

A Life in a Poem

SAMPLER

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A Life in a Poem

*Memoir of a Rebellious
Bible Translator*

SAMPLER

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To Jed Sekoff

friend in need

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Introduction: See Thyself

The Socratic demand “to know thyself” translates, in the biblical sense, “to see thyself.” In my twenties, still on a career path as an academic poet, I focused on the postmodern necessity to see myself sitting at a table (mostly), a creature bent over a page (now a screen). The implied question was not just how this creature got created but what the act of creation might mean, beyond Aristotle’s idea of imitating nature, *mimesis*. In one early poem, I compared myself as a writer to a cat diligently covering up its waste material. In another, a poem I reproduce in the chapter, “The Poem of Authorship,” I see myself as a car at night, its headlights flashing across a billboard as if it’s the page I’m writing. Within a few years, as I’d begun to translate the Bible, my focus sharpened: beyond seeing myself translating, I needed to see, imaginatively, the original biblical writer at his or her scene of writing, at a table within the palace archives, in ancient Jerusalem. To do that, and in addition to imagining myself into that ancient Hebrew writer, I became a historical researcher. In libraries here and in Israel—and in the streets of New York and Jerusalem, pitting the vocalization of English against Hebrew, modern and ancient. Did the ancient biblical writer also self-consciously see himself? We tend to think conventionally about biblical writing, that unlike our anxiety-ridden modernism it is not self-conscious; but I discovered how untrue that was, for the intense play of language, in endless ancient puns as well as the ironizing of historical scenes and narration, rendered the ancient writer self-aware. In the end, through many decades of working with the Bible, I can say that the gel seat upon which I now work, inserted into my Adirondack chair poolside, merges in my mind with a velvet pillow cushioning an ancient chair, one modeled in miniature after a throne.

Unlike a story, which usually has a beginning, middle, and end, a poem begins in the middle and ends in the middle. The Bible’s Adam and Eve narrative is close to a poem because time in the Garden of Eden is collapsed into an image of human consciousness—which is also the thing that names with words. So our first parents have language before they have a historical life; time begins after losing the Garden. Even the word repeated in this narrative, “creature,” holds the mystery of being in the middle of creation: objectively, as of the universe, and subjectively, of our uses of language to orient ourselves. The biblical writer explored the origin of the word creature like a poet-historian, digging into the soil of ancient myth. We began, as a creature in the Garden, in the middle of Creation. And when Adam and Eve are thrown out of the Garden, they find themselves in the middle of a natural world that preceded them.

Anyone's life is a story but life itself is a poem. Celebrity aside, if it's a life that holds together because of a persistent mission, like a poet's life—rather than some dramatic calamity or career that renders it a story—it's the arc of ideas met or discarded that we follow, rather than a tense plot. There better be tension, however, between life and thought, to hold us, and the voice of a memoirist may do this if, like Mark Twain in his classic monologues, a poignant struggle ensues between serious and comic reflection. It can also be more valuable to find the poetry of ideas that thread through a life than what holds it up with the suspenders of story and plot.

So it's attention to the process of thinking, the drama of it, that I'll hope to keep parallel with the drama in my life. Occasional smash-ups along the way—deaths and disagreements—might also resemble the incidental poetic mash-up. Like a poem, each chapter begins in the middle of my life in the present and weaves back and forth to the past. "Forth to the past?" Exactly, scientifically speaking. When we look straight up at any moment, all the light we can see is in the past, up to billions of years ago. If we look forward, we can expect that in another century from now we'll see even further back, and more closely.

