

The Holocaust and the American-Jewish Novelist

I was surprised to find myself asked to be a speaker at a conference on Holocaust writing. The reason I was asked, I was told, was because I was one of the very few American fiction writers to have treated the subject.

I began to wonder why. Why so few had written, and why this conference, for which a lone writer had to be searched out and tapped.

From there it was a short step to wondering about who had been writing what in America and how, and by what path one might travel from one set of questions to another. Finally there emerged a whole curve of questions upon which I bridged my way.

A backward and painful journey. First, back to the moment or extension of moments when the revelation of the Holocaust is taken into one's being—flesh-and-spirit-altering. Then to the years during which the novel, *Touching Evil*, was painfully written, and then to the responses, some of which were also painful because the novel was praised for what was not intended—for a depiction merely of the evil in everyday life.

In order to talk about writing about the Holocaust as an American, I have to think back also to what it felt like to write fiction as a Jew in America when I first began, and about what the so-called genre of the Jewish novel has been—and what it did and did not make available to someone who wanted to write about the Holocaust.

As to who is speaking, who is “I,” the answer is that it is someone who looked into Jewish history for the first time through the burnt opening of the Holocaust.

Quickly and inadequately, I must touch also on what it means to be a fiction writer, and how that affects the fate of any subject the fiction writer writes about.

This essay is in some ways itself emblem and warning about this last matter. It is not well rounded or nicely balanced, and comes to few conclusions.

True enough, it's divided into two parts—the first is large and bulky, the second part is a ridiculous wisp, like a bobbed tail on a big dog.

The trouble lies with the best and the worst aspects of what it means to be a fiction writer. Fiction writers rely on ambiguity; they put their ideas forward behind the protection of characters' masks. Fiction writers find this congenial, not because they are afraid to speak the truth, but because they find truth to be slippery—or to put it more elegantly, truth is in the dialectic itself, in the interplay of ideas; ideas moreover that in life never express themselves purely but are always modified, sometimes grotesquely, sometimes nobly, by human behavior.

In short, whenever I must come right out and make straightforward statements about the way things are, without the aid of the ambiguities of fiction, without the inconsistent behavior of characters who act like real people, I worry. I feel I may, by the logic of thought, by the inexorable march of relevant word after relevant word, be trapped into saying something that sounds rhetorically right, but that I will discover, the next time I sit down to write a piece of fiction, to be utterly wrong.

As you see, my opinion of ideas in themselves is so low that I will go to any length to discredit them. Not only do I maintain that ideas in themselves don't exist in this world; I also say that they exist in a very bad form.

But perhaps, instead of idea, what I really mean is ideology? Idea, myth, blind adherence (an idolatry of ideas)—these things are, and ought to be, kept separate from each other but have been shaken up together so that it is almost impossible now to keep them apart.

Hence my opinion that ideas are like dogs. They can be trained to do anything. Even to deny themselves. The art of fiction, on the other hand, is like a cat. It cannot be trained to betray its nature.

For now, I must be both dog and cat. And so my words are bound to fight with each other. The best I can do about this is to promise at least not to conceal the quarrel from you.

How many Jews can a Jew speak for? Few enough. When those Jews are writers, even fewer.

Mostly I speak for myself, my own experience.

I have not read every Jewish writer. Some of them I have not had time to read. Some I have not wanted to read. But I have the sense of an ambiance. If for no other reason, though there are other reasons, I would have it because critical opinion reflects the notion that there is a genre of writing in America that is Jewish.

But that is not the same as writing as a Jew in America.

Is writing as a Jew in America so different from writing as not a Jew in America? Before you turn away from the question, because it is so simpleminded—you will immediately know that of course it's different, and day by day events make it clear that it is different—let me quickly tell you my feeling that for many years, and for many people—and I am one of the people—it has been the same.

Think for a moment of what it is that the renaissance of the black artist in this country springs from: the black artist has tried to make a commitment, a covenant, as it were, out of genetic accident—the accident of being born black. They have said, these black artists, to themselves and to the world, that to be born black is not an accident, but rather a special dimension of soul. And the special dimension comes not from what the black now calls his “diaspora” experience—that is, humiliation, subjugation in every land that is not Africa—but rather a mystical ethos of blackness.

Isn't this the opposite of what has been the case with most Jewish writers? They have tried to subsume the commitment to covenant within the accident of birth: “I happen to be born Jewish,” the writer says, “there is only this accident of birth. Otherwise I bleed, love, hunger, die, and respond to art like all my human brothers and sisters.”

