no ethnic content. Hence, it could not be considered Jewish.

Yet I was taken aback by the students’ reaction. Bellow, after all, is *supposed* to be a Jewish novelist. He’s *supposed* to write Jewish fiction. Since his first appearance on the American literary scene in the mid-forties, Bellow has been labeled and celebrated as such. (Much to his chagrin: “People who make labels,” he has commented, “should be in the gumming business.”⁷) Critic after critic has commented – often with unbridled enthusiasm – on the Jewish influences on Bellow’s work, the Jewishness of his characters and settings, of his language, of his thought and vision. Indeed, for many, he is the quintessential Jewish-American novelist. Alfred Kazin, Bellow’s contemporary and long-time admirer, assures us that Bellow is “fascinated and held by the texture of Jewish experience,” that the fascination “follow[s] from some deep cut in [his] mind,” and that he thus “has been able to personify the Jew in all his *mental* existence, to fit ancient preconceptions to our urban landscape, to create the suffering, reaching, grasping, struggling mind of contemporary Jews.”⁸ L. H. Goldman, co-editor of the *Saul Bellow Journal*, even asks us to believe, not only that “Saul Bellow’s perspective is unmistakably Jewish,” but that “the philosophy of Judaism is

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part and parcel of [Bellow's] very being and manifests itself in the kind of writing he produces."⁹

Certainly there are other approaches to Bellow's work. Scholars have hardly restricted themselves to questions of Bellow's Jewishness – as evidenced in this volume by Sam Girgus, a scholar with impressive Jewish-ist and ethnicist credentials, who nevertheless contributes an ethnicity-neutral, psycho-cinematic reading of *Seize the Day*. (Intriguingly, however, Girgus does turn at the end of his essay to a description of elderly *Jewish* bodies in "an uptown New York Auschwitz.") And some who do deal with the ethnic question – from Maxwell Geismar writing in 1958 to Emily Budick in these pages – find his Jewishness (such as it is) neither impressive nor appealing.¹⁰ Still, I found the chasm between critical claims and student perceptions puzzling, to say the least. How could *Seize the Day* be both "a powerful Jewish work" and hardly Jewish at all?¹¹

I decided to press the issue of palpable ethnicity, choosing one of the scenes toward the end of the novella in which Jewishness is presented clearly and directly. "What, then," I asked, "do you make of this passage?" I picked up my well-thumbed copy of the book and read aloud:

But Tamkin was gone. Or rather, it was he himself who was carried from the street into the chapel. The pressure ended inside, where it was dark and cool. The flow of fan-driven air dried his face, which he wiped hard with his handkerchief to stop the slight salt itch. He gave a sigh when he heard the organ notes that stirred and breathed from the pipes and he saw people in the pews. Men in formal clothes and black Homburgs strode softly back and forth on the cork floor, up and down the center aisle. The white of the stained glass was like mother-of-pearl, the blue of the Star of David like velvet ribbon.¹²

Why, I asked, at this crucial, dramatic moment in the narrative, as Wilhelm is about to undergo *something* – catharsis, revelation, communion, breakdown – does Bellow insist on placing that Star of David in full view of hero and reader?

Silence. I noticed the students looking at each other, puzzled. Had they missed the reference? Were they rethinking their assumptions? Finally, one student raised her hand and said, "My

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book doesn't say that. My last line is different." Murmuring, heads shaking in assent. I asked her to read her version. "The white of the stained glass was like mother-of-pearl, *with the blue of a great star fluid*, like velvet ribbon" (116, emphasis added).

Serendipity. A quick flip to copyright pages, and, in bare outline, a textual history emerged. My edition – the only one I had ever used – contained the original *Partisan Review* version of 1956, theirs, a version "with author's corrections," first published in 1975. Bellow, we discovered, had revised the text of *Seize the Day*. And he had muted the presence of what is arguably the most recognizable and powerful emblem of Jewishness in modern times.

It was *as if* the Star of David had disappeared before our very eyes. At that pedagogic moment it *seemed* that the students' initial impression had been confirmed by literary-historical fact. (Both Hana Wirth-Nesher and Emily Budick offer in their essays in this volume strong, substantive readings of Bellow's revision. I deal here only with impressions and classroom dynamics.) We might try to explain Bellow's modification in simple aesthetic terms – considering Tommy's confused, anxious state of mind at this point in the narrative, the substitution of subtle description for direct naming makes psychological sense – but it nevertheless *seemed* at the moment that when he revised the text Bellow made a not particularly Jewish story even *less* particularly Jewish, less palpably ethnic.

