Winter 1999

The Displacement of Jewish Identity in Stefan Zweig's "Buchmendel"

Ken Frieden
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/rel

Part of the Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
https://surface.syr.edu/rel/61

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts and Sciences at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.
THE DISPLACEMENT OF JEWISH IDENTITY IN STEFAN ZWEIG’S “BUCHMENDEL”

In the story “Buchmendel” (1929), Stefan Zweig represents Jewish identity in Vienna as it is displaced, eclipsed, and then destroyed. Yet the narrator, a man of the world much like Zweig himself, does not mourn this process of ethnic effacement. Instead, he bemoans the associated destruction of literary culture at large and seems unconcerned about the implications for Jews in Vienna or elsewhere. Like other residents of Vienna during the First World War, the urbanite postwar narrator even shows a measure of unexamined xenophobia, which is surprising in light of the flesh-and-blood author’s Jewish ethnic identity and cosmopolitanism. Because the Judaic subtext of “Buchmendel” is subordinated to a universal drama, ethnicity is a suppressed theme.

Ambivalence and self-denial characterized Jews in Stefan Zweig’s cultural milieu. Born in 1881 to an assimilated Viennese-Jewish family, Zweig became one of the most popular writers in Europe between the world wars, known especially for his biographies published in the 1920s and 1930s. His prose and ideology were late expressions of the Jewish Enlightenment that began in eighteenth-century Berlin; Zweig shared many of the values that led the Jews of Europe toward Westernization and assimilation. He fled from Austria after the rise of Nazi influence in 1934, however, and after several years of wandering, he and his wife committed suicide in Brazil in 1942. The reception of Zweig’s work has suffered immensely since the Second World War rendered anachronistic his dream of universal humanity.1

The story “Buchmendel” anticipates the anti-Semitism that would eventually haunt its creator.2 The story is told in the first person by an unnamed narrator whose education and literary activities suggest obvious links to Zweig. The protagonist is a bookseller named Jacob Mendel who is known widely as “Buchmendel,” or “book Mendel.” Famous for his prodigious memory of bibliographic details, and as a striking emblem of Viennese literary culture, he is admired by patrons of the café he frequents. During and after the First World War, however, he appears out of place and is persecuted by a society that has suddenly become intolerant. The story revolves around the downfall of this remarkable personage, as retold by characters who remember him. Zweig’s narrator views Mendel as a relic from the past and, incidentally, from the East. Another intellectual in the story describes Buchmendel as “ein vorweltlicher Bücher-Saurier aussterbender Rasse” (“a primeval book-saurian of a dying breed [or race]”). The notion of race is displaced, like almost everything else in this text, to the realm of books.

The narrator provides a congenial frame to the story, at the beginning and end, by means of unhurried descriptions and reflections. His opening scene combines a hint of ominous events to come with an aura of security: “Wieder einmal in Wien und heimkehrend von einem Besuch in den äußern Bezirken, geriet ich unvermittelt in einen Regenfall, der mit mässigem Peitschen die Menschen hartig in Haustore und Unterstände jagte, und auch ich selbst suchte schleunig nach einem schützenden Obdach” (61). “Once again in Vienna, on return from a visit to the outlying regions, I was unexpectedly caught in a downpour that, with its wet scourge, swiftly chased the people into entryways and other shelters, and I myself quickly searched for a protective refuge.” This well-cadenced phrase balances impressions of Viennese Gemütlichkeit and duress as it brings together an awareness of nearby shelter and a sense of being whipped and chased. Although “Buchmendel” is a postwar story, its opening sentence evokes a wartime crisis; the German word for “shelters” (Unterstände) has military associations. The narrator finds asylum in a café he describes as “altwienerisch bürgerlich und vollgefüllt mit kleinen Leuten” (“bourgeois in the old Viennese style and filled with common people” (61)).

The entire story unfolds inside this café, which turns out to be a refurbished Café Gluck—named after the composer, but suggesting a lost place of joy and good fortune, Glück.

Zweig presents Mendel’s story through the narrator’s memories and in recollections by Frau Sporschil, an elderly cleaning woman at the café. She turns out to be the only person responsible for preserving Mendel’s memory. The name “Sporschil” indicates that she is a trace, a Spur, as well as a shield. Another intertextual trace is contained in the name Jacob Mendel, and especially in his nickname “Buchmendel.” As a book peddler, Mendel has much in common with one of the major figures in Judaic literature, Mendele Moykher Sforim, which means literally “Mendele the Book Peddler.” This character made his début in 1864 and underwent a number of metamorphoses in the Yiddish and Hebrew works of S. Y. Abramovitch (1836–1917).3 Zweig’s book-peddling Mendel alludes to the Mendele whose presence pervades fiction by Abramovitch, the so-called grandfather of modern Yiddish literature and also an enthusiast of the Enlightenment decades before Zweig was born.