The biblical prophets looked back at their present as if from years ahead, but they still provide our bedrock faith in history—back to David, back to Sinai, and even back to Eden. While I look at my personal history from a different angle in each chapter of this book, I always come back to the Bible and to a defense of poetry. Why poetry? Because it defends my need to be of two minds, and it first did so in my early teens when a crisis of faith in my parents' truths met a crisis of faith in society. Many of my peers conflated the two and either acted out a rebellion against them, as in rock 'n' roll and SDS, or did (and identified with) what they were told. Neither choice required full compliance; you could go along with them while harboring doubts. But poetry allowed me to go along with both. A poem spelled it out more clearly than any other art because words express knowledge (or a critique of knowledge) as in, "I don't know. I'm of two minds. My poem expresses that knowledge, a self-knowledge." My parents, for whom Jewishness best defined their lives, came straight out of the Hebrew Bible, even if I never saw them reading it (unlike granpa). They were full of character, argumentative, yet seemed to know when to hold their tongues in public. Society, on the other hand, while suspicious of shady rebels or criminals, tolerated the acting out of bohemians/beatniks, just as it did eccentric inventors/scientists. I understood that a poet could be both a biblical prophet in black turtleneck and a bohemian in a sports jacket, if he/she held both in mind, which tended to save one's art from cant. Yet I eventually found that the biblical mind was missing from poetry—that my parents' history, with its cultural treasure and

political marginality, was missing. There were analogs—the Blues and the gypsy violin my father played—but nothing so deeply two-minded as the Hebrew Bible, pitting human history against unknowable Creation. Beyond Shakespeare or Charlie Parker, the Bible was cosmic: you lived in history and the present, like King Lear, but also in the afterlife of King David's psalms and promised land: a speaking back to creation.

The story I tell in these chapters weaves the culture of our moment with my unintended fate as a Bible translator. The late film critic Roger Ebert, in reviewing the biblically titled *A River Runs Through It*, said that “[Director] Robert Redford and his writer, Richard Friedenberg, understand that most of the events in any life are accidental or arbitrary, especially the crucial ones, and we can exercise little conscious control over our destinies.” It was far from my thoughts to become a Bible translator; I was closer in sympathy to experimenting poets of my preceding generation, Reznikoff, O'Hara, Lowell, Plath. If you asked me what I wanted to be at age 6, it was the back alley scrap man (he had a horse and interesting junk); at 10, it was a Nancy Drew detective (she wore slacks?); at 14, it was Tony Curtis (I was understudy at Detroit's Vanguard Theatre). I assumed soul was merely what my Brady grade-school classmate, Aretha Franklin, would soon be identified with. Having soul meant having talent, or better yet, being especially *with it*. I didn't connect it to loss, to marginality—the opposite of intrepid Nancy Drew—until I began translating psalms in the early '70s. By then, I'd turned some of my own losses into poems, yet I still thought my destination was to be an academic, so that I could make a safe career out of exploring consciousness and binding together all that was “accidental and arbitrary” in my experience.

I had yet to encounter the precariousness of the soul. For that, I had to lose my professorship, my wife, my passport, and soon my father, until destiny fell off my social radar. Yet it was the soul-wrenching loss of what I thought modern writing should be—its adornment in personal experience and congenial fragments of the past—that pushed me past both the academic and the self-consciously experimental, past the poker face of postmodernism and the dossier of self-interrogation, and toward the restoration of the most deeply lost: the poets and prose writers of the Bible. Few ask where they came from, how they were educated, and what place the art of writing had in their culture. “Imaginative writers are compelled to swim in the medium of culture,” wrote Cynthia Ozick of Jewish writers, yet shall we go on ignoring the swimming skills of the imaginative writers in ancient Hebraic culture? It doesn't have to matter if a writer serves a big C or small c creator-precursor, as long as the art created keeps open the path back to our original astonishment at creation—or, as poet Wallace Stevens called it, echoing Kant and somewhat reductive of the greatest biblical writers, a “felt reality,” or “things as they are, but beyond us.”

Looking back at the present as if it's the past, which is what establishes the poetry of biblical prophecy, is not quite what I can accomplish here, yet I want to suggest a weave of ideas, ranging from science and religion to poetry and the Bible, that reveals how evocative of ancient belief a writer can be in an age of disbelief. Why do we need ancient history and poetry? I keep coming back to this question in each chapter; whether yesterday or the last Ice Age, we need ever older origins to create poetry that can disarm our grandiosity about being more important than the dead (if only because we're alive). There's nothing better for a living person than to have more life, but we are more than persons of the present, we are things with origins and an inheritance in the past—and the past is what we most belong to, yesterday's and the world's. It's all ancient the minute we study the present, including what we take to be reality. Writing about Wallace Stevens, philosopher Simon Critchley says "reality retreats before the imagination that shapes and orders it. Poetry is therefore the experience of failure." That is, poetry, by acknowledging our failure to hold onto the present, holds onto our traces in the history of living things—and not merely our inscription into cultural memory. While the Bible lies at the origin of our culture, its poetic forms, including history, philosophy, and law, address this failure head on. How deep can we go into history, how far into origins, to experience the uniqueness of our failure and the hope for singing/hearing of it in the future?—these questions are a post-Holocaust poet's digging tools, if not toward the angels First Isaiah envisioned in infinite harmony on the *om* word, "holy", then toward a re-envisioning of the Hebrew poets behind that cosmic text and the rest of the book of Isaiah.

