

Murray Baumgarten, "Urban Rites and Civic Premises in the Fiction of Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, and Sandra Schor." *Contemporary Literature* 34:3 (Fall 1993), 395-424.

## Contemporary Literature XXXIV.3

### MURRAY BAUMGARTEN

# **Urban Rites and Civic Premises in the Fiction of Saul Bellow, Grace Paley, and Sandra Schor**

Consider the following thought experiment: imagine the Jews as a rural people. In modern times this is not possible. The miraculous yields of Israeli agriculture are the product of the urban, modern sophistication of its farmers. There are no country cousins among the sharp-eyed kibbutzniks. Reaching backward to the Talmudic era, we can envision the rural Jewish experience that included the two kallah months of Adar and Elul, which fall at the beginning of spring and the end of summer when the fields did not need tending, and so were designated as a time for free adult education by the great Babylonian rabbis Rav and Shmuel, in order to enlighten their country folk and prepare them for the yearly (at least) pilgrimage to Jerusalem. By contrast, the shtetl culture of the European Jews with a few isolated exceptions depended upon the fact that they were not allowed to own land or have access to the means of production of the rural economy. Here too they had to live by their wits. In any event, rural nostalgia quickly fades before the stinging phrase with which Karl Marx banished pastoral Rousseauism to the dust-heap of history. No, in modern times, the Jews do not partake of the "idiocy of rural life"; they are city people.

That was the core of the Nazi hatred of the Jews. In the ideology of Nazism, the country virtues insured the best Aryan stock. Hitler hated his capital city, rightly guessing that Berlin was a mysterious world that even he could not control: right through to the end of the war, many Jews managed to hide in it. What Hitler and the Nazis could do, however, was take revenge upon these city people, driving the inhabitants of the *Yidishe Gas*--the Jewish Street--into the ghettos, concentration camps, and death factories of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Theresienstadt, Bergen-Belsen. Even so, contemporary accounts of life on that "other planet," as a witness at the Eichmann trial called it, reveal the unyielding resistance of modern Jews which derived from their urban habits. By this act of witness, these Jews left a city legacy--modern Jewish destiny thereby articulated in the reborn urban centers of Israeli and American life. This should not surprise us, for the modern world had provided the Jews with a thorough urban training, teaching them throughout the decades of the later nineteenth century and our own totalitarian one that

only in the city could the Jews gain the rights of citizens and articulate their Western and human identities.

It is worth noting that for many American Jewish writers--Grace Paley, Woody Allen, Wallace Markfield, Lynne Sharon Schwartz come to mind--city habits reflect the tenacity of Jewish self-mythologizing as a people making do with a promised nation, yet one that for all their commitment strikes them as notably not their home. The fact of the existence of the State of Israel cuts only in the most oblique ways across so much of American Jewish self-consciousness (for which these writers' work perhaps stands as a synecdoche), which clings stubbornly to its own territorial lack. Here the city becomes the substitute for a nation; hence, it cannot be associated with America except insofar as America has been mythologized in the city's image as the melting pot or salad bowl. For these Jews, the city must be a microcosm and not the subset or center of a nation, because the Jews are of the world, scattered. They must be cosmopolitan. Often choosing to live as if it were possible to exist outside the difficult choices of modern politics, they have constructed a naive neighborhood. That is, though they claim to be city folk, they have responded to the violence characteristic of the contemporary urban and global situation by tolerating and even accepting the idea of exile and eschewing power: theirs has often been the politics of mute resistance rather than transformation.

Saul Bellow like Grace Paley engages these issues as part of the effort to situate the modern Jewish condition in urban Western history. He writes about the city that has lost its center--and the central city, the city as center, as place rather than condition, becomes the informing history of his characters' lives. Similarly, Sandra Schor's work carries this analysis forward to propose an enlightened dream of modern Jewish nationhood that provides the forward thrust for Jewish city life. For all three, this centripetal force of city experience is the result not of the homogeneity of the neighborhood but the heterogeneity of the street: for Schor, Paley, and Bellow, the American Jewish city may not be a promised land, but unlike, say, Michael Gold's, it is still full of promise.

