

Prophetic Fervor and the Jewish Writer



HE DECLINE AND FALL of everything is our daily dread, we are agitated in private life and tormented by public questions,” proclaimed Saul Bellow in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1976. “Give us this day our daily dread”—it would be interesting to know whether

Bellow’s Stockholm audience recognized the normality, for a Jew, of Bellow’s fraught disquiet. The decline and fall of everything, including the inner man, has been a Jewish study since there was an everything to decline and fall. Hence the proliferation of Jewish prophets for whom prophecies are not so much prognostications of trouble to come as scathing commentaries on the present: diatribes and lamentations that are terrible indeed, but at last, because they describe the way we are, consoling in the way that watching a tragedy can be consoling. If this is to be the consequence of how we live, let us behold and own it. In making us look at the worst, the

prophets performed functions we grant today to artists, writers, and even comedians who abuse us for our own good. Would it be too fantastical to think of Jeremiah and Isaiah as forerunners of Malamud and Mailer? Ezekiel as a dry run for Lenny Bruce?

I don’t mean to push personal resemblances, but the lives no less than the utterances of the great prophets are troubled in ways we have come to think of as the divine privilege of the literary. Jeremiah tells of God anointing him as a wordsmith when he was just a child, covering his mouth and telling him, “Go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak.” Thereafter, curses pour from him like the cries of a demented monologist. In his oddities—lying on his left side for 390 days, shaving his head, baking his lunch on dung—Ezekiel evokes a character out of Kafka. (A Hunger Artist, maybe.) Isaiah atones for “his unclean lips” by allowing one of the seraphim to place a burning coal upon them, eats the stomach-souring scroll of prophetic commission from an angel’s hand, and preaches naked, pronouncing the God-given words that have explained Jews to themselves and powered Jewish art for centuries: “I the Lord have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people’s covenant, as a light unto the nations.”

Never mind what a light unto nations means exactly or whether the ambition is foolhardy or overweening; it is enough that the covenant enjoins a disinterested seriousness of purpose on the Jewish people and that Jewish artists and writers have found in it a spur for work of the highest order. The spiritual urgency of Rothko could not have been achieved without it; nor would the nagging irreligious priestliness of Philip Roth have otherwise dared show its face. In *Herzog*, Saul Bellow pulls off nothing short of covenantal comedy. Even as his plot to murder the man who cuckolds him degenerates into demeaning failure and farce, Herzog holds fast to his fastidious pedantry, an aspirant, come what may, to the crown of exemplary grandeur that Isaiah holds out to the Jews.

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America in the 1960s, it was because there was prophetic work of the old sort to be done. Along with the vitality of the times went gross laxities of morality, thinking, and expression of the kind that the new Jewish prophets felt that God had commanded them to assail. Think of it as a rage for seriousness. Roth's heroes would go on correcting their mistresses' grammar even while enacting the most outlandish desires on them. Bellow's exacting intellectualism survived every act of sexual indecorousness. To be a wife or mistress in a novel by Saul Bellow is to have Lionel Trilling in bed with you. And on occasions, Groucho Marx as well.

After a not quite explicable leave of absence (it might simply be that distractions from seriousness have multiplied or that the material success of the previous generation makes it ripe for reprimand), prophetic fervor seems called for once more. Bellow, a garrulous but reliable guide in these matters, alerted the civilized world to those distractions from seriousness in a lecture he wrote some dozen years after his Nobel acceptance speech. "The writer cannot make the seas of distraction stand still, but he can at times come between the madly distracted and the distractions." And how does the writer do that? "By opening another world."

Thirty years on again, the call to open that other world is still more compelling. The politics of diversity goes on distracting from the essential austerity of aesthetics. Language has stopped being

a currency in which the generations can communicate. Falsehood brazenly outfaces truth. That which is considered popular plumbs depths of unimaginable triviality. And cyberspeak cows the intellectual classes who fear sounding like relics of an older age if they dare inveigh against it. It is no surprise anymore to hear the educated affirm that if Shakespeare were alive today, he'd write for *Game of Thrones*, and God, could we hear him, would apologize for divisive language. This is what I take Julien Benda to have meant by *La Trahison des clercs*. But then Benda was a Jew.

A new prophecy for our times is what we look to Jewish writers for now. A flurry of art, hot from the mouth of God, as alive to the teeming world of men and women as were Jeremiah's denunciations, but no less admonitory, perhaps a little less Chicago and Newark street-smart this time around, and a little more "old European" in the Singer style, or "new Israeli" in the tragic manner of David Grossman, but still manic in its high-mindedness, blasphemous, hilarious, and above all unapologetic. The great prophets knew what to say to the back-sliding Jew, long before the back-sliding Jew had Zionism as his excuse. They cannot be a light unto other nations who denigrate their own. *