When Graham Greene in *The Heart of the Matter* has Scobie, a Catholic, commit adultery and then suicide, the special dimension of pain comes from the acknowledgment that it is, precisely, a Catholic who commits these acts.

Seldom have Jews in contemporary literature looked at their defection from ethical behavior and seen themselves as having fallen from their place as part of a “kingdom of priests.”

Saul Bellow, in a fascinating essay written in the early sixties, speaks of the first Jewish writers in America, their scenes of ghetto life in Poland and Russia.

“They tended,” he tells us, “to idealize it, to cover it up in prayer shawls and phylacteries and Sabbath sentiment, the Seder,

the matchmaking, the marriage canopy; for sadness the Kaddish, for amusement the schnorrer, for admiration the bearded scholar. Jewish literature and art have sentimentalized and sweetened the ghetto; their pleasing pictures are far less interesting of course than the real thing."

He goes on to make a plea for "maintaining the distinction between public relations and art."

Yet, for a long while after that period, no one was worrying much about public relations for the Jew.

No need to rehearse here the stages of Jewish writing in America since those early pictures of ghetto life.

Arthur Miller's first published novel (and as far as I know his only novel) was *Focus*.

Here is a précis of the book, quoted from the 1945 Library Journal: "An American of English descent named Newman begins to wear glasses, from then on is mistaken for a Jew and becomes the victim of anti-Semitic persecution."

And here is an excerpt from something called "The Weekly Book Review":

"This is in a class with the propaganda novels of Charles Reade or Harriet Beecher Stowe, which is a pretty good class to be in. The happiest fortune we can ask for it is that it may be read not by the completely tolerant members of our large populace but by those, so much more numerous, who either have not had occasion to face the problem it propounds or who choose simply to close their eyes to it. If it can help them, indeed, to focus on the ugly sight it discloses, self-interest as well as decency may well compel them to take some kind of remedial measures."

The *New Yorker* of that day, less interested in helping our large populace to focus on the ugly sight of anti-Semitism, laconically says: "A pertinent idea for satire these days, but enough is enough and you get the point long before Mr. Miller has finished belaboring it."

So there we have an aspect of the public-relations-versus-art dialogue.

And yet, when you think—1945—the death camps were being liberated.

Me in your skin, was what Arthur Miller wanted the great populace to think about. You in my skin. Anybody could be any-

body. Let's realize that, and be kind. Because the next gentile or Jewish life you save could be your own.

I don't mean to make fun of this idea. I find it a noble and moving one. Empathy—responsiveness to lives other than one's own or one's family's or one's nation's—seems to me still to be one of the highest human attributes—and rarest.

The gentle, liberal views of Arthur Miller were not the ones generally expressed by Jewish writers. Miller has said somewhere that he vowed never to characterize his people as Jews because he did not want the bad traits he might write about to be added to the burden of calumny Jews already had to bear in the world.

On the contrary, most Jewish writers couldn't wait to add to the calumny.

In justice to their rage, it must be said that they had their reasons.

The scene was the suburban Jew, the fat cat in postwar prosperity, very much at home out of Zion, having abandoned Jewish learning for himself and his children; or else keeping it somewhere in a side pocket, where it would not interfere with money-making American pursuits.

It was a scene ripe for the satirist. The Patimkins of Philip Roth's "Goodbye Columbus" leap to mind.

Since there wasn't much in the present scene that called forth the Jewish writer's sympathy (Malamud mostly had to reach back to earlier times and types to express his pity) the satirist's tone took over. It was an age of satire anyway.

Jewish writers really let post-war prosperous Americans have it. However, since the Americans they knew best were often Jews, they portrayed their Americans as Jews. A harmless transformation, but deadly in its way. It came to seem to many readers that the faults of Americans or human beings in general were exclusively the faults of Jews. From faults in the sense of flaws to faults in the sense of "things caused by" is another easy transformation, and deadly.

I think again of Arthur Miller's idea of never making a character Jewish. Ought we to be skeptical of that reasoning? Was it really a way of responding to the lure of universalism?

An experience-hungry book and literary landmark was Bel-
low's *The Adventures of Augie March*, published in the early

fifties. Much admired, envied, and imitated. Life is an open classroom. A smart Jewish boy can liberate himself.

More than a decade later, Portnoy's complaint seemed largely to be that he was not Augie. "Because of you, my American-Jewish family," Portnoy was complaining, "I can't let myself go with the gentile or the Jewish hedonists. I can be bad but I can't enjoy it."