There's no putting the Holocaust behind us if we're going to face the murder in our hearts, the way The Ten Commandments did (I will elucidate it as a poem for its sublime concision). It will always be yesterday's history, like the slavery in Egypt was for Moses, who himself didn't experience it. Just as you can't bring back an innocent life you've murdered or been accomplice to—an enabler, a bystander, a forgetter—you can't bury your victim's once vital laugh and smile. You have to half-smile for them now, you have to embrace irony and deadpan, become aware there's no category for "what's me got to do with it," for an innocent irony or an unknowing smile. No rock music can forget its origins in the blues; no novel its genesis in Genesis, no art its origin in prehistoric caves. Rachel and Leah are like relatives to all deep readers of the Bible, no less than Muddy Waters, the Chauvet cave painters, and Zora Neal Thurston, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf are to me as a writer. But I feel even closer to Rachel and Leah's writers, who have been so deeply lost, like parts of my own life I still hope to face.

You can't read and pray at the same time, unless you know you are reading poetry. It's in the poetry of the Bible—"the greatest poetry in English is in the prose of the Bible," wrote Ted Hughes—that our crucial

history is recorded, including the revelation that the present is the past, and that the future is a revelation of what's in our hearts. Not that my heart doesn't skip a beat when I dare to describe how poetry gets written. It's hard enough to explore how anything gets written, including the arc of a life, but to extend the inquiry into how the Bible was written is daunting even to state as a project. Perhaps it's enough to say I excluded prayer from my overt research, but not poetry.

Already by 1910, the Hungarian literary critic György Lukács, in *Soul and Form*, attempted to show how consciousness had replaced soul as a key concept of modernism. If the standard Judeo-Christian idea of soul is timeless, outside of conventional spacetime and dependent on its host in the physical world, then without such a soul we have no personal sense of the unknowable—of what may be unknowable to the human species. Do I want to read a contemporary writer who is soulless? Yes, of course, if he or she is really good, really chilling. But such a writer, like Lukács, will have no use for the Bible, Dante, Blake, or the soulful late Stevens or Celan. The latter two represent the soul in the form of a deep anxiety about the viability of the human species (in Stevens, the anxiety is mastered). It's an anxiety that we've lost our history, and with it our souls, so that only the possibility of a new poetry remains in its place.

In my experience, I had to fall, continue falling backward into a history that reached bedrock with the last poets and writers of the Hebrew Bible. I had to trip and fall, for instance, through the soberly academic Kafka I had been teaching, to discover how uproarious were his textual ironies, his cockroaches and mousefolk. We had read his work in class in almost a hushed reverence, as if it was the Bible. Am I saying we should now read the Bible comically, since many writers have satirized it? No, but there's a close connection between elation and awe, as in the word dumbstruck, a condition I can imagine prevailed at the biblical scene of writing no less than when a poet like Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson put their pens down, reread their texts, and were gladly dumbfounded to see that the work could go no further, that it had reached its end. In my time, the Bible was read so heavily that it was an obvious task to somehow lighten it, and to bring the word to its apogee, as in enlighten, or as in the phrase, to see the light. In retrospect, then, the Hebrew Bible gave shape to my life as a North American poet after six youthful collections of avant-garde work dependent on lightening the academic reading of a Rimbaud or Mallarmé, when I translated them intertextually. That is, I envisioned them at their writing tables, elated by the lines that seemed to overtake them like the hare passing the tortoise. Eventually they would hone those lines in the slow work of pinning thought and feeling together on the page like a gorgeous specimen, with the writers akin in their creatureliness, like the tortoise focused on the finish line while the hare stayed too long at the bar. The biblical writers were

also conscious of their physical presence above the papyrus, as if mediating the cosmic presence of a Creator—no less elated than Rimbaud, and then, like any great writer, falling to the hard work of refocusing, of getting the lines right with a rightness we can only sense by reestablishing the creative context and returning to the historical scene of writing.

