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How Jewish Refugee Critics Changed British Literary Criticism, 1970–2020

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Abstract: During the mid- and late 20th century, a small group of Jewish refugee critics changed the way British culture thought about what kind of literature mattered and why. These outsiders went on to have an enormous impact on late 20th-century British literary culture. What was this impact? Why in the last third of the 20th century? Why did British literary culture become so much more receptive to critics like George Steiner, Gabriel Josipovici, Martin Esslin and SS Prawer and to a new canon of continental Jewish writers? The obstacles to Jewish refugee critics were formidable. Yet their work on writers like Kafka, Brecht and Paul Celan, and thinkers like Heidegger and Lukacs had a huge impact. They also broke the post-war silence about the Holocaust and moved the Jewish Bible from the margins of English-speaking culture.

Keywords: culture; encounter; Martin Esslin; European Modernism; exile; Germanists; Holocaust; impact; insular; Jewish; Jewish Bible; Gabriel Josipovici; literary critics

Two encounters in Oxford in the 1950s tell us something interesting about the relationship between Jewish refugee critics and the British academic world, then and now.

In his memoir, *Errata* (Steiner 1997), George Steiner describes calling on the Oxford don Humphry House:

Shortly before my doctoral *viva*, I called on House. On his Victorian lectern lay the handsomely printed text of my Chancellor's English Essay Prize. I waited, I ached for some allusion to it. It came when I was already at the door. "Ah yes, yes, your pamphlet. A touch dazzling, wouldn't you say?" The epithet, writes Steiner, 'fell like mid-winter. (Steiner 1997, p. 129)

A few years later, Gabriel Josipovici arrived at Oxford for an interview to study English Literature. "They kept asking me what English novelist I most admired," he said in an interview, "and I kept saying Dostoevsky and they kept saying *English* novelist, Mr Josipovici, and I kept saying Dostoevsky, vaguely aware that something was profoundly wrong but unable, in the heat of the moment, to put my finger on it."¹

These stories give us a sense of the relation between young Jewish refugees who went on to become famous literary critics and 1950s Oxford, at its most English and self-confident. The students come across as outsiders. What happened over the next twenty years is that a small group of Jewish critics changed the way British culture thought about what kind of literature mattered and why. These outsiders went on to have an enormous impact on late 20th-century British literary culture. What was this impact? Why in the last third of the 20th century? Why did British literary culture become so much more receptive to the "dazzling" Steiner and to a new canon of non-English writers?

¹ Interview with Gabriel Josipovici, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 3 September 2010, p. 41.

There were two kinds of refugees who came to Britain and taught literature during the mid-20th century. The first, and much larger group, were the scholars who joined foreign language and literature departments. These included Germanists like Professor Claus Victor Bock (1926–2008), who was professor of German at Westfield College, London (1969–1984) and wrote on Goethe and Stefan George and his circle; Professor Charlotte Jolles (1909–2003), a lecturer then professor of German at Birkbeck, who published mainly on Theodor Fontane; Erich Heller, Professor of German at University College, Swansea, in the 1950s; SS Prawer, Taylor Professor of German Language and Literature at Oxford University, 1969–86; and JP Stern, Lecturer in German at Cambridge, 1972–1986 and then Professor of German at UCL, 1981–85.

In addition to Germanists, there were also scholars of French Literature such as Professor Fanni Bogdanow (1927–2013), professor of medieval French literature at Manchester, best known for her study, *The Romance of the Grail* (1966); Romance linguists like Joseph Cremona (1922–2003), the first lecturer at Cambridge in Romance philology; and a formidable group of scholars who fled revolutionary Russia, including Dame Elizabeth Hill (1900–1996), who fled the Russian Revolution in 1917 and in 1948 became Cambridge's first Professor of Slavonic Studies; Nicholas Orloff, Professor of Russian at Oxford; the great Russian and Balkan scholar, Sir Dmitry Dmitrievich Obolensky (1918–2001), professor of Russian and Balkan History at Oxford, 1961–85, and D.S. Mirsky (1890–1939), who returned to the Soviet Union in 1932, where he died in a labour camp in 1939.