Who isn't angry at being cheated?

Why not be furious if your craving for hedonism is inhibited by only secular tatters of Jewish ideas?

Even out of great ignorance, it was still possible for a "Jewish writer" to write a "Jewish book" merely because of living in New York, or Cleveland, or similar places.

One had inherited, literarily speaking, a trust fund. Without even trying, one had certain speech rhythms in one's head—colloquialisms that were inherently funny, relationships always good for a cutting down by wit, and a large, energy-radiating store of culture-abrasions.

In *Joy to Levine!*, my first novel, I used some of the elements that were at hand. Levine has an overprotective father, who fears for his son's luck out in the world. And so Levine concocts an elaborate lying pattern with which to keep his father misinformed, and this makes up the main mode of the narrative. Levine falls in love with a girl who he thinks is not Jewish, and is delighted and appalled at his own adventurousness. Levine's friend is an Irish pro-Semite who uses Jewish comedy-routine speech patterns.

Although I had only the vaguest understanding of an aspect of Jewish life that, so far as I was concerned, had never made it to American shores—I mean the great ethical concepts embodied in Jewish thought—nevertheless, I looked about me and I wrote what was called a "Jewish" novel. And apparently I did not write so badly. I was praised for what I wrote, and so were many other Jewish authors who wrote as I did, with the eyes alone. What we saw and noted in our books still reverberated, luckily for us. We were drawing interest on money that an earlier time had put into our cultural bank.

In this wide-open meadow of sitting ducks that the Jews of America had become for the Jewish novelist out gunning for them there was only one impassable place. And that was the Holocaust.

The Holocaust is the central occurrence of the twentieth cen-

ture. It is the central human occurrence. It cannot therefore be more so for Jews and Jewish writers. But it ought, at least, to be that.

Yet by and large, American Jewish writers have omitted it from their work. Not only have they not treated it directly (and there are authentic reasons for not doing this), but also they have not in most cases allowed it to color their response to Jews.

I cannot rid myself of the nagging thought that the experience of the Holocaust ought to have acted upon Jewish writers in the way we know that the encounter with devout Polish Jews acted upon the Russian writer Isaac Babel, who had wished to be assimilated into the Red Cavalry, the Cossacks; and upon the young German intellectual, Franz Rosenzweig, who saw them praying on Yom Kippur, just before he was to effect his conversion to Christianity. Both men, through these encounters, became Jews—Rosenzweig a learned and devout one. In short, the encounter changed their lives.

Let us suppose that the Holocaust did have this effect upon Jewish writers. I think, in fact, that it did. That it shook their souls with pity, with awe, with empathy and identification, and with the desire to know what it was that had been lost.

But how was the Holocaust to be written about? How could the virtues of fiction—indirection, irony, ambivalence—be used to make art out of this unspeakable occurrence?

To make bad art would be unforgivable. Even to make good art would be in another way unforgivable. Because that would be a transcendence. And it was not yet the right time for transcendence—it was far too soon, and maybe it would never be time.

If something is unspeakable, then how speak of it? Unless it is a metaphorical unspeakableness. But nothing about the Holocaust was metaphorical.

Years later, the Vietnam War was said to be unspeakable. Yet the Vietnam War was spoken about every moment of its existence, and TV cameras were always upon it.

Not so the Holocaust, which occurred in the deepest silence of the truly abandoned.

If something is unspeakable, then how speak of it? Is there a difference between writing and speaking? Yes, writing is more silent. Heart speaks to heart in the novel. It is inherent in the very

tactile form of the novel. The reader sits alone in the chair. Or lies in bed. The book held upon the body. The words of the book become his own internal speech. As lovers tell each other: "I don't know any longer which is your body and which is mine," so between reader and books there is this mingling and it too takes place within.

Only a few writers had dared to paint such dark canvases as would be needed. Kafka, the Czech Jew, had painted a Holocaust world of inexplicable pursuit to the death before the Holocaust happened. And Deurrenmatt, the Swiss playwright. But they were European. Americans could accept the morbid streak running through Europe and its writers. But in America?

For the American Jewish writer, the Holocaust as subject was a double bind: as nearly impossible to write about as to avoid writing about. European writers had come forth as witnesses and had, even when their writing had been most surreal, given something that felt like documentary.

Witness-through-the-imagination could be the only role for the American writer: documenter of the responses of those who had (merely) "heard the terrible news."