“The dated look of the films is itself an image of time,” wrote critic Leon Wieseltier on the power of old movies. The extent of inadvertent detail that a literary description provides is multiplied exponentially by movies. Poetry can’t compete literally, but its images and resonances can be complimented by anti-images and anti-rhetoric, thanks to the full panoply of linguistic sound, imagery, and intellectual drama. The image or idea that is undermined in the poem’s little theater is analogous to our unconscious, where, like any single word, it can reappear in different guise or meaning. Words have histories not only in cultures but in our minds, like the image of an industrious honeybee that becomes its opposite, an assassin, in a particular memory. (And any word is subject to an indeterminate number of puns, including when translated into another language.) So poetry, more than any other art, can provoke a wider access to history, both public and personal. In the Bible, there’s an image of Abraham holding a knife over his bound son but also the anti-image of an angel hovering above, heard but unseen. I describe the nightmare of this scene, the Akedah (Sacrifice of Isaac), as a poem—one that can only be properly experienced if we consider the ancient author at his writing table. It’s similarly helpful to know the director of a film, but there’s so much greater detail of background and foreground, gesture and tone, in a film, that we can ask for less art. In the Bible, the art of the writing is bedrock, essential.

We take in movies of the present as if looking out the window, unmindful of our cultural situation. Older movies, however, are framed with the deeper resonance of historical and cultural context. They are time capsules, and unlike older books or paintings they provide an analogue for the unconscious: lost and inadvertent details, such as the grille on a ’49 Mercury that has nothing to do with the story. And in films over time, we get to see the actors age completely apart from the characters they’ve played. Movie characters can also age and change over time, but the actors are real in another way: time works on them oblivious to their will or our own. The image of time we get is inexorable, something we know in our bones but is rarely so poignant. It may be there in old home movies or videos but never so stark, for although we might mug for the camera there we are not *artists* of character, especially at the level of the golden age of cinema.

What is more, the four minutes out of three hours during the annual night at the Oscars that represents the deaths of movie industry people of the last year is now so time-constrained that even a clip of the actors on screen has been erased, with only a kitschy air-brushed photo in its

place, underlined not with silence but equally insipid music. Fortunately, it's mostly taboo to mess with the original films, just as it's been a taboo to change even a word of the Bible for thousands of years. Yet it took centuries for that ancient taboo to come on line, just as it takes time to realize the value of old films, many of which were discarded and are now lost. For that reason alone, I venerate the art of restoration, both of old movies and of the original scenes of writing the Bible. I want the writers and their cultural surround to give us back a sense of lost time reopened, so that their living flesh and blood can be transmuted in our minds into artists no less driven than our own today. That restorative transmuting I consider the next literary avant-garde. Of course, it's easier said in a critical essay than experienced in a poem. And it doesn't have to be portentous: the fish that swallowed Jonah doesn't have to be a real whale; it could even be a ridiculous project we took on and that consumes us.

After a youth editing and translating Baudelaire and surrealists like Desnos, honoring a droll covenant with the infinitude of consciousness, how was I to feel close to biblical writers? I had to face that they pushed past even further boundaries, toward a cosmic theater in which their countrymen are creatures bound into an existential covenant with their Creator. What does He—and life itself—want from them? To grasp the biblical writers working out the complications of the answer, in the form of our journey through human history, required that you sensed them alive and at play, however serious with their language. Loss of those imaginative writers, for me as a writer, was the deepest loss; it pushed me beyond asking how the Bible was written, and in search of lost ancestors. “Why are you doing it?” my writing colleagues once asked. “Why throw your career as a poet away in order to become a rebellious translator, outside the game?” I didn't have an articulate answer. If I could put words in the mouth of the past, I might say: “It's the only way I know how to write the lost Jewish writers at the origin of Western culture into our lives now; they're the great cosmic players we no longer know how to be. By giving them their lives back, we make it possible to absorb their influence.”