In part, these differing views reflect the experience of how different Jewish communities settled in the New World. These Jewish self-representations thus mediate ideas and images of the city as much as progressivist or culturalist myths. Yet the desire of almost all American Jewish groups to identify themselves with city ideals expresses their anxious desire to avoid being mistaken for wanderers, nomads, and exiles--and does so by defining Jewishness against a more truly heterogeneous idea of Judaism. The fault lines splitting the American Jewish community set different views of Jewishness against each other and articulate different and clearly demarcated views of immigrant history. It is not surprising to find the classic Zionist notion of the ingathering of the exiles, David Ben-Gurion's *kibbutz galuyot*, serving as a subtext for much of American Jewish city life--and challenged in the terms in which modern Israeli life has confronted Ben-Gurion's socialist vision of the Jewish State.

Consider, then, the urban history of modern Western Jewry. Seduced by American possibility, driven by intolerable conditions in Eastern Europe, millions of Jews left their traditional culture at the turn of the century and headed for the fabled cities of the New World. Participating in the Western enterprise, the Jews helped to articulate its urban parameters. What they managed in Warsaw, Prague, Vienna, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, London, and Tel Aviv, they also achieved perhaps even more quickly in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Providence, Chicago, Cincinnati, and St. Louis, as well as Buenos

Aires, Santiago, Valparaiso, Bogota, La Paz, Lima, Quito, Caracas, San Salvador, Havana, and Mexico City, and eventually Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area. Transforming the ambiguous welcome they received at all the Ellis Islands of their debar-kations into straightforward opportunity, these immigrant Jews realized their desires by committing themselves to the democratic enterprise.

Parenthetically, it is worth recalling that Jewish immigrants began by working for others; soon they managed to work for themselves. Economic opportunity, including the struggle to form strong labor unions, quickly gave them enough power to gain a foothold and with it the beginnings of a public voice. National prominence came late in the century to individual Jews; in North America local urban power consolidated years earlier was their base. Even those who shot their way, to the top of Murder, Inc., thereby proclaimed their willingness to try the urban American way (Bell 115-16).

Embracing city life, American Jews found a modern fate. We hear its accents in the vitality with which Augie March addresses us at the beginning of his adventures. "I am an American, Chicago born--Chicago, that somber city--and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent." Relying on his personal abilities rather than traditional learning, making his way as an individual rather than a member of a communal group, Augie strikes out on his own. His free style enables him to modulate his responses to new situations and to take advantage of the fluid experience of the city. He can take on many roles and, functioning as Bellow's twentieth-century version of Shakespeare's Prince Hal, succeed--perhaps because his roguish exploits have helped him discover the full dimensions and range of meanings of his kingdom. Self-taught, he has the advantage of his rivals who cannot comprehend what Chicago is because of the cultural baggage they bring to this self-transforming city. Forced "early into deep city aims" (62), he articulates his own individuality because he is a city--a Chicago--boy. He is the prince of this city, demanding a noble destiny, for he is married to Chicago's world-transformative power--in which he participates and for a time makes his own. Optimistic, urban, modern, Augie is a "Columbus of those near-at-hand" (90), a discoverer and explorer of his new world.

The city is not only the setting for Augie's life but the condition of his existence. Even when he is off on his adventures he, like so many other characters in modern Jewish literature, is a city person. Bellow's novels depend upon and refer to this fundamental experience of the Jews in the modern world. Even if you can take the Jew out of the city, the city can't be gotten out of the Jew. His discoveries are urban, his life the reciprocal of the city he has made his own. To live in Bellow's city is to be neither beast nor god but fully human. Only here can one be an individual and thereby participate in the enterprise of Western culture. For Bellow the idea of the city is the hope of our individuality. Celebrating the urban condition, Bellow articulates its human ideal as our moral imperative. As Charley Citrine comments in *Humboldt's Gift*, "Chicago with its gigantesque outer life contained the whole problem of poetry and the inner life in America" (10). To explore the situation of the Jew in the city is thus to encounter the conditions for modern North American experience.

