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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 urbane postwar narrator even shows a measure of unexamined xenophobia, which is surprising in light of the flesh-and-blood author’s Jewish ethnicity 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 the Yiddish and Hebrew works of Mendele Moykher Sforim, which means literally “the peddler,” a term that also indicates a lost place of joy and good fortune, Glück. Zweig presents Mendel’s story through the narrator’s memories and in recollections by Frau Sporschi, an elderly cleaning woman at the café. She turns out to be the only person responsible for preserving Mendel’s memory. The name “Sporschi” 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 debut in 1864 and underwent a number of metamorphoses in the Yiddish and Hebrew works of S. Y. Abramovitch (1836–1917). 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 unendurable 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
this skill finds its analogue in bibliographic expertise. The detailed description of a displaced shetel 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), Nu, eppes, Sechel, Amlerh, Oi, and Oiweh (73). They are what remains of the former Jacob or "Jainkel" (81).

Even more exotic, in the eyes of the cosmopolitan narrator, is Mendel's childhood in the East: "Vor dreunddreißig Jahren, mit noch weichem, schwarzaufaumigem Bart und geringelten Stirnlocken, war er, ein kleines schiefes Jüngel, aus dem Osten nach Wien gekommen, um Rabbiin 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."] Alternatively secular and polytheistic book cults have swept aside Mendel's biblical and Talmudic education and, without regrets, the narrator affirms this explicit displacement.6 All that remains, marked in the rhythms of Mendel's body, is a habit of rocking back and forth (schaukeln), "a habit brought with him from the cheder, the Jewish school for small children in the East" (65). The displacement involves a cultural transfer that is epitomized by the narrator's explanation of the word cheder and his observation that Mendel "read the way other people pray" (65). We might say, more precisely, that Mendel memorizes title pages as he once memorized pages of the Talmud.

The narrator consistently avoids passing judgment on this phenomenon of displacement. For most of the Jews living in fin-de-siecle 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, hundertausende von Studenten und Gelehrte beherrscht und erstaunt, fruchtab für die Wissenschaften, ein unvergleichlicher Gewinn für jene öffentlichen Schatzkammern, die wir Bibliotheken nennen. Aber diese obere Welt war ihm, dem kleinen, ungebildeten galizischen Buchtrödler, der nicht viel mehr als seine Talmudschule bewältigt, für ewig verschlossen, so vermochten diese phantastischen Fähigkeiten sich nur als Geheimwissenschaft auszuwirken an jenem Marmorische des Café Gluck. (70)
Placed in a public post at a university, this mind would have taught and
drew thousands or hundreds of thousands of students and scholars—
fruitful for the sciences, and an incomparable benefit to those public
house 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 Sporschil, 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 alle
Einzelheiten) eine rasende, eine bönrende, eine selbst in jenen irrwilligen
Zeiten ganz unwahrscheinliche Dummheit, erklärbare nur aus der vollkommenen
Versunkenheit, der die hochbrisante 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
atrocious times, explicable only from the total absorption and otherworldli-
ess 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 polit-
eical events; in this respect he resembles pious Jews who renounce history 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-rorah).

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-
cpicions of espionage, which in turn lead to Mendel's arrest and incarceration
as a secret science at that marble table in the Café Gluck.

The mixed metaphor, which fuses the realms of architecture, mechanics, biol-
ogy, and music, indict technological society and at the same time shows a
measure of the narrator's participation in it. The delicate results of cultural
transfer have been thrown off course by a single false turn, and 'Mendel was
no longer Mendel, as the world was no longer the world' (86–87). The narrator's
own mechanical metaphors reflect his participation in this development, and he
remains in control of the story, masterfully weaving together past and present
scenes.

If we peel away the shell of universality that surrounds 'Buchmendel,' we
find an implicit, unspoken message of this remarkable story. Language and
ethnicity are at the heart of Mendel's collapse, yet on the surface Zweig's nar-
ror remains indifferent to these themes. At stake for the narrator are mem-
ory, high art, and European literature. These pinnacles of human
accomplishment have been endangered by the First World War; the narrator guides us to
interpret his story 'Buchmendel' as an allegory of the destruction of literary
culture caused by war, or as an allegory of the take over of the human spirit by
technological mastery. This general humanistic message is neither surprising
nor threatening. Indeed, when paraphrased so simply, it appears banal.

The text also suggests a more specific commentary on postwar Vienna.
Xenophobia during the war may be comprehensible from a military standpoint,
but Vienna's subsequent treatment of the ruined Jew is another matter.

When Mendel returns from imprisonment, he is further humiliated and
persecuted by a new owner of the Café Gluck. 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 café 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-
bly because his own situation demands a selective blindness. At the close of
the story, the narrator feels ashamed that he had forgotten about the existence
of Buchmendel, while an illiterate cleaning lady preserved his memory:

'Denn sie, die Unbelehrte, sie hatte wenigstens ein Buch bewahrt, um
seinem besser zu gedenken, ich aber, ich hatte jahrelang Buchmendel...'

in the fantastic, artistic frame of his memory, some pillar must have col-
lapsed and left the entire structure in disorder; for our mind is so deli-
cately tuned—this circuitry of subllest materials, this fine, mechanical,
precision instrument of our knowing—that an obstructed vein, a con-
vulsed nerve, a worn-out cell, or a misplaced molecule suffices, in order
to silence even the masterful, most comprehensive, harmony of the spir-
it. And when he returned [from confinement], in Mendel's memory—
this unique keyboard of knowledge—the keys were stuck.
These high-sounding phrases conceal the deeper meaning of what has taken place. The narrator assumes a didactic 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 one-sidedly. The coded message, unconscious perhaps even to the author, is not merely that memory will save us from death. This platitude contrasts with a more fragile human memory can be.

Buchmendel's destruction is the direct outcome of his cultural displacement. Where Talmudic study was, secular learning takes place. This new obsession abstracts him entirely from the world, unlike traditional Jewish learning that is intimately tied to everyday practices and the concreteness of communal life. The secular mind collapses immediately under the weight of political persecution. The individual is readily forgotten, as the cases of Buchmendel and his creator Stefan Zweig show. A person may easily be destroyed, but a culture leaves direct and indirect traces that are not eradicated by even the most far-reaching genocides.

The unacknowledged tragedy in "Buchmendel" is that the narrator and implied author misconstrue the tragedy and present it as a generic human condition of loss. Both Mendel and the narrator forget the culture from which they come; if we wish to universalize, we might examine more closely the hazards of apparently successful immigration. Even where persecution is slight and assimilation allowed, the concomitant damage to cultural continuity 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.

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