Let me set one recent scene before you that encapsulates my situation as a poet translated (or beamed up, if you're a Trekkie) into the biblical dimension. I'm holding an open box and Rhonda a broom, trying to corral a 3-foot-long young snake that our cat caught against the patio screen and was trying to kill, tiring it out with endless pawing vs. coiling/hissing—play for the cat (she could choose to walk away) but life/death for the snake. Many tense minutes of staring into desperate snake's face and eyes, tongue flicking, body coiling backward, until we “convinced” it (anthropomorphically speaking) into our saving trap and set it free in the yard, “a narrow fellow in the grass,” Emily Dickinson-wise.

“Several of nature’s people
I know, and they know me”

It’s that last line of Dickinson’s that stuns again: it was seeing that the snake saw me, *face to face*, that offered me a sense of my creaturehood. Unlike our feline, it saw me not as predator—how could it know?—but as creature (size not the issue, for it could spring to my height) full of mystery, anxiety-provoking, dangerous only because it was there with me, not safely alone in its lair. Our cat knows me as domesticated creature, careening slowly about the house, staring into books and tablets, but for the snake I was wild, unpredictable. How often am I aware of that, outside of imagination? Even in the Everglades wilderness near our home, I’m on an official path—boardwalk, gravel, earthen or watery, conscious I’m walking in civilization’s shoes. But with those minutes of snake consciousness, I was in the realm of the supernatural soul, an unknowable essence of myself that I still can feel naturally, like wind brushing by. It’s but a brief imaginative step from there, awakened to creatureliness, to the snake that speaks in Eden.

That gorgeous snake knows me, my innocence of its full knowledge, its motives. Still, I sense its limitless canniness: I don’t ask how it got there, yet it asks of me that question, knowing I am blind to our mutual Creator. But I will learn, when I leave it, what both of us in the garden are cut off from: the Creator’s uncanniness. As I read, even as I hear God talk and emote, the words of the text echo the muffled words I heard beyond the womb. The garden was there before me as Sinai was, and Israel; but it was the Hebrew writers in Jerusalem, rebelling against myth fixed in stone, who brought expressive movement back to history.

Modern poets have sometimes done the same for classic myth. Writing metaphorically about Orpheus, Cocteau says “the poet must undergo many types of ‘death’ in order to achieve immortality through his art.” For myself, the central such decease was that of my career as a poet, when, at age 29, after six published books of poetry, I turned into a Bible translator. I’ve written unpublished volumes of poems since then, in addition to the publication of a book-length poem, *The Lost Book of Paradise*, but the work of my post-careerist life became a poetry of restoration. The scenes of writing I labored to restore go back to the origins of written literature in Sumer, reflecting the probable education of the biblical Abraham in ancient Ur. In that book, *Abraham: The First Historical Biography*, it is the Bible’s writers in Jerusalem, many centuries later, whose education I primarily evoke—yet for them too the literature of Sumer and Akkad were their classics, as Greek and Latin were for Shakespeare and remain so for us. I would prefer to have that literary trope change to “Greek, Latin, and Hebrew,” so that the Bible’s hundreds of lost writers can take their imaginative place beside Homer, Sophocles, Plato and Virgil. To do that, however, they must be

named, located in their Hebraic culture, and reimagined in their literary careers and educations. I'm satisfied that Roman letters are a start to taking on those names, so that J, E, S, and others are clearly biblical. It's not literally the names that are crucial, but rather the unique character of their lives as literary artists: poets and prose writers without whom the literature of the West, including today's, would be threadbare.