I realize that these students were not typical in their attitudes toward Jewishness, that they were, in the eighteenth-century sense of the term, *interested*. After all, "Jewish" was the fabric out of which the national life of these students was woven – their language, their sense of history, their calendar. *They* could not forget Yom Kippur because, whether or not they personally fast or go to synagogue, the State officially recognizes Yom Kippur as a national holiday: Schools, businesses, public transportation, all shut down. They couldn't help but recall the Holocaust when, every year on Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day, sirens sound throughout the country and millions of people stand for a moment in solemn silence, mourning the six million dead. Moreover, this was a group of students keenly sensitive to the appear-

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ance – and disappearance – of the Star of David. For them, it was not only a religious but a potent political symbol. Most had served under it, in defense of a state whose very existence was an emphatic expression of unembarrassed, uncontingent Jewishness. Whatever their political or religious beliefs, they were (most of them) Jews in a Jewish state. They understood, to be sure, that “Jewish” could have many different meanings, that it could be – that it *was* – a matter of debate, of confrontation: Israeli society is entrenched in a culture war, not against its Arab neighbors but an internecine war, Jew against Jew. Indeed, in Jerusalem in particular, they were confronted daily with many contending versions of “Jewish,” religious, cultural, political. But in Israel, all Jews – secular and religious, hawks and doves, Ashkenazi and Sepharadi – identify themselves *deliberately* as Jews. Tommy Wilhelm’s secularity was another story, however: His evanescent Jewishness, his attenuated relationship to religious ritual and national fate, just didn’t seem Jewish to them in any substantial way. “Jewish” could not be its absence. From an Israeli point of view, Tommy seemed rather to exemplify the antithesis of Jewishness. He was the assimilated American Jew, a familiar, quasi-mythic figure of Jewish demographic studies – disaffected, intermarrying, disappearing. (“There are probably few more assimilated Jewish characters in American literature,” writes Emily Budick, “than Tommy Wilhelm.”) He was Jewishly, to borrow Cynthia Ozick’s term, a “figment.” The disappearance of the Star of David seemed to symbolize for them the sociological phenomenon of the vanishing American Jew.¹³

To ask Israeli Jews to evaluate the Jewishness of a fictional American character or author is to risk blurring the distinction between nationality and ethnicity. The truth is, however, that student reactions to *Seize the Day* are similarly skeptical in the United States. In California, students have wondered about, and even challenged, my inclusion of the novel in courses on Jewish-American literature, not because they share the Israeli sense of Jewishness, but because they also believe that ethnicity should be palpable. In our multiculturalist times, we tend to prefer our ethnic fare well-seasoned with definitive markers of cultural difference: the ghetto, the barrio, the reservation; Yiddish, Spanish,

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Black English; a yarmulke, a kimono; klezmer, jazz, salsa; knishes, black-eyed peas, fried rice – markers that distinguish ethnic characters from their nonethnic “American” compatriots. We read ethnic literature, we have revised our canons, because we recognize, respect, and value the differences among peoples. We *expect* group differences and want them to be clearly manifest in the texts produced by group members. Why else study ethnic literature *as* ethnic literature? So when those expectations are not met, we are frustrated, perhaps a bit offended. And *Seize the Day* seems to offer very little of these sorts of otherness. Bellow does not cater to these tastes.

Indeed, he actively discourages them, both in general and, especially, in regard to himself. He bemoans the “ethnic protectionism” of the contemporary academy, regarding it as inhibiting freedom of thought and constraining freedom of expression. (He has written an adulatory preface to Allan Bloom’s controversial, anti-multiculturalist critique of the academy, *The Closing of the American Mind*.) And he has always been rather edgy about being considered a Jewish writer, calling the label “an implied put down.”¹⁴ Not that he denies or belittles either cultural differences or the *fact* of his Jewishness. “I’m well aware,” he has announced time and again, “of being Jewish.”¹⁵ He claims that he is painfully conscious of what that identity brings with it, particularly in the twentieth century. “Many have tried to rid themselves in one way or another of this dreadful historic load, by assimilation or other means,” he has said, “but I myself have not been tempted.”¹⁶ Still, he refuses to accept ethnicity as a sufficient definition. His soul, he has written, “does not feel comfortably accommodated” in “the Jewish-writer category.” To be sure, most of his characters, as in *Seize the Day*, are at least nominally Jewish, and many others, as in *Herzog* (1964) and “The Old System” (1967), more palpably so. He has written one book explicitly concerning antisemitism (*The Victim*, 1947) and one about the Holocaust (*Mr. Sammler’s Planet*, 1970). He has translated stories from Yiddish (Sholom Aleichem’s “Eternal Life” and Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool,” both 1953) and edited *Great Jewish Short Stories* (1963). He has written journalistic accounts of the Six Day War and of the Begin-Sadat peace treaty

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and has published a book-length memoir of one of his stays in Israel (*To Jerusalem and Back*, 1976). He accepted the Bnai Brith Jewish Heritage Award in 1968 (as well as the Anti-Defamation League's "America's Democratic Legacy" Award in 1976). Yet, although he claims never to have betrayed his history, he asserts adamantly that he has "never consciously written as a Jew," that he writes only as Saul Bellow, "a person of Jewish origin – American and Jewish – who has had a certain experience of life, which is in part Jewish," but also American, Russian, son-of-immigrants, male, twentieth-century, Midwestern, hockey-fan, and so on. "I simply must deal with the facts of my life – as a basic set of primitive facts. They're my given."¹⁷