Within their imaginary worlds, Mendele Moykher Sforim and Jacob Mendel are both traditional Jewish men from the Eastern European shtetl; the difference is that the journeyman Mendele in Yiddish and Hebrew literature never abandons the provinces of Eastern Europe. The latter-day tragedy lies in a displacement from origins that leaves Zweig’s character, Jacob Mendel, at an untenable distance from his namesake and his culture.

For Zweig’s narrator, the central theme of his story is memory. He recalls a twenty-year period (roughly 1905 to 1925) that concludes with his chance
visit to the renovated Café Gluck. The character Mendel, whom he knew before the First World War, interests him precisely because of his preternatural memory for bibliographical information. Yet Mendel’s literary learning is confined to titles and publication data; this superficiality suggests the shallowness of his entry into European culture. Whereas his childhood education included traditional Jewish concepts, his secular knowledge lacks true content.

In a postwar era characterized by impersonality, Zweig grants special importance to the psychology of memory, “for memory always binds, and doubly so loving memory” (91). A woman works “mechanically” near the cash register (Zahlungsautomat, 61–62) in the degraded new café. Even mental processes seem to have become mechanical when the narrator prods the “apparatus” of his memory (his Gedächtnisapparat, 63) much as one shakes a broken machine. When he finally realizes that this is Café Gluck, “Mendel’s place,” the narrator recalls his hero as a “miracle of memory” (67). At this point he introduces a musical metaphor into the sequence of technological images. During their first encounter in about 1905, the narrator requests information from Mendel, who “immediately played the most wonderful bibliographical restatements of my theme upon the keyboard of his memory” (67). This was before the war gave prominence to machines at the expense of literary, musical, and artistic expression.

A corollary to the narrator’s interest in phenomenal memory is the theme of genius in art. Looking back at his student years in turn-of-the-century Vienna, the narrator tells us: “In diesem kleinen galizischen Büchentödler Jakob Mendel hatte ich zum erstenmal als junger Mensch das große Geheimnis der restlosen Konzentration gesehen, das den Künstler macht wie den Gelehrten, den wahrhaft Weisen wie den vollkommen Irrwitzigen, dieses tragische Glück, welches, in order to devote himself to the scintillating and multifaceted polytheism of books.” Alternatively secular and polytheistic book cults have swept aside Mendel’s biblical and Talmudic education and, without regrets, the narrator affirms this explicit displacement. All that remains, marked in the rhythms of Mendel’s body, is a habit of rocking back and forth that Mendel brought with him from the Galician shchule, and his observa-

this skill finds its analogue in bibliographic expertise. The detailed description of a displaced shtetl Jew is unique in Zweig’s writings; one facet of this portrait is linguistic. At several points the narrator mentions Mendel’s “Eastern jargon,” a pejorative reference to the Yiddish language, and the story quotes a handful of his Yiddish words—Parch (67), Nau, epes, Sechel, Anhorez (68), Oi, and Oiweh (73). They are what remains of the former Jacob or “Tzaneit” (81).

Even more exotic, in the eyes of the cosmopolitan narrator, is Mendel’s childhood in the East: “Vor dreunddreißig Jahren, mit noch weichem, schwarzflaumigem Bart und geringelten Stirnlocken, war er, ein kleines schliches Jungel, aus dem Osten nach Wien gekommen, um Rabinat zu studieren; aber bald hatte er den harten Eingott Jehova verlassen, um sich der funkelnden und tausendfältigen Vielgötterei der Bücher zu ergeben” (73). (“Thirty-three years before, as a small slouching boy with a soft, black downy beard and curly forelocks, he had come to Vienna from the East in order to study for the rabbinate: but he had soon left the severe monotheistic God, Yahweh, in order to devote himself to the scintillating and multifaceted polytheism of books.”) Similarly, Mendel’s literary learning is unique in Zweig’s writings: one facet of this intellectual transfer is his Habilitation as a writer, a skill that finds its analogue in bibliographic expertise. The detailed description of a displaced shtetl Jew is unique in Zweig’s writings; one facet of this portrait is linguistic. At several points the narrator mentions Mendel’s “Eastern jargon,” a pejorative reference to the Yiddish language, and the story quotes a handful of his Yiddish words—Parch (67), Nau, epes, Sechel, Anhorez (68), Oi, and Oiweh (73). They are what remains of the former Jacob or “Tzaneit” (81).