Yet the forms of the American novel, the tones of the American voice that Jewish writers had been at such pains to cultivate, seemed almost to preclude concerns with such material.

Was it possible to make art of it? Should art be made of it at all? Could the material be merged symbolically with other human disasters? Did such merging have no place here? And if this was so, then what would that mean about the isolation of the Jewish writer from Melville's noble concept about "genius that all around the world stands hand in hand. . . ."

The difficulties of writing about the Holocaust are many. Too much pain, too recently felt, still felt. The best response to it might be silence, or an endless scream. Neither one makes art.

Must we tell stories that reflect the Holocaust then? Can't we just leave it out? Can't we just go on telling funny stories about Jews living it up in America, or living marginally and baffled in America?

Must we darken our canvases, must we give up the humor so dear to Jewish writer and reader alike? So much looked forward to, also, by the gentile reader?

Moreover, what about our most cherished idea about ideas? That humor gives ideas balance. That it shows we have humility—if I'm willing to laugh about something, that proves I don't think I know everything! And more, and probably foremost of all our received ideas about the psychology of humor—it makes us healthy.

I think it does. I think it might even save lives, in the case of gallows humor. In the case of those so frozen in the shadow of imminent destruction that the lungs can hardly draw breath. At such a time a laugh, even the grimmest one, might be a kind of artificial respiration for the body.

But for the rest of us, at other times, I am beginning to wonder whether humor might be making us sicker.

Laughter—easy, slick—keeps us from thinking, gives the excuse to avoid feeling what needs to be felt in ideas.

It's not without significance that more than one Jewish writer has been characterized—in praise—as being a stand-up comic.

The laughter that Saul Bellow speaks of in that 1965 essay as being typical of the best early Jewish literature—"laughter mixed with trembling"—had given way to a laughter that whips and flays.

The question of whether American Jewish writers have developed a tone of voice for writing about the deepest concerns of Jews and the world is the question I am asking.

When I read these lines by Bertolt Brecht: "He who can still smile has not yet heard the terrible news," I felt he was lending me a tone of voice out of which to create the woman I needed as protagonist of my novel, *Touching Evil*.

In America, business as usual was an article of faith. Disasters of war took place "over there." It was part of that expected picture that the disaster that overtook Jews thirty years ago should also have happened over there. It was foreign, and business as usual was a corollary commandment of the Protestant work ethic.

It seemed right, therefore, that the woman in my novel should be determined that nothing in her life would, after she learned of the existence of the death camps, be as before.

She was to be someone so profoundly affected by the news that she would vow never to live the life that had been lived by people till now. She did not know exactly what that would mean. For a

start, it meant she would never marry or have children. She meets her counterpart in the next generation—a young woman who learns of the evil and touches it through watching the Eichmann trial on television. This woman is pregnant. And obsessed by the fear of what is passed on in the cycles of human generations.

I decided that neither of these women in the book was to be Jewish. Clearly, a Jew might respond this way. Non-Jews *ought* to respond in the same way, I thought, and in my book at least, they would.

Heart's Witness, I wanted to call the book at one time. Anyone in America who *knew* and who *felt* was also a survivor.

My theme was what might happen to people who truly took into consciousness the fact of the Holocaust. I was not considering the meaning of the Holocaust for Jewish history. I was considering the meaning to human life and aspiration of the knowledge that human beings—in great numbers—could do what had been done.

I added to the characterizations:

I made my protagonist, at the time of discovery, young—and vulnerable to horror. I made the moment of discovery the precise moment of sexual seduction, almost of intercourse itself, so that everything should be open and the appearance of penetration complete.

In addition to the reasons I have already given, I also made her not Jewish so that there should be no historical inuring to the idea of mass torment of Jews in history, no stoical endurance, no religious apologetics. The catastrophe of knowledge was total.

When a child is born to the second young woman, it is the blood and guts of childbirth itself that brings the horror home to her.

For it's not only love that pitches its tent in the place of excrement. But all our human effort rises from that stage also. And if the pitiable human frame is humiliated, not cared for, mocked in its helplessness, then all sinks quickly down, down into ooze.

It was not that I wished to say that hospitals—or labor rooms in particular—were like concentration camps. I was not talking about the banality of evil. But rather that this small experience of seeing how easily the helpless are despised brings home—again, to the body as well as to the mind of the second woman—this knowledge that brings with it a limit to hope. She becomes, in her hallu-

ination, the women who gave birth in the camps. It is the “taking in” of the knowledge of the Holocaust.