The second group was much smaller, barely a handful of critics, and yet Gabriel Josipovici, George Steiner and Martin Esslin were arguably more influential on the larger culture.

What is striking about the first group is that all these European refugee scholars had distinguished careers at leading British universities. They assimilated more easily than the stories about Steiner and Josipovici might suggest. Perhaps for two reasons. First, they were specialists, fluent in their native languages. Second, and arguably more important, they did not try to move into English literature departments. As Edward Alexander observes in his review of Lionel Trilling's *Letters in Standpoint*, discussing the problems facing young Jewish academics trying to get jobs in English Literature departments at Ivy League universities,

Perhaps this was because the study of English, unlike that of science or philosophy, was intimately bound up with the particularities of culture, for it was precisely the study of the mind of Western Christianity. What Bernard Berenson called the "Angry Saxons" who ran English departments, were determined to protect Tennyson's "treasure of the wisdom of the West" from barbarous Eastern (European) invaders. (Alexander 2018, pp. 40–41)

This was no less true in the older British universities. It was one thing for a German–Jewish refugee to teach German literature. It was more of a challenge, a provocation even, for a foreign Jewish refugee to teach English Literature.

This encounter was clearly complicated and is still misrepresented today, decades later. The obstacles to Jewish refugee critics were formidable. Could they teach and write in a new language, especially the literature of a foreign country? In an essay on Nabokov, George Steiner wrote about writers who were "linguistically "unhoused"", "not thoroughly at home in the language of his production, but displaced or hesitant at the frontier." (Steiner 1972, p. 14).

This image of "the frontier" reminds me of Steiner's story of visiting House in Oxford. House's crushing response comes "when I was already at the door." Neither inside nor outside, but in the doorway. It is an image which haunted a generation of refugee scholars.

Even if they could master the language, could they fit in? Were they too "dazzling" or "unclubbable"? Were they haunted by loss or did they find it hard to adjust to a new country? Or were they just too foreign, or even too Jewish?

Perhaps this explains why so many Jewish refugees chose Prague, Switzerland or Paris before they came to Britain in 1939–1940. And even among those who did come to Britain, many major refugee critics soon moved on to America. Geoffrey Hartman (1929–2016) came to Britain in 1939 as an

unaccompanied Kindertransport child refugee, aged just nine. He spent the war in Britain but then went to the United States in 1946 to be reunited with his mother and stayed in America for the rest of his life. René Wellek (1903–1995) was born and raised in Vienna, came to Britain and lectured at the School of Slavonic Studies, at London University, 1935–1939 before leaving for the US in 1939. Steiner himself had escaped from Paris to New York with his parents and studied at Chicago and Harvard before he came to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He did not stay for long. Soon he was at Princeton and then Innsbruck, before returning to Britain. Erich Heller (1911–1990) came to Britain in 1939 but left for America in 1960, where he spent the remaining thirty years of his life. Dorothee Metzlicki (1914–2001), was born in Königsberg in Germany, moved to Russia and then escaped the Revolution to Memel (Lithuania). In 1933, she came to England but left for Jerusalem shortly before the war, where she later co-founded the English department at the Hebrew University, and then moved to the United States in 1954 and taught English at Berkeley and Yale for the rest of her career.

But many refugee critics who came to Britain did stay on and had distinguished academic careers. Some of the best-known were immersed in German-speaking culture, but they were not insular or parochial. Figures like Erich Heller, JP Stern and SS Prawer were wide-ranging in their interests. Heller's classic study, *The Disinherited Mind* (Heller 1952) moves between literature, philosophy, history of art and science. But the subtitle is crucial: *Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*. The book consists of eight essays on German writers and thinkers from Goethe, Burckhardt and Nietzsche to Kafka and Karl Kraus. It covers more than a century, starting with Goethe in the 1790s and ending with Kafka and Kraus in the interwar years. His next book, *Thomas Mann: The Ironic German*, was published in 1958, just before he left Britain for America, where he spent the rest of his life.