To return them from the dead, as it were, required that initial career-death I've noted, a type of Orpheus retrieving his wife from the netherworld. Such was the Greek myth that underwrote Cocteau's statement, and upon which he played throughout his career, including a cocking of the hat toward earlier musings on literary death by the likes of Lukács. To restore ancient Hebraic culture to the life of the imagination, I needed every contextual aid I could think of, high and low, that would throw light into the study rooms and archive libraries of biblical writers. Yet context was just what I had learned to disarm as an avant-garde poet, breaking down boundaries, or what Lukács called "the rift between speakers, listeners, and their surrounding world." Even so, Lukács was dismissive of experimental writing, and he would have accounted my project to restore Hebrew and English context as too experimental; though strangely enough, this most imposing of Marxist aestheticians would have been in sync with the most conventional of scholarly critics. So, with skeptics on left and right, bourgeois and bohemian, I was on my own, a Judaic Orpheus.

When I consider Moses's Ten Commandments and its sublime elaboration through forty years in the putative desert—as finally articulated centuries later, in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—I recognize the Bible's original writers in Jerusalem not for their personal independence but for their passion for independence *per se*, especially from worldly resentment. No Jewish writers since have come close to the honestly critical light they throw on Jews themselves. They are fearless, because they have a cosmic theater in which every word is scrutinized not for its sincerity ("all bad poetry is sincere," wrote Oscar Wilde) but for its resonance—historical, rhetorical, poetical and most of all, the depth of that resonance, as if listening down the well of human history toward the origin that is imagined our Creator is listening back from. Each word in the best writing of the Bible is measured against the irony of being a created creature. What is that irony but a grand unscrolling of how we got here, listening for direction in every scrap of history we can restore.

Jonathan Sacks, UK Chief Rabbi, writing in the *Times of Israel*, encodes rebellion into the imaginative life of Israel: "The great figures of Judaism—Abraham, Moses, the prophets—were distinguished precisely by their ability to stand apart from the herd; to be different, to challenge the idols of the age, to refuse to capitulate to the intellectual fashions of the moment.... Poetry, music, love, wonder [are] the things that have no

survival value but which speak to our deepest sense of being.” If I can elaborate, it is poetry that most gives voice to the Bible, not simply as a literary form but as the form to our lives (Torah is called *shirah*, which means both poetry and song in Hebrew). The Russian modernist Anna Akhmatova, in 1959’s ‘Prose About the Poem’ (translated by Ronald Meyer) considered her life’s work as a single poem: “The poem is a peculiar revolt of things.... It imperceptibly assumed events and feelings from different layers of time.” I could take from Sacks and Akhmatova the rebellion that spun me past the adolescent and avant-garde ones, out into the ancient cosmic theater of biblical authorship, where human history consists of boundaries pushed, stretched and questioned but never detached from origins. In modern philosophical terms, Derrida refers to a “transcendental signified” (in ‘Structure, Sign and Play’) as a central point of origin to structure, including linguistic structure. He claims “the function of this center is to render meaning determinate,” but he proceeds to deconstruct it in a manner similar to how the poetics of the Bible rebelled against a determined origin—whether in the unquestioned plurality of gods or Adam’s rib—that can’t be reinterpreted, seriously and playfully.

My wife Rhonda, upon reading that last sentence, worries that a reader has difficulty getting their mind around a biblical scene of writing. Whatever perspective a reader has picked up, from childhood onward, it is focused upon the Bible’s text with its highly educated imaginative writers and historians hidden behind a curtain of forgetting. Why bother to reembody them now? The answer is central to my story because it also begs the question of why I, or anyone, would devote their life to writing. Just like a writer today, the ancient Hebraic author sat in a chair, drank his ancient tea or beer, and surveyed his sources in the form of papyrus scrolls spread across his table and shelves. That writer did not start from scratch or catch inspiration like lightning in a bottle. Like writers today (and long before the great rabbis) he or she felt the weight of history, worldly and literary, stretching back for two millennia of written texts before the Bible, to the cradle of civilization in Sumer and beyond. When I began to write poetry in high school and university, I didn’t think I’d need such a long education. You played with your imagination or memories; you read a modern poem by Yeats or Marianne Moore and tried a take-off on it. I lacked a sense of the strength of imaginative mind needed to write through an entire life and continue to grow. It was hardly a matter of instant access to dreams and emotions, experience and the unconscious—and yet a life would seem to stretch out that way, a series of serendipitous accidents and uncharted destiny.