I had read documents: the Black Book of Poland and the diary of Emmanuel Ringelblum; I had myself been a daily listener to the testimony of eye-witnesses at the Eichmann trial.

After I completed the book I began to read what I had not read before. André Schwarz-Bart’s *The Last of the Just*. The non-Jews who wrote about the Holocaust and who were mostly Germans, the so-called Group 47, with their own reasons for their own obsession with the subject, a need to explore the German psyche. Günther Grass evoked in his novels a surreal landscape, a deformed and grotesque cast of characters to suggest corruption at the marrow. Jacov Lind wrote of near-insane characters, bizarre transformations of the flesh. Kafka again, but now after the fact. Lind called one of his books *Landscape in Concrete*. Peter Weiss appeared to write from Marxist impulses; and Hochhuth, in *The Deputy*, documented what everyone suspected all along—that the silence of the church was deliberate—that Christianity’s hostility toward Jews kept it quiet at a time when keeping quiet meant Jews would die.

It was Kafka who said that a book should be an axe to break up the frozen seas within us.

I felt, of course, when the book was finished, that I had failed to make a sharp enough axe of the book, had failed to live up to that material. Nothing can live up to that material but the Black Book of Poland, the journals of Emmanuel Ringelblum, the eye-witness who spoke at the trial of Eichmann of Jerusalem, the poems of the children of Teresienstadt.

But I was not prepared for the book to be praised for showing the corruption of evil in everyday life—unfaithful husbands, corrupt landlords, ill-run hospitals, etc. That is, when it was praised. When it was not being taken to task for being too dark a book, or one in which the effect is “to isolate the narrator,” as one reviewer said, “from what we like to think of as the real world. . . .”

The question the book was asking—What kind of daily lives can people live after they have touched an evil so absolute that it overpowers all the old ideas of evil and good?—eluded some reviewers entirely.

Nor was I prepared for a review which regretted that I had left

out something. "*Touching Evil*," the reviewer said, "*lacks the comedy of Mrs. Rosen's Green and Joy to Levine! (Perhaps, to be taken most seriously, a writer must first make us laugh—a paradox that Mrs. Rosen wrung out of her earlier books.)*"

I hope no one will mind my adding italics. It's the only way I have of showing now how despairing I felt to read that mindless line. What did the reviewer want from me: a song and dance about the Holocaust?

I've since come to think there might be some truth, at least in the first part. Out of sheer despair over the tone of Jewish humorists (they were never in any review characterized as merely funny—the obligatory word was always "wildly" funny, an attribute originating, I have the impression, with Dorothy Parker in *Esquire*, and thenceforth never relinquished by her or anyone else), it may be that in reaction I plunged the book into the darkest tones I could summon.

No one can think of the Holocaust without thinking of the image of the Jew in the world, and particularly in literature—most particularly in the literature created by Jews.

This brings me now to the second part, the wisp of the tail. And that concerns writing itself.

I'll start off with a small anecdote.

Recently the editor of an old and well respected magazine told me that he was giving a lot of thought to a literary form he had just invented, but not yet got onto paper. He called it, in his own mind, the new fiction, rather than the now-familiar new journalism.

What he had in mind was to assign certain topics to serious fiction writers and tell them to go ahead and treat the topics in the writer's own characteristic way.

Thus the reading public would get insight, through the techniques of fiction which alone can move us (unlike the essay, which only makes us think) into the personalities and news of the day. The editor didn't want us all to have to wait—and this is crucial—until some particular writer came along with that particular *donnée*. That might be too long to wait. That might be never.

For a moment, when he suggested it, I was intrigued. After all, every writer knows how sometimes the unsought task set by the story itself brings forth an aspect of response the writer didn't know about before and is pleased to have been able to uncover.

And every writer has had the experience of finding that at some point the story may call for the appearance of a particular character about whom nothing is known, yet who must, with the greatest dread and fear of failure, be invented, based on nothing. And sometimes it happens that out of nothing, something comes. The character based on nothing is invented on the spot, and is more vivid than the one for whom the story exists.

But then I thought about what this really meant: that this one aspect of fiction writing, the *donnée*, or what is given—which has always been considered to be the one mysterious and almost mystical, certainly incontrovertible fact about writing, that a certain writer at a certain time feels an irresistible desire to write about one particular thing in a particular way—would be taken away from the writer.

Henry James said it was as useless to quarrel with a writer about the *donnée* as to quarrel with a man about the color of his eyes.

This sacred-to-writers-accident of the *donnée* was to be taken away. In its place, the assigned topic.