His given, not his goal; his point of origin, not his purpose. In part, Bellow's rejection of the "Jewish writer" label stems from the perception that the American Jewish community was trying to enlist him in its cause. "Since the holocaust," he explains, "[Jews] have become exceptionally sensitive to the image the world has of them" and they "feel that the business of a Jewish writer in America is to write public relations releases, to publicize everything that is nice in the Jewish community and to suppress the rest, loyally."¹⁸ Indeed, he writes, some "Jewish writers [have] bent over backwards just because there was this pressure put on them." But Bellow has determinedly resisted the pressure. He would not, he says, sacrifice artistic integrity in the name of "public relations." He would not agree to produce deliberately "a pleasing impression of Jewish life."¹⁹ He would not, as we say nowadays, be politically correct. "In that respect," he concludes, "I was a great disappointment to them."²⁰ He sees these sorts of restrictions on literature as of a piece with the programmatic demands that totalitarian regimes make on their writers. A novelist, he argues, cannot be a writer and a propagandist, too. He cannot begin with an explicit political purpose – even a wholly laudable one – and remain true to his art. "If a novelist is going to affirm anything," Bellow writes, "he must be prepared to prove his case in close detail, reconcile it with hard facts." And since "facts are stubborn and refractory," the writer "must even be prepared for the humiliation of discovering that he may have to affirm something different." In other words, for

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Bellow, “the art of the novel itself has a tendency to oppose the conscious or ideological purposes of the writer, occasionally ruining the most constructive intentions.”²¹ If to be a Jewish writer means to write *for* the Jewish community, then “Jewish writer” is a contradiction in terms: A true writer, committed to his art, cannot *by definition* be a Jewish writer in this sense. He cannot be defined by his roots. True literature cannot be ethnic literature. Literature may be (must be) grounded in ethnic detail, for “there is no such a thing as a generalized human being.” And “if we dismiss the life that is waiting for us at birth, we will find ourselves in a void.” But great writing transcends its own ethnicity. It aspires toward universal truth. And so Bellow has declared: “I don’t have any sense of ethnic responsibility. That is not my primary obligation. My primary obligation is to my trade and not to any particular ethnic group.”²²

For Bellow, the spiritual autonomy of the individual is the highest moral good, and he thus sees the writer’s goal as giving “new eyes to human beings, inducing them to view the world differently, converting them from fixed modes of experience.” So the writer must himself maintain a fiercely independent consciousness “which has the strength to be immune to the noise of history and the distractions of our immediate surroundings.”²³ Bellow insists, accordingly, that the “primitive facts” of his life, the various and variegated social and cultural influences he acknowledges, even when viewed in all their complexity and multiplicity, cannot account for the man Saul Bellow. And, most important, they have not impinged on his autonomy as a writer. Hence his declaration: “This whole Jewish writer business is sheer invention.” To be a Jewish writer – to be any category of writer – is to be something less than a writer, something less than free. To resist categorization is thus, for Bellow, a matter of principle. “The commonest teaching of the civilized world in our time can be stated simply,” he has recently written: “ ‘Tell me where you come from and I will tell you what you are.’ ” Bellow sees this teaching – including its current multiculturalist version – not so much as an untruth as an evil, a force to be opposed. For he recognizes that we *can* allow ourselves to be determined by our environments, and Bellow would not allow himself to be so

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diminished: “I recognized at an early age that I was called upon to decide for myself to what extent my Jewish origins, my surroundings (the accidental circumstances of Chicago), my schooling, were to be allowed to determine the course of my life. I did not intend to be wholly dependent on history and culture. Full dependency must mean that I was done for. . . . Before I was capable of thinking clearly, my resistance to its material weight took the form of obstinacy.”²⁴ Although “I was born into an orthodox family,” he writes, “I detested orthodoxy from the first.”²⁵

Consider, in light of these statements, the following autobiographical account of his early years written in 1955:

My parents emigrated to Canada from Russia in 1913 – my father, a businessman, has often told me that he imported Egyptian onions into St. Petersburg – and settled in the town of Lachine, Quebec. I was born there in 1915, the youngest of four children. Until I was nine years old we lived in one of the poorest and most ancient districts of Montreal, on the slope of St. Dominick Street between the General Hospital and Rachel Market.

In 1924 we moved to Chicago. I grew up there and consider myself a Chicagoan, out and out. Educated after a fashion in the Chicago schools, I entered the University of Chicago in 1933. . . . [T]he university was, for me, a terrifying place. The dense atmosphere of learning, of cultural effort, heavily oppressed me; I felt that wisdom and culture were immense and that I was hopelessly small. In 1935 I transferred to Northwestern University. Northwestern had less prestige, but my teachers there appreciated me more. And of course I wanted to be appreciated. My intelligence revived somewhat and I graduated with honors in anthropology and sociology in 1937.

Graduate school didn’t suit me, however. I had a scholarship at the University of Wisconsin, and I behaved very badly. During the Christmas vacation, having fallen in love, I got married and never returned to the University. In my innocence, I had decided to become a writer.²⁶

Elsewhere, and at some length in recent years, Bellow has spoken more freely of his early Jewish family life, of his having begun Hebrew study “at about four,” of reading the Bible and internalizing the stories of the Patriarchs, of his mother’s wanting him to be (if not a fiddler) a rabbi, of family debates over assim-