Heller is still best known for *The Disinherited Mind*. What is perhaps most striking, now, are the absences. There is almost nothing about Jewishness, exile, or Nazism in these essays. He briefly mentions how close Buchenwald was to Goethe's hometown, Weimar, there are a few references to evil, and there is a powerful quote from Karl Jaspers about the experience of reading Goethe after the Second World War. The overall tone is dark, but there is no sense of engagement with his own experience of exile or loss. What is interesting is that it was only later that these absences started to stand out. Heller barely mentions exile or either his or his family's experience of the war. This may have gone unnoticed during the early 1950s but more than half a century later, when we are more sensitive to these issues, this apparent detachment can come across as troubling.

JP Stern was just as wide-ranging in his interests. He wrote or edited nearly twenty books over more than forty years, on subjects ranging from Ernst Jünger and Nietzsche to Thomas Mann, Kafka and Hitler. But as with Heller, he stayed close to German-speaking central Europe. His penultimate book, published in 1992, was appropriately called *The Heart of Europe*.

SS Prawer was the only one of this trio to have been born in Germany. Heller was born in Bohemia, then in Austria-Hungary, and Stern was educated in Prague. He was hugely prolific, publishing more than twenty books over almost sixty years, ranging in subject from Heine, Marx and Thackeray to *Caligari's Children*, *The Blue Angel* and *Nosferatu*. What makes Prawer stand out from the others is that he was the only one to write widely about Jews and Jewish representation, especially in the second half of his career. During the 1980s and 1990s, he published *Heine's Jewish comedy: a study of his portraits of Jews and Judaism* (1983), *A. N. Stencl, Poet of Whitechapel* (1984), about the Yiddish refugee poet, *Israel at Vanity Fair: Jews and Judaism in the Writings of W. M. Thackeray* (1992) and *Between Two Worlds: the Jewish presence in German and Austrian film, 1919–1933* (2005). Prawer moved between 19th-century England, German literature and film, the representation of Jews and modern Jewish masters like Marx, Heine and Freud. He returned again and again to the subject of how great writers and thinkers saw others, a sort of hall of mirrors: how Heine saw Shakespeare, England and the English, how Heine and Thackeray saw Jews and Judaism, how Freud used British and American writing. It is no coincidence that one of his books was called *Between Two Worlds*. Like his sister, the writer and screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Siegbert Prawer was fascinated by liminal lives and writings.

All three were Germanists. They had distinguished careers and contributed to the growing impact of modern German-speaking writers and thinkers on late 20th-century British culture. How many Oxford critics had read Heine or even heard of the Yiddish poet, Stencl? Who in Britain was writing about Rilke, Nietzsche and Karl Kraus when Heller wrote *The Disinherited Mind*?

But though they helped introduce major German literary and philosophical figures, these Germanists remained curiously marginal in the larger culture. Only Stern's book, *Hitler: the Führer and the People* (1975), and his Fontana Modern Masters paperback on *Nietzsche* (1978), reached a more general audience. Apart from Prawer, their focus was resolutely on German-speaking culture: Goethe's Weimar, the Basel of Burckhardt and Nietzsche, Kafka's Prague and the Vienna of Karl Kraus.

George Steiner, Martin Esslin and Gabriel Josipovici were neither Germanists nor confined to language departments. But they faced the same problems of dealing with a parochial national culture as critics like Heller and JP Stern. After all, how many European writers were in FR Leavis's *The Great Tradition* (1948) or Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958)? How many central or east European writers did Frank Kermode, John Carey or Christopher Ricks write about?

And yet Steiner, Josipovici and Esslin, all refugees, had a significant impact on British culture, Steiner perhaps more than the others. There are several reasons for Steiner's impact, especially in the thirty years between his breakthrough book of essays, *Language and Silence* (Steiner 1967), and his last major book of essays, *No Passion Spent: Essays, 1978–1996* (1996).

First, Steiner was never just an academic. He wrote fiction, short stories and novellas. More importantly, in terms of his influence, he was a well-known broadcaster and journalist, and most of his books were published in paperback rather than as academic monographs. *Language and Silence* (1967) was first published by Faber and Faber, then in paperback by Pelican. Most of his influential books were published by Penguin, Faber and Weidenfeld and Nicolson. *After Babel* (1975), his seventh book, was his first to be published by a university press. Between 1984 and 2003, none of his books were published by university presses. He was part of that generation of British intellectuals, along with EJ Hobsbawm and AJP Taylor, who reached a huge audience through paperbacks.