Nevertheless, I write these chapters in a form of rebellion against the chronology of my accidental life. It’s a loving rebellion, however; poetry’s rebellion against beginning, middle, and end. The Hebrew Bible doesn’t

end, I discovered; it just stops, anticipating more history to come. That would be an anachronism, if it didn't resemble the end of a psychoanalysis. All those sessions, all those biblical chapters in the light of creation, are now internalized, so that the present—though already the past—opens up like a poem, never happy with an ending. What to do with that “ordinary unhappiness,” as Freud calls it? It's a complicated poem with a complicated author, and needs further translation. So I found the most complex authors I could, the lost writers of the Hebrew Bible, and set out to acquire the scholarship I'd need to envision them. I wasn't seeking to become a visionary; I was hoping it would help me to envision my own life as a poet, born on one of the most horrendous days of the twentieth century.

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SAMPLER

The Poem of Explanation

I'm in one of the last great independent bookstores, Books&Books, late night 4th of July. Many samba-band listeners but not many book-buyers lured by the 20% holiday discount. I've collected a pile of books to check through three-legged stool-side, half of them found by Rhonda. She also finds owner Mitchell Kaplan, who, after an exchange of "You look greats," asks what I'm reading at that moment, which is a two-thousand-page \$75 recent edition of Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, newly translated. You would not find this book in Barnes&Noble, but it's on Amazon as an e-book at less than half list price, plus it won't weigh heavy on your stomach as you read (unlikely you could hold it up in two hands). As an older guy, I can enlarge the e-book print, though I wouldn't mention this to Mitch, who I think still imagines us as young guys. He's more than a decade younger yet I'm surprised to learn he's already entered the age of existential awareness: after Rhonda tells him I'd had a heart bypass recently, he wants to know if I had a heart attack first (no) and how it all went down. In a heartbeat, I answered: I was riding my bike and noticed a pressure in my chest; called my doc, asking if I should take a Xanax for anxiety. "Have you been under heavy stress?" she asks. No, I answered, "but who knows?" Go to the emergency room and get checked out, she says, "you have nothing to lose." We go, we're night owls so we don't mind that it's midnight, plus less wait time. Actually, when there's suspect heart trouble, they take you instantly, we find, and within a few hours it's early AM and I'm looking at a 3D real-time image of the inside of my heart and arteries on a state-of-the-art machine. The blockages are clearly visible, though I still feel mostly normal, and the doc says you need an operation, which is backed up by his team of heart-pros. Serendipitously: "We can do it this morning," he says, "it's our surgery day." So no time to worry or think, we decide to get it over with, after a bit more medical encouragement.

I report all this to Mitch, who responds supportively that he was in Baltimore recently when a doc looked at a melanoma on his arm, saying it could be dangerous. "When you get back to Miami, I'd have it checked out immediately." No way was he going to live with that worry, says Mitch, and the doc dug it out right there and then. "I'd have done the same as you," he continues, "get on with your life like Philip Roth." We both knew Roth had a similar operation to mine two decades ago and went on to write more than half a dozen new novels, some of them his best. You can find the recent ones in Mitch's bookstore, but not much more of a literary backlist, which I've always been embarrassed to ask him about, knowing that literary history is his soft spot. For three decades he's been a national celebrity for hosting the

Miami International Book Fair, though his backstory includes being a high-school English teacher so frustrated by the younger generation's disinterest in dead authors that he left his job to risk opening a bookstore, one so avidly devoted to literary history that he named it "Books&Books" to spite the plague of stores at that time desperately named "Books&Things" or "Books&Birthday Cakes" or "Books&Dolls". Now the others have folded and Mitch's little chain of 7 stores, some of them pocket-size, are holding on, if barely. "But I can't even keep Singer in stock," he says. "The younger generation has no memory for literature and anyway the publishers won't reprint." There's an English teacher's pedagogical regret in his voice, so when Mitch says "younger generation," I think he's counting back from fifty-five, imagining his own onetime students.

Yet "no memory for literature" sticks in my mind. It seems to validate Harold Bloom's comment on the back of the *Zibaldone* book, that Leopardi had substituted his total consciousness for traditional ideas of "mind." Bloom's economy of literary history, however, fails to note the losses that a dedication to consciousness may entail, especially the loss of memory for literature. Today, that memory has been exchanged for a wider range of culture, from high to low, with new mediums stuffed into consciousness like photography and film; radio, video and TV; rock, comix and cyber forms such as blogs. That's not all bad but Leopardi, writing almost two centuries ago, had far more room in his head for books, including the ancients and the Bible.