For Bellow, living in the city is a philosophical activity. Urban life makes possible the discovery of the self because it highlights the ways in which individuality is an event of consciousness as well as history. Bellow explores the ways in which idea and act are

inextricable from each other, mutual and self-defining reciprocals. To read Bellow is to comprehend the ways in which urban life makes possible the discovery of the idea of the self. To the extent that Bellow's work evokes Chicago and the contemporary city, so it provides a remarkable range of characters engaged in the process of discovering who they are as they put that person into action. They enact city careers, caught up in the power of the city as they learn how to deal with it. Self and city discover common limits and shared values, like organisms growing from the same soil. Herzog, for example, leaves the city at the end of the novel for the discovery of silence in the Berkshires; but it is evident that he must return to the city of intellect, imagination, and power in order to take up his moral quest once more. Not to do so is to define himself as an invalid, unable to be healed by the country air, to which he has turned for spiritual renewal. It is to realize that only in this modern version of the ancient Greek polis can one be an individual and thereby participate in the enterprise of Western culture.

For the Athenians who invented it, the polis was the "space of appearances that distinguishes yet binds men together." It served "to multiply the occasions of action and speech, thereby affording every citizen repeated opportunity to distinguish himself in the eyes of his fellows" (Fuss 168). This was part of its political function, and one of the ways in which it made a full human life possible. For the Greek, "the public revelation of men's unique identities through action and speech was the very content of politics." This activity defined the Greek sense of reality as it reinforced the conviction that city life alone was worth living. "Here alone could [the Greek] breathe the air of freedom, because he had left behind everything that had to do with his merely 'private' concerns--those governed by the standards of utility as well as those under the sway of necessity. Here alone he found himself released from the need both to rule and to be ruled. Here alone did the opportunity to reveal his individuality, to distinguish himself from all others, fully present itself" (Fuss 167). Bellow's nuanced and subtle articulation of the values of the polis parallel the exposition of its meanings central to the work of Hannah Arendt, a colleague of his in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. Like Arendt, Bellow speaks for the values of urbanism, the condition by which we live with all kinds, not just our own, in a public space conducive to the expression of the varied aspects of our personalities. Not to live in the city is to lose our sense of reality and become "entirely private . . . deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them." As Arendt points out, this brings us to "the end of the common world" (qtd. in Fuss 166). Under these circumstances, the city becomes a wilderness. The force and subtlety of the analysis of both Arendt and Bellow thus honors that of their predecessors (of the Chicago school of social science) Jane Addams, Louis Wirth, and Robert Park. They make us aware of the ways in which the epic city of nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture continued to fulfill some of the great ideals of the Greek polis. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between the two.

The Greek city was in size and population no more than a good-sized village, enclosed by a city wall. It was culturally and socially homogeneous, depending upon slaves for many of its economic functions, denying citizenship to women, whose activities were limited to the domestic sphere, and tending to link the political and sexual spheres through homosexuality. By contrast, the great city of the industrializing cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was an expanding space, with great social, cultural, and human diversity, rapidly replacing the labor of slaves with machines (and resources

appropriated from colonies abroad), freeing women from domesticity and allowing them the possibility of discovering their rights, as social, political, cultural, and sexual agents. This is the world not of Pericles but of Dickens, the historical dynamic not of Thucydides but of Carlyle. Rather than depending upon the intimate qualities of the polis, the possibilities of Bellow's Chicago, celebrated in novels that have an epic sweep and intensity, derive from the juncture of five modern developments. Gunther Barth elaborates how the modern city provided a transportation system for its population, apartments for them to live in, department stores for them to shop in, sports like baseball that taught the rules of competition as well as providing a focal point for urban loyalties, and a communications network--especially newspapers--to link people and place.

This contrast between Greek polis and the contemporary American city comes to a focus halfway through Bellow's 1981 novel, *The Dean's December*, in a startling passage in which, musing upon Aristotle's comment that "a man without a city is either a beast or a god," Dean Corde, its protagonist, reminds a friend of the past greatness of his native city. "Well, Chicago was the city." The Dean does not have the optimism of Augie and Herzog. As soon as he has made it, he begins to doubt his assertion: "Or was it? *Where* was it, what had become of it? No cities? Then where was civilization?" (229).