His writing was accessible: old-fashioned and free of academic jargon. It is what you might call higher journalism. It is worth remembering that Steiner began as a journalist, writing for *The Economist* for "four magnificent years" (Steiner and Laure 2017, p. 8) in the early 1950s. Many of the essays in *Language and Silence* were originally published in small magazines: *Commentary*, *Encounter*, *The Listener*, *The New York Times Book Review* and *The TLS*.

Later, in the 1960s, Steiner became the leading book reviewer for *The New Yorker*, writing 134 articles over more than thirty years, most of them reviews or review-essays. The range was typical: Webern and Vienna, Borges and Beckett, Karl Kraus and Céline. His third main journalistic home was the London *Sunday Times*.

Part of Steiner's impact, then, came from the fact that his major books were published in paperback, and he reached an audience through newspapers and magazines. But there were other media homes for Steiner, television and radio, especially in Britain. He appeared on the best-known radio programmes: *Start the Week*, *Private Passions* and *Desert Island Discs*.

It was through television that Steiner reached his largest audience. In his heyday, he appeared on television discussing Freud and Kafka, the Holocaust and the end of Communism. He debated TS Eliot's antisemitism with Clive James, gave *The South Bank Show Lecture* on fin-de-siècle Vienna and talked about the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie on the first episode of BBC2's *The Late Show* in 1989.

Why was British TV and radio so interested in Steiner? There are three main reasons. First, Steiner opened up the insular world of Anglo-American literary criticism to Europe, especially central Europe. "A door was flung open on what had been there all the time, at our backs, namely, our European heritage," said the Irish writer, John Banville, in an interview in *The Guardian* in 2001. "He told us not to be cowed by insularity or hidebound by small minds, but to look beyond the border." The critic, Bryan Cheyette, said in the same *Guardian* profile, how Steiner offered, "the first telling those who would listen in Britain about Heidegger, Benjamin and Paul Celan—the great German philosophers

and poets. Now work on those figures is an industry, but he was a lone voice in the Sixties." As Steiner himself wrote in *Errata*, "I have sought to press on my students and readers . . . that which is "other", which puts in doubt the primacy of household gods." The echo of TS Eliot's *After Strange Gods* is not an accident: it is a direct reference to Eliot's 1934 lecture in which he criticised "nomadic Jews who threaten the cohesion of the group." (Eliot 1934; Cheyette 1993, p. 238).

In an essay on Borges in *The New Yorker* (20 June 1970), Steiner wrote of his "disdain of anchor". Where was Steiner's "anchor"? One answer comes in *Real Presences*: "In Kafka's prose, in the poetry of Paul Celan or of Mandelstam, in the messianic linguistics of Benjamin and in the aesthetics and political sociology of Adorno . . ." (Steiner 1986, pp. 5–6).

The brilliance of the intellectual and modernist avant-garde in Central Europe between the 1880s and 1930s was one of his great subjects. Jewish, urban, from "the inner capitals of the 20th century", the Budapest of Lukács, the Paris of Lévi-Strauss and Sartre, the Prague of Roman Jakobson and Kafka, the Berlin of Benjamin and Brecht, the Vienna of Freud, Kraus, Mahler and Wittgenstein. For Steiner, the flowering of European culture in the early 20th century was coterminous with post-emancipation Jewish culture: Marxism, psychoanalysis, much of modern physics and mathematics, philosophy, modernism and what he called "the language revolution". (Steiner 1972, p. 79).

Steiner wrote about the highpoint of Modernism, but the point was that he turned his reviews into intellectual drama. In the *TLS*, on 1 October 2004, he wrote: "In the twentieth-century context, the most challenging, creative encounter between philosophy and poetry is that between Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger." He begins a review of Céline,

Reportedly, Sartre, whom Céline loathed for his political opportunism and second-hand philosophy and whom he savaged in *A l'Agite du bocal* in 1945, declared not long before his own death, "Only one of us will endure: Céline." . . . [T]wo bodies of work lead into the idiom and sensibility of twentieth-century narrative: that of Céline and that of Proust.