Perhaps when and if I reach eighty I'll be able to retire and prop up the 8 lb. vol of *Zibaldone* on my stomach as I read in bed. Can a writer, however, read without his or her deeper purpose of putting the wisdom acquired (if any) to work? That is, to add yet more exotic yeast to the next book he or she may write? Can one imagine Philip Roth reading now—reading even his own oeuvre—after publicly declaring that he will write no more? Of course not; to what purpose is reading to a writer if one can't write? It was a typical Rothian gambit, much like his ironic comment after I asked him to contribute to the journal I was editing in Israel in the early '80s, *Forthcoming: Jewish Imaginative Writing*: "I don't think I have anything Jewish to give you."

I reminded Roth of this when we met in the *Symphony Space* Green Room before 'An Evening with *The Book of J*,' when he accompanied his wife at the time, Claire Bloom, who would read from my translation, sandwiched in between expositions by Harold Bloom and myself. Roth smiled in recognition. "I still don't know if I have anything, but you could ask your friend Professor Bloom. Maybe I've missed something." Although Roth's books would not be found on Mitchell Kaplan's bookstore's "Jewish shelf" (I don't think it still exists) his books might certainly be found on such a shelf in any Christian bookstore.

When I reminded Mitch I was writing a creative memoir, he lamented that I'd need footnotes to explain who Isaac Bashevis Singer was. Mitch recalled how I first came to Miami in the '80s as Singer's editor, when the revival of Art Deco "South Beach" was just beginning, a couple miles downwind from Singer's '50s style condo—cinemascope apartment windows, 3D staircase from elevator to street—on Ocean Drive. One block over was Singer's main walking destination, a '30s-style imitation Manhattan drug store with long lunch counter and a few tables where he could work and nurse a glass of tea. "Sheldon's Drugs" was also our meeting place, source of the first "real" grilled cheese sandwich I'd eaten in half a century. It was barely thirty-five years ago that Singer won the Nobel Prize and not much more than twenty since he died, so when Roth mordantly claimed that nobody would be reading his own or any novels at all within a generation after he passed on, he should have proffered Singer for proof.

I can easily imagine Shakespeare and John Webster in their cups, in an Elizabethan pub, reflecting that few would remember their plays a generation after they were gone, the texts never published. It's taken more than four centuries, meanwhile, to get serious about the books influencing Shakespeare, as another book in my little pile at Mitch's bookstore seems to do. *Shakespeare's Montaigne* is a new paperback I can actually afford and will buy to not disappoint Mitch, who reads the title aloud when we saunter over to the cash register. "You're the last of the literati," he comments. "We need you to stay healthy." Rhonda chimes in: "Don't worry. The surgeon said he should have a good twenty-five years ahead of him, though David said: 'Is that all I can get?'"

"What egregious fools are we?" writes Montaigne. "He hath passed his life in idleness," say we. 'Alas, I have done nothing this day.' What, have you not lived? It is not only the fundamental but the noblest of your occupations." Just living, that is. But of course to really celebrate *that*, one could aspire to be a writer like Montaigne himself, or Shakespeare reading him in Florio's translation, which Greenblatt and Platt have just re-edited from the 1605 edition, for my shiny paperback. Like Montaigne, Shakespeare had a great mind—but no, we don't want to say that, it's the scope of their *consciousness* that keeps both of them alive to us—even if we're more obsessed today with testing the boundaries of consciousness, rather than the scope of what may live on either side. For Shakespeare, there's tragedy on this side and dreams on the other. A century ago, Freud was similarly occupied with dreams, but now we're fixated on neither dreams nor suffering but instead the erotic border town between them—a Tijuana, not Macbeth's Scotland. When our writers today probe the boundaries of consciousness, it usually leads to satire, and more dangerously, to the representation of psychosis for the individual and extinction for the species. For those circumstances we have the irony of "superheroes". The proof is all