To the response of a colleague--"You're very hard on the old toddling town. Are things so different elsewhere?"--Corde admits the meanings of the situation he has been struggling against: "I suppose not. Among other discoveries, I found that Chicago wasn't Chicago anymore. Hundreds of thousands of people lived there who had no conception of a place. People *used* to be able to say. . ." And his friend agrees, "Ah, yes . . . I'm with you there. It's no longer a location, it's only a condition. South Bronx, Cleveland, Detroit, Saint Louis, from Newark to Watts--all the same noplacement" (237). The litany can be expanded to include other cities, as Bellow's novel makes clear, encompassing not only Chicago but Bucharest's shabby spirit, as well as the cities in between. The sentiment is echoed by Clara Velde, the protagonist of Bellow's novella *A Theft*: "The men I meet don't seem to be real persons. Nobody really is anybody. There may be more somebodies than I've been able to see." In the modern world, "Nobody is anybody" (74, 108). The meaning is, alas, the same: nowadays, the era of individualism, and the varied urban life on which it depended, is over.

Neither Dean Corde nor the other characters of *The Dean's December* are Jews. Nevertheless, Bellow's theme has its source in the historical situation of the Jew in the modern cities of the West. His work has charted their relationship, and this novel underlines the fact that the desperate situation of the American city can only lead to despair for the American, and the contemporary Jew. The Jew's situation is representative of the state of Western culture, his life an index both to its achievements and its dilemmas. What is possible for the West and the Jew, Bellow asks, now that the city has lost its center?

Intertwined in this historical and sociological question is a literary issue about city writing. Bellow, following Dickens and the great nineteenth-century social critics, has charted the immigrant experience, the young man from the provinces coming to the urban center of Western culture to seek his fortune and find his destiny, a story, as Lionel Trilling has noted, central to the realist, epic bildungsroman ("Princess"; "Manners"). In reaching for the capital city's cultural, economic, social, and sexual treasures, the young hero transforms elitist values into democratic possibilities. And the project of liberation

sweeping through these novels from which he benefits is the democratic political force re-creating the social order as it rebuilds its cities.

Nineteenth-century city planners, as Francoise Choay notes of Joseph Paxton, were the first to think of the city "in comprehensive terms" and consider "the city as a whole," as an interconnected system. Furthermore, Choay notes, the dominant concepts of art and labor, and their incarnation in city exhibitions in the early nineteenth century, the forerunners of the Crystal Palace exhibit of 1851 and later expositions and world's fairs, are linked to this mode of thought (24, 27). Such thinking was part of an analytic reduction perhaps resulting from but certainly paralleled by the new arrangement of city life on the "gridiron plan" that came to dominate urban thought; it was "planning powered by industrial-capitalism." Such "semantic impoverishment" which reduced the city to its new center also signaled a significant increase in access. Together, they articulated the notion of the city as the microcosm centering the new social, political, and cultural order, which the realistic urban novelist explored.

Entering the mainstream of American life as carriers of urban values in the postwar era, the Jews found themselves confronting a decaying city. The world they had defined for themselves became more and more difficult to live in. Public confidence in the city as the arena that made it possible to bring diverse neighborhoods and varied communal traditions into fruitful encounter had been shattered, postwar affluence, suburbanization, and white flight reinforcing earlier American suspicions of city life. As Sam Warner notes:

The sentimental, backward-looking quality of the urban nationalism of the late nineteenth century formed part of a general contemporary reaction to the growing industrial metropolis. In abetting this popular movement nationalism joined a strong and old American tradition--the rural ideal . . . an attitude which had always contained the notion of escape from city restraints, organization, and objects. The city's ways and forms were conceived of as too artificial and of the wrong quality to support a moral life.... [For the city] was thought to be the home of feasts and orgies, of clothes cut to fashion alone, of men and women devoting their lives to the pursuit of money, power, and happiness in a setting not made in the image of nature but by the goals of the city itself. Whereas in the country simple village institutions would suffice to police the actions of the villagers, the city often appeared out of control. The city accumulated great wealth, but it seemed lacking in devices to harness that wealth to moral ends.