Secondly, Steiner appealed to programme makers and executives because, whether in short reviews and essays or in monumental books, he asked big questions. Is Tragedy dead? Do humanities civilise? Will there be another Plato, Mozart, or Shakespeare?²

Steiner and his family had fled from Paris to New York in 1940. He was one of only two Jewish children from his school who survived the war. Everywhere in Steiner's writing we find big history. There are twenty-five references to Stalin in *Language and Silence*, twenty-two to Hitler.

Which brings us to the biggest questions of all in Steiner's writing. How can we explain the Holocaust and thousands of years of antisemitism? This was George Steiner's greatest, enduring legacy. In British post-war culture, he broke the silence about the Holocaust. He was the first major critic to do so, both in his fiction, in *Anno Domini* (1964) and later, famously, in *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1980, republished 1981) and in his academic books and essays. Think of the Foreword to the 1969 Pelican Edition of *Language and Silence*. On the first page Steiner states that, "Underlying these essays is the belief that literary criticism, if it is to be of any genuine interest at all and other than glorified book-reviewing, . . . ought to accept as its essential provocation the fact – to me scandalous in the deepest sense—of the coexistence in one time and place of "high culture" and political bestiality."

He continues,

Implicit in *Language and Silence* is the legacy, syllabus if you will, of that Central European humanism, c. 1860-1930, which Nazism and Stalinism all but obliterated. In so far as it looks back on a lost world, this book is unashamedly an act of remembrance, an effort, personal and limited, to keep certain names and habits of feeling alive.

² For example, *Has Truth a Future?* (BBC2, published in *The Listener*, 12.1.78, pp. 42–45; "Art, Repression and Freedom" (Voices, Channel 4, 1983); *The Late Show with Clive James* on 'evil artists' (BBC2, 18 November 1988).

His writing is haunted by the relationship between civilisation and barbarism in 20th-century Europe. In his book on Heidegger he writes,

I have sought to formulate certain questions about the interactions between, the interpretations of, artistic, philosophic, and scientific achievements on the one hand, and the totalitarian barbarisms of the twentieth century on the other. To ask such questions is to revert, obsessively perhaps, to the relations between German culture and Nazism . . . (Steiner 1978, p. 15)

In a late book of interviews, *A Long Saturday* (2016), he tells the interviewer,

the death camps, Stalin's camps, the great massacres, didn't come from the Gobi desert; they came from the high civilizations of Russia and Europe, from the very center of our greatest artistic and philosophical pride; and the humanities put up no resistance.

Steiner was never simply a literary critic. He wrote about great writers and thinkers in relation to modern barbarism and the fate of the Jews in 20th-century Europe. At the same time as George Steiner was making his impact in the 1960s, Martin Esslin established himself as the best-known writer in Britain about modern drama. He was born in Budapest, grew up in Vienna and fled from Austria after the *Anschluss*, first to Belgium and then to Britain before the war. He began working for the BBC in 1940, serving as a producer, script writer and broadcaster. Esslin headed BBC Radio Drama from 1963 to 1977, having previously worked for the external European Service. Later he became the BBC's Head of Radio Drama. During the late 1950s and 1960s, Esslin wrote a series of books about contemporary European drama: *Brecht: A Choice of Evils* (1959), *The Theatre of the Absurd* (Esslin 1962) and *Absurd Drama* (1965), explaining fashionable post-war European playwrights like Adamov, Genet, Ionesco and Beckett to British playgoers and students. Who were these new European playwrights and what did they have in common? What was "the theatre of the absurd"?

It is no coincidence that Steiner and Esslin burst upon the British cultural scene at the same time. Steiner's first book, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, appeared in the same year as Esslin's book on Brecht. *The Theatre of the Absurd*, still in paperback almost sixty years after it was first published, came out a year after Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* (1961).

The decade between their first books and the early 1970s marked a revolution in British culture. Britain, which had been notoriously insular, suddenly threw open its doors to European culture, whether the drama of Genet and Brecht or the ideas of Heidegger and the Frankfurt School.