The editor is not a bad man. Not a philistine, not a fascist. In fact he's a good man, with deep concerns about the issues of the day: and a sensitive man, with a love of poetry and art. A man, in fact, who himself once was involved in the writing of fiction, but who gave it up for a long and successful career in journalism.

Here, maybe, is a clue to what launched the editor on his invention. Journalism, with its assigned topics, its pre-set length, its clear-cut form and its admirable correlations of assignment to result, makes him—makes many of us—impatient with fiction, which blunders, which meanders, which waits for its *donnée* in order to begin at all and then, often, fails, in the working out, to achieve the full reach of possibilities of its own idea.

Why, I asked myself, couldn't Jewish writers assign themselves the task of repairing the damaged image of the Jew, and also make it art?

And then I answered myself: because art comes from sources that are beyond the reach of the rational, that are not wholly within our control. A writer who functions as an artist and not as a propagandist cannot be sure that what is written will brighten up anybody's image in the eyes of the world.

The dilemma is that fiction, literary art, cannot deal directly with ideas without ruining itself as art.

Good fiction searches for itself in the same way that truth does. By utter freshness of response. This means respects cannot be paid to pieties that have been emptied of meaning for the writer. The problem of anti-Semitic fiction written by Jews will not be easily solved. There is always the ferocity of attention to those near at hand.

Our decades have nearly forgotten how to make heroes and heroines out of people of virtue. Writers have forgotten how to write about them, and readers have forgotten how to be attentive to them.

And yet—and yet. There was one day, in the depths of the Israeli-Arab impasse in the desert, when the Egyptian Third Army was encircled by Israeli armor, when the Israelis were holding their position as leverage in bargaining for the return of their prisoners, and when the Egyptians exerted their leverage of cutting the nations off from their supply of oil, and when there had begun to be a series of pieces appearing on the OP ED page of the *New York Times*—one day by an Arab, the next day by a Jew, as if by such evenhandedness someone had planned to cancel each by the other, ad infinitum—one day there appeared a piece by Freidrich Duerrenmatt.

It was a short statement to announce that he aligned himself with the Israelis. “For all of us,” he said, “so we won’t soon all be silent.”

Impossible to read that without remembering Duerrenmatt’s play, “The Visit,” in which a whole town is bought into collusion against a single man, bought pair of feet by pair of feet by the bribe of new shoes. And I thought again how it’s not enough for us to know the facts. Not enough to have the documents, the history, the accounts in the daily papers, the pictures on the eleven o’clock news. Because we do not recognize our lives until we read them in art. We need that shock of recognition.

The world won’t be changed by it—we ought not to expect that. All that will happen is that we will be brought up abreast of our own lives, whose meaning and weight cannot crush what they illuminate.

To write as a Jew in America, it is no longer enough to draw on the interest of what was put in the bank long ago by others. It means somehow to find ways of being “interesting, highly interesting,” to quote Saul Bellow again, while yet not, as he warned we must not do, substituting public relations for truth or for art.

When Flannery O'Connor was asked why Southern writers wrote about freaks she replied, “It is because we are still able to recognize one.” In order to have that recognition, she said, “You have to have some conception of the whole man.”

The central struggle of O'Connor's stories appears to be to drag, assault, mug her characters to the same perception.

Debased Jews in American novels are not reminded—neither roughly nor gently—that they have fallen from a kingdom of priests, a conception of the whole man. Does the author even think of it?

If what the writer is really writing about is debased Americans, why make them Jews? But if the writer is writing about Jews who don't recognize their grotesqueness, why shouldn't they be brought face to face with it? Why else the piled-up faggots and the roaring fire? What other conversion—if the writer keeps the claim to prophet—can the roasting be for?

If writers are going to put on the prophet's mantle let it not be half a mantle but a full one. This means that they must educate themselves to the point where they will never again be able to see the distortions of Jewish life in America without also seeing the vision of what ought to be.

Exactly how might this be done? Being a fiction writer, I can't give anyone, or myself, a blueprint. I would have to feel my way as I went. But there are two quotations from an essay by Franz Rosenzweig, “Towards a Renaissance of Jewish Learning,” that might do for a start.

The first is: “Hebrew, knowing no word for ‘reading’ that does not mean ‘learning’ as well, has given this, the secret of all literature, away.” And the second is: “Nothing Jewish is alien to me.”

How else can we have a literature that will not shame us by proceeding as if the Holocaust had never been?

—1974