(11-12)

It is a view Tolstoy embodied in the contrasting figures of Levin and Vronsky in *Anna Karenina* and Dickens turned into the caricature of Podsnap in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Bellow carries that vision forward as the literary tradition informing his work. He articulates both the optimism of the discoverer, the Columbus of this New World, and the guilt of the child who is forced into becoming the parent of the family, thus echoing Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* and Anzia Yezierska's *The Bread-Givers* and situating his work in relation to theirs. Exploring the difficulties of the immigrants' experience, Bellow charts their redemption from ancient quarrels by the new civic premises of this city world, which offers the rights of citizenship. Like Dickens's, Bellow's project leads him

to the role, responsibility, and obligation of speaking for his civic culture at the moment of its transformation. In his fiction, the American metropolis finds its voice.

The characters in Bellow's later novels cast about for explanations to account for the destruction of their native environment while seeking ways of surviving amid its wreck. Their difficult peregrinations make it clear that if the city's streets are no longer the possession of all, but have become the stalking ground of the few, civilization has turned into a wilderness. Instead of the urbane traditions brought to American shores by Jewish refugees and European exiles and expatriates when Hitler came to power, corrosive totalitarian habits have taken hold; an addiction to the eroticism of violence unleashed by the Holocaust and World War II has turned the American city into the site of Stalinist cultural politics; the city of death Mr. Sammler encountered at the hands of the Nazis has found other agents to carry on their obscene program. Only the survivors of the old ways, Dean Corde discovers to his dismay and increasing frustration at his powerlessness, bring any grace to Bucharest's bureaucratic repression, and their secret life can only for the moment emerge to commemorate the passing of one of their own.

Ironically, the modern city has been destroyed by those who claim to speak for the new modernism. Smashing the idea of individuality, they have ruined the heart of the city. When there is nothing to be a citizen of, the Jew is naked before the onslaught of modern history, having lost the turf which is the contemporary condition of his existence. To articulate these (im)possibilities of the urban situation as Bellow has done is to define the ironies of the modern, as well as the Jewish, condition.

The Western city, Bellow observes, has simultaneously expanded into the world-as-city and shrunk to the university campus and the regional shopping mall. No longer central to Western culture, urban life has become the background against which the mythic drama of superpowers emerges. *The Dean's December* ends with a meditation on intergalactic space brought on by a visit to the astronomical observatory at Mount Palomar. Dean Corde does not emphasize the ways in which the universe is rushing apart from its center--yet that too is part of the modern condition, by contrast with the focused urban experience of our recent past.

What for Bellow is the conclusion of modern city writing, for Grace Paley, as for Cynthia Ozick and Sandra Schor, is opportunity. Working in a synecdochic mode, seeking not the evocation and representation of the whole but its part that stands for the entire culture, they explore a world tangential to his. The marginal world of their characters and situations stays marginal and does not seek the revolutionary possibilities that make it possible for the epic city to become transformed into a version of the polis. The imperial city in which they live is not malleable politically and socially. Nevertheless, it offers urban opportunities to those previously excluded.

Where is the city, Dean Corde asks. Everywhere, his literary colleagues answer. If that is true, then city life depends not so much on place but on gesture, tone, and accent. The urban condition cannot be discovered; it must be revealed. We must expect to find the news of our city ways in accounts of how private life is suddenly transformed into public encounter. It is no accident that American Jewish women writers have recently made this kind of writing available to us. They bring to us the news of the newly empowered citizens of the contemporary city--the free American Jewish woman.