What is striking about Steiner and Esslin, compared to the eminent Germanists, is their geographical range. Of course, they were interested in German-speaking culture. Esslin wrote on Brecht, Steiner on Adorno and Benjamin, Kafka, Celan and Thomas Mann. But both ranged far beyond German-speaking culture, from Paris to Moscow, from Beckett, Genet and Ionesco to Dostoevsky and Mandelstam. They brought news from Europe, not just from classical German literature.

There was something else, which is more evident in Steiner and Josipovici than Esslin. They wrote about Jews and Judaism, exile and loss.

Gabriel Josipovici was born in France in 1940, the same year as Steiner left. Both arrived in Oxford in the 1950s, Steiner as a Rhodes Scholar at the beginning of the decade, Josipovici at the end. Both began their academic careers in Britain in the Sixties, Steiner at Cambridge, Josipovici at Sussex, and these became their academic homes for the next forty years. Both were critics and writers, deeply preoccupied with the greatest Western literature, from the Old Testament to Kafka, with a particular passion for modernism. And for both, Jewishness became an increasingly important thread in their work.

Arguably, Steiner's greatest impact was not on literary criticism but on how we think about language, philosophy and theology. Josipovici's early impact, by contrast, was on how we think about modernism—particularly Proust and Kafka—cubism and modern music, and the questions they raise about other kinds of art, literature and music.

Josipovici's criticism is centrally preoccupied with one image: What happens when the individual artist sits down to produce a work? In the Preface to the 1987 edition of *Lessons of Modernism*, he writes: "Modernism is not only something which happened in Paris or Vienna in 1900; it is there, with the problems and possibilities, *whenever and wherever an artist sits down to work* [my emphasis]." (Josipovici 1987, p. xv).

This image is at the heart of the way he thinks about literature and all forms of art. An individual confronts an empty page or canvas and starts to work. For Josipovici, this is what modernism is about. At a certain moment, writers, artists and composers started to ask themselves questions about what they were doing, whether they had the authority to make claims for their work, whether or not they belonged to a tradition and how they could confront worries about uncertainty and failure. In his Northcliffe Lectures, published as *Writing and the Body* (Josipovici 1982), Josipovici writes of Kafka's doubts: "'Why should I do it this way if I might just as well do it that way?'" is not just a preliminary question. It is the first question and the last one too." (Josipovici 1982, p. 9).

It is primarily the writer as a solitary individual that fascinates Josipovici. Some of the central examples are Beckett, Kafka and Proust, who recur throughout his work from *The World and the Book* (Josipovici 1971) to *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010), almost forty years later. First, Proust: "We watch Marcel," he writes, "coming alive in those last pages of the novel, until he reaches the point where, understanding fully what his task is, he is ready to write the book we have been reading." (Josipovici 1991, p. 61). Or Beckett: "For Beckett did not stop at the end of *Molloy* and look round for another novel to write. There seemed to be no way forward, yet he found he could go on moving." (Josipovici 1991, p. 86). Or Kafka, alone in his room in a sanatorium: "We are now perhaps a little nearer to understanding the profound irony of Kafka's last illness. He who had always mistrusted writing, he who had always longed for a writing that would be more than mere words on paper, is now, in those last moments, reduced to communicating only by means of words on paper." (Josipovici 1982, p. 155).

"All artists are solitary beings," writes Josipovici. "All artists have to find their own way." (Josipovici 2006, p. 330). Proust in his cork-lined room, Kafka in his sanatorium, Beckett at the end of *Molloy*: all "solitary beings".

There is something consistent about Josipovici's preoccupations. From his first book, *The World and the Book* (Josipovici 1971), to his more recent collections of essays, we find the same key names: Proust and Kafka, together with Aharon Appelfeld and Walter Benjamin.

Perhaps the biggest change in his critical writing in recent years has been a growing preoccupation with Jewishness. Josipovici was always interested in a number of Jewish writers and thinkers: Freud, Wittgenstein and Benjamin, Bellow, Appelfeld and, above all, Kafka.

