

Efraim Sicher

*BEYOND MARGINALITY: ANGLO-JEWISH LITERATURE  
AFTER THE HOLOCAUST*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985, Pp. 235,  
\$10.95

Reviewed by Miriam Roshwald

This overview of the Anglo-Jewish literary scene since the last war sets itself the difficult task of addressing the question what makes a work of art Jewish. Is it the author's parentage, his declared allegiance to his community, his choice of themes, or some other, more subtle elements, buried deep in his sensibilities, imaging, or point of view?

In his attempt to handle this problem, Efraim Sicher limits his study to those marginal writers who, though publicly identified themselves as Jews, "are Jews outside the organized Jewish community and distant from traditional Jewish life" (p. x). Into this category seem to fall some of the most notable novelists, playwrights, and poets which the Anglo-Jewish community has contributed in the last three decades.

Arnold Wesker, Frederic Raphael, Harold Pinter, Peter Shaffer and Jon Silkin—to mention the best known names—are all descendants of immigrants from Eastern Europe, who have moved out of East End London, or its equivalents in other English urban centers, leaving behind them their traditions, close family and community ties and, often, socialist ideals. Thus, the transition from working-class status to middle-class Anglicized respectability brings in its wake a breakup of old loyalties, estrangement, and consequently, a crisis of identity. From the vantage point of "semi-detached, semi-rural utopia of Golders Green," the East End and its in-group intimate bonds are perceived as stifling, narrow, and contemptible. What replaces them is, alas, hardly more satisfactory. False pretences, hypocrisy, resentment, and guilt fill the vacuum created by the rejection of the old commitments. Arnold Wesker, a second-generation socialist, draws on the poverty-stricken but warm and caring East End memories and exposes the betrayal of ideals and shoddy values of the nouveau-riche suburbia. But his concern is not bound by ethnic affiliations. Moral stagnation and complacency of rural Norfolk and its farm folk are denounced with the same vehemence as are those of Golders Green. The lost ideals of the Jewish East End—the fight for justice, active social commitment, nurturing of one's roots, as well as abhorrence of brutality and moral inertia—"lie at the core of the Jewish writer's existence" (p. 86).

If Wesker "preaches universal messages from specific Jewish situations" (p. 92), Pinter, Shaffer, Raphael, Silkin, and others translate the Jewish content of their works into non-Jewish settings and transform them into metaphors which have "everything and nothing to identify it as Jewish." Themes of existential anxiety, homelessness, a sense of threat, and psychological impotence, preoccupy the modern Jewish writer. The Kafkaesque surrealism only deepens and sharpens once the writers come to grips with the chapter on which they kept silent for two decades: the Holocaust.

The Anglo-Jewish writers, assimilated and removed from their traditional roots as they may have been, once the self-imposed taboo on this subject had been broken, revealed a depth of festering pain and self-lacerating identification with the victims, which compelled them to reexamine their Jewish allegiance. Frederic Raphael, Jon Silkin, Brian Glanville, to mention the least "Jewish" among them, all testify to the indelible effect which the Holocaust and its implications have wrought on their imagination and creative process. The Holocaust becomes with them an obsession which takes different forms with the different writers, but the theme of guilt, the guilt of the survivor who escaped while his brothers across the Channel were burned in their millions, is an underlying leitmotif of much of their writing. The urgency for self-redefinition may be explained, Sicher suggests, "as a need of expiation."

The collapse of belief in humanity, brotherhood of man, God and even nature, brought in its wake a state of confusion and despair which was not always expressed in Jewish terms. Harold Pinter and Daniel Abse are only examples of authors who have expanded their sense of catastrophe into a universal metaphor of an archetypal fear and unredeemable grief

pursuing man against a landscape of barren desert. At this "point of no return" Auschwitz and its bestialities become a prefiguration of a universal Hiroshima.

In conclusion, Sicher submits that "If the Jewish experience during the Second World War taught universal lessons, then universal themes have, in a sense, become Jewish themes . . ." Also, the reappraisal of Jewishness has enabled that step beyond marginality, so that the Jewish view of things, not least the Jewish use of biblical themes, is gradually accepted . . . The Jewish voice claims as much place in British culture as Roman Catholicism of Graham Greene . . . as the Scots dialect of MacDiarmid, and as the reggae beat in music" (pp. 166-67).

Julia Prewitt Brown

*A READER'S GUIDE TO THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL: AN INFORMAL INTRODUCTION TO THE WORLD THAT SHAPED THE NOVELS OF AUSTEN, DICKENS, THACKERAY, HARDY, ELIOT, AND BRONTË*

New York: MacMillan, 1985. Pp. 137. \$15.95

Reviewed by A. Leslie Harris

If one keeps in mind the inherent restrictions of the subtitle of Julia Prewitt Brown's slim but useful book, her study fills a genuine gap in literary studies. She has organized many aspects of nineteenth-century England into those categories about which a reasonably literate but culturally and historically inexperienced audience (i.e., an American undergraduate) might be expected to know only superficial details. Even the novelists cited are those often found on a college syllabus. If, then, Gaskell, Meredith, or even Gissing is missing from such a survey, protest at such an omission is muted.

Similarly, the informality invoked in the subtitle assuages any objections that such a broad range of social and political issues necessitates individual treatment that, though incisive, is brief. Professor Brown covers topics from class and titles, the Church of England and evangelicism, education and the professions, marriage, reform and the prisons, to censorship, serial publication, and illustrations. In explaining the groundwork necessary to understand the milieu in which, and of which, the selected authors wrote, she shows how much and how fast the cultural and physical landscape was changing during the last century.

Such sweeping changes are especially clear in one of Brown's strongest chapters, depicting the extent and influence of the evangelical movement in England. She focuses not only on the changing morality developed by upper- or middle-class Evangelicals or working-class Dissenters but also on the changing social conscience. Her statement that the Victorian ability to be at once socially liberal and morally conservative stems largely from evangelicism explains many of the "contradictions and difficulties" of this "dual emphasis" (p. 52) felt by such characters as David Copperfield and Dorothea Brooke.

If Professor Brown's strengths are her ability to pull together convincingly broad social movements (such as evangelicism or the recurrent reform impulses) and to explain terminology unfamiliar to a casual reader (even such distinctions as those between a rector and a vicar), her weaknesses are also imposed by the inclusiveness of her treatment. The chapter on education, for example, clearly explains the prestige of the Oxford-Cambridge system and its challenge by the red-brick universities, but scants the intellectual power attributed to the holder of a classical education. Its lack was often felt to be the greatest dividing mark between male and female writers. If a nineteenth-century woman was to write at all, which she did in increasing numbers in the course of the century, she was expected to write novels, as much because she lacked the grounding in classics for weighty treatises as because domestic sentiments and romantic adventures were suitable topics for women writers and readers. Since three of the exemplar novelists are women, closer attention to the woman's role in the novel-writing process seems sensible.