The narrator consistently avoids passing judgment on this phenomenon of displacement. For most of the Jews living in fin-de-siècle Vienna, it was a historical reality that lay in the family history just one or two generations past. So the narrator situates Mendel’s tragedy elsewhere, at a safe distance from the situation of Viennese Jewry and of Zweig himself. A single passage intimates that the society around Buchmendel is flawed in its failure to value him:

Eingesetzt in ein Seminar, an eine öffentliche Stelle hätte dies Gehirn tausende, hunderttausende von Studenten und Gelehrte belohnt und erstaunt, fruchbar für die Wissenschaften, ein unvergleichlicher Gewinn für jene öffentlichen Schatzkammern, die wir Bibliotheken nennen. Aber diese obere Welt war ihm, dem kleinen, unbildeten galizischen Buchtödler, der nicht viel mehr als seine Talmudschule bewältigt, für ewig verschlossen, so vermochten diese phantastischen Fähigkeiten sich nur als Geheimwissenschaft auszuwirken an jenem Marmortische des Café Gluck. (70)

Yael Feldman's SYMPOSIUM 235
Placed in a public post at a university, this mind would have taught and
awed thousands or hundreds of thousands of students and scholars—
fruitful for the sciences, and an incomparable benefit to those public trea-
sure houses we call libraries. But for this small, untrained Galician book
peddler, who had received little more than his Talmudic schooling, this
higher world was forever closed; thus his fantastic capabilities could
operate only as a secret science at that marble table in the Café Gluck.

Apart from this faint protest against hierarchies in Viennese society, the
narrator seems to place the responsibility for Mendel's demise on this man's
own one-sidedness and lack of secular education.

The narrator learns of Mendel's downfall from Frau Sporschi, who views
his demise as the result of sheer stupidity: "Unser Freund Jakob Mendel hatte
wahrhaftig nichts Unrechtes begangen, sondern nur (erst später erfuhr ich dass
Einzelheiten) eine rasende, eine rührende, eine selbst in jenen irreparabil-
zeiten ganz unwahrscheinliche Dummheit, erklärbar nur aus der vollkommene-
en Vernunft, aus der Mondernheit seiner einmaligen Erscheinung" (79).
["Our friend Jacob Mendel had, in truth, done nothing wrong, but
only . . . acted with an excessive, moving, improbable stupidity, even for those
deranged times, explicable only from the total absorption and otherworldli-
ness of his unique case."] This absorption (Versunkenheit) in bibliography to
the exclusion of all else, in turn, echoes the Jewish penchant for Talmudic
study. Mendel "read no newspapers" (75) and is completely ignorant of
political events; in this respect he resembles pious Jews who renounce his-
try and cleave instead to sacred texts. A certain ahistoricity characterizes traditional
Jewish scholarship; a passage in the Talmud asserts, for example, that "there
is no early and no late in Torah" (eyn mukdam u-m 'uchar ba-torah).

Mendel's error, in ignorance of the ongoing war, is to write letters of
inquiry to booksellers in France and England. This innocuous act arouses sus-
picions of espionage, which in turn lead to Mendel's arrest and incarcera-
tion by his name. Herr Standhartner, the former proprietor, as indicated
by his name, Herr Standhartner, "stood hard" to support even an impoverished
book peddler like Buchmendel. The clean and efficient atmosphere of the
modernized cafe does not, however, leave room for such an anachronism;
Buchmendel without his phenomenal memory is merely a freak, an outlandish
Austländer who cannot even pay for his rolls.

Yet the narrator seems to miss the ethnic significance of his tale, presum-
ably because his own situation demands a selective blindness. At the close
of the story, the narrator feels ashamed that he had forgotten about the exis-
tence of Buchmendel, while an illiterate cleaning lady preserved his memory:

Denn sie, die Unbelehrte, sie hatte wenigstens ein Buch bewahrt, um
seiner besser zu gedenken, ich aber, ich hatte jahrelang Buchmendel
These high-sounding phrases conceal the deeper meaning of what has taken place. The narrator assumes a moralistic tone, preaching about the virtues of human memory and praising books as weapons against oblivion. Taking refuge in this self-chastening remorse, the narrator neglects a fuller questioning of his own story. He reads the writing on the wall but interprets it slanting and assimilation allowed, the concomitant damage to cultural identity may be irreversible. Perhaps Zweig’s suicide in Brazil attests to this, and perhaps—although Zweig glorifies memory in the service of art and fame—the secularization of genius, which suppresses the ethnic and religious past, may be reconceived as a complex strategy of deliberate forgetting and unconscious denial.

Syracuse University