In a 2015 interview he says,

Until well into my thirties I knew I was Jewish, knew my mother and I had survived in France during the war more by luck than anything else, yet I had no connection with things Jewish. My first books were written by someone without any contact with organised religion or with any religious tradition.³

Josipovici learnt Hebrew in the 1970s in order to read the Old Testament. Three things followed. First, he started writing more about the Bible, especially the Old Testament, particularly in his book, *The Book of God* (Wangerin 1988) and more recently in *The Singer on the Shore* (Josipovici 2006). Second, he started writing his first pieces on the Holocaust. Above all, he wrote a very personal essay on his Jewishness in *The Singer on the Shore*. What is so interesting about this essay, "This Is Not Your Rest", is the way he contrasts "the art of rootlessness against the art of rootedness", writing about "always being on the move" which he finds in Kafka, Celan, Appelfeld and "in certain parts of the Bible and the

³ Best 2015, *The Mind of the Modern: An Interview with Gabriel Josipovici*, *Numero Cinq*, December 2015.

liturgy". "[Their words help me to understand] what I feel about not belonging, having no language, always being on the move . . ." (Josipovici 2006, pp. 300, 307).

This is very personal writing, whether he is talking about modernism or the Bible. But we can also see Josipovici as part of a larger cultural moment in Britain since the 1970s. First, how European and cosmopolitan English literary criticism has become. This was not just about French Theory. Josipovici, like Steiner, always went his own way. He was never a follower of critical fashion, being more interested in Blanchot than Barthes or Derrida.

In the 1970s and 1980s, British culture started to discover the writers and thinkers Steiner and Josipovici had been immersed in for years, long before many other English critics. Even before Josipovici told his Oxford interviewers about his passion for Dostoevski, he had spent his time in the public libraries, "devouring the works of Mann, Kafka and, finally, Proust." (Josipovici 2016a, p. 42). And then at Oxford,

I first came across the name of Borges in Maurice Blanchot's *Le Livre à venir*. That was in 1959, in the narrow corridor that linked the main shop to the foreign books department in the old Parker's, across the road from Blackwell's, in Oxford... In Paris later that year I picked up a copy of the French translation of *Ficciones* in the ugly yellow cover in which the NRF condemn their South American translations to face the world, and read it through in one afternoon. (Josipovici 1983a, p. 128)

In crucial ways, Steiner and Josipovici helped to Europeanise British literary culture. Not because of Theory, but because of European writers, thinkers and artists and the questions they made them think about. These were personal for Josipovici and Steiner and raised questions about modernism and language rather than about what became known as Structuralism and Post-Structuralism. They rarely quote Structuralists or Deconstructionists. Both Steiner and Josipovici are more interested in following the trail laid by writers, artists and composers.

Secondly, there is the Jewish question. Look how gentile Anglophone literary criticism had been since the First World War. English departments were not only uninterested in Jewish writers or critics, they were not even interested in the representation of Jews in the English canon. Perhaps they might have been interested in these questions if they had hired more Jewish academics. Steiner and Josipovici, who both started their academic careers in Britain in the early 1960s, were trailblazers.

These Jewish critics opened up a new world of thinkers like Benjamin and Scholem, writers like Kafka and Proust, the experience of exile, displacement and loss, and then the importance of the Jewish Bible. In 1988 Josipovici wrote one of his best books, *The Book of God*, and over the next thirty years a number of essays and on the Bible;⁴ while in 1996, Steiner wrote his Introduction to the Everyman edition of *The Old Testament: The King James Version*.

There were other key figures, of course, who opened up the Jewish Bible during the late 20th century, American critics like Geoffrey Hartman, Harold Bloom and Robert Alter among them. But in Britain, Steiner and, especially, Josipovici played a key part.

It was not just about the Jewish Bible. Reviewing *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (1981), Josipovici wrote,

. . . [W]hat this book does is to break up a history that had become monolithic for us, to open doors and windows in what we had thought were blank walls. . . . It alters the context of our thought about the past, reinforcing the insights of such scholars as Peter Brown and Meyer Schapiro, who have tried to draw us out of our Rome-centred, classics-centred view of the past. (Josipovici 1983b, p. 80)

⁴ Many of these were published in (Josipovici 2006, 2016b).

Reviewing three books on Walter Benjamin in the *TLS*, ten years or so later, Steiner argued that those unwilling to face the importance of Benjamin's Jewishness "have no true business with him." Later, he wrote about "the utter centrality of Judaism, of the "insoluble Jewish problem" to Leo Strauss's *oeuvre*. If, in the traditional pairing which Strauss adopts, the life-long labours turn around Jerusalem and Athens, it is the former which, at the last, radiates at the centre."⁵

What is striking in these reviews is the sense of "our Rome-centred, classics-centred" view of the past, the contrast between "Jerusalem and Athens". But, above all, it is Josipovici's crucial insight: this book "open[s] doors and windows in what we had thought were blank walls." This is what these refugee critics did. They changed the landscape by putting European Jews and Jewish issues there.

This was a central aspect to Prawer's work as well. He wrote about Jewish writers. Already by the beginning of the 1960s, he had written two books about Heine, the first of his five books on the great German–Jewish poet. Later, from the 1980s, he wrote increasingly about Jewish writers and the representation of Jews.

These refugee critics brought European modernism to Britain. Before them, English critics treated modernism as a thoroughly British and American affair: Pound and Eliot, Bloomsbury and DH Lawrence, Joyce and Woolf. The refugees were more interested in Beckett and Brecht, Benjamin, Kafka and Proust.

They also, crucially, brought European Jewish thinkers and writers, as well as the Jewish Bible, to Britain, at precisely the moment British culture discovered the Holocaust. This context was crucial. As Bryan Cheyette said in an interview almost twenty years ago, "Britain, until recently, didn't think it had a relationship to the Holocaust; its mythology of the war was rooted in the Blitz, Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain."⁶

In these two ways, in particular, Steiner and Josipovici helped to broaden the horizons of two generations of literary students. They brought European thinkers, Jewish writers and the Jewish Bible into the British mainstream.

Crucially, Steiner and Josipovici opened the way for a new generation of Jewish critics, including Bryan Cheyette and Peter Lawson, the editor of this publication, who started to find their voices as postgraduates in the 1980s and then as young academics in the 1990s. Cheyette's first book, *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English literature and society: Racial representations, 1875–1945* (1993), based on his PhD, is a heady mix of Steiner, Josipovici and Edward W. Said, and he has since written extensively on all three critics. Steiner and Josipovici, in particular, allowed a younger generation to think about their own Jewishness in relation to English literature, to find themselves and their concerns in the English canon.

A new cosmopolitanism spread through Anglo-Jewish culture from the 1980s and 1990s. Jewish Book Week, the books pages of *The Jewish Chronicle*, *The Jewish Quarterly* and *Jewish Renaissance* were all part of these widening horizons.

We should not forget that a handful of Jewish refugee critics made this new cosmopolitan and Jewish literary culture possible. In a recent issue of the American literary magazine, *Salmagundi*, the literary critic Stephen Greenblatt paid this tribute to Steiner:

Years ago my brilliant, polymathic teacher leaned toward me and whispered with some urgency that I should always carry two passports. That teacher was George Steiner. At home everywhere and nowhere, at once the possessor of European culture and possessed by it, Steiner is one of the great, restless wanderers of modern criticism . . . His astonishing intellectual career was a moving, emblematic refusal in the wake of Auschwitz to settle down to cultural business as usual. (Stephen 2020)

⁵ George Steiner, cit. Dan Gunn, "The restless prodigal", *TLS*, 5 May, 1995, p. 25; George Steiner, "Inscrutable and tragic", review of Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, *TLS*, 14 November 1997, p. 4.

⁶ Bryan Cheyette, cit. Maya Jaggi, *Guardian Saturday Review*, profile of George Steiner, 17.3.2001, p. 6.

“At home everywhere and nowhere, at once the possessor of European culture and possessed by it.” Not French or German culture. But “European culture”, with a Jewish voice and “two passports”. That is the legacy of the great Jewish refugee literary critics, in Britain and in America. In the year that George Steiner died and Gabriel Josipovici turns eighty, we should celebrate their impact on British literary culture.

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