Consider only one moment in Grace Paley's extraordinary story, "A Conversation with My Father." Discussing with her father a story she is writing, the daughter-narrator

defends the urban possibilities of her heroine. Her father sees the woman's life as ended when she becomes a drug addict; the daughter-narrator protests: "'No, Pa,' I begged him. 'It doesn't have to be. She's only about forty. She could be a hundred different things in this world as time goes on. A teacher or a social worker. An ex-junkie! Sometimes it's better than having a master's in education.'" Father protests: "'Jokes,' he said . . . 'You don't want to recognize it. Tragedy! Plain tragedy! Historical tragedy! No hope. The end.'" But his daughter knows what city life is about. "'Oh, Pa,' I said. 'She could change'" (166).

Instead of Bellow's lament at the demise of the respectable, middle-class city virtues, the world of Grace Paley's fiction is a clear-eyed exploration of the state of liberation of contemporary Jewish women in the decaying yet vital city. Her characters know that for all its anarchy and chaos, the city makes possible their liberation from patriarchal structures, be they familial, institutional, or personal. Amid the confusion of formal structures and formidable institutions, they make their way. As the city allows them to live their own lives, even if that means they are marginal to the forces and powers of Bellow's epic world, so it also allows them to hear each other's voices in a new way. They too now, in the words of John Stuart Mill's extraordinary essay, "The Subjection of Women," benefit from "the peculiar character of the modern world--the difference which chiefly distinguishes modern institutions, modern social ideas, modern life itself, from those of times long past[.] It is, that human beings are no longer born to their place in life, and chained down by an inexorable bond to the place they are born to, but are free to employ their faculties, and such favourable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them most desirable" (142-43).

Paley's women are not modern heroes out to re-create the world in their own images; coming after Auschwitz, they seek to survive in order to bear witness to their humanity, as they reflect upon their experience of sisterhood. Theirs is the disadvantaged world of the poor and unrecognized. Wherever they go, these women are at risk. The despair of contemporary life is inscribed in their lives, but the desperation with which they address it speaks not to the giving up of the struggle but the power to renew it through thought. For them, living is thinking, and thought is the opportunity to renew their lives. As the narrator in "Living" says, "People require strengthening before the acts of life. I drank a little California Mountain Red at home and thought--why not--wherever you turn someone is shouting give me liberty or I give you death. Perfectly sensible, thing-owning, Church-fearing neighbors flop their hands over their ears at the sound of a siren to keep fallout from taking hold of their internal organs. You have to be cockeyed to love, and blind in order to look out the windows at your own ice-cold street" (59).

Where then is the city, Dean Corde asks for Bellow, expecting a response that echoes his pessimism. Instead, the surprising answer is that in some form the city yet continues, as idea if not ideal, as psychic force and the energy underlying Corde's jeremiad. For Western culture, the city is now nowhere--and everywhere. No longer place-specific in the old way, now the exchanges of urban life reveal themselves in gesture, tone, and accent: the news of city ways surfaces not in the urban novel but the briefer accounts of the sudden transformation of private events into public encounter. These modes of writing of American Jewish women writers locate the world of the city in the episodic epiphanies of their stories.



These writers seek not to encompass an entire culture but to evoke its lyric intensities. In their work the imperial city's cultural and political imperatives are sidestepped in order to construct the intimacies of the polis in the alternative possibility of the local neighborhood. Their stories take place in the lyric moment of the present tense, functioning as an epiphany, crystallizing the costs and benefits of Jewish immigrant life into shimmering images. Nevertheless, their achievement derives from the history central to Bellow's work, as their smaller compass depends upon his larger narrative sweep. As the title of Paley's collection testifies, this is an urban world in which enormous changes occur in people's lives at the last minute: the world-transformative power of the epic, industrializing city has now become the psychological structure and personal surprise of individuals' lives. Paley prepares for the moment of transformation, guiding us to it, in order to memorialize and celebrate that astounding instant and the city world which makes it possible. Her characters, no less than Augie March, live and breathe the city world. They too are experts in the quick remark, the swift retort; they too are language-makers, citizens of that most volatile of urban elements, as they celebrate the moment of unsuccess in order to remember the conditions that might make its opposite available.

Informed by the devastations of the past and aware of the potential terrors of our nuclear future, these stories make possible the space of reflection. Not yet word-wise or street-smart, the Jewish woman narrator of Paley's tales voyages through the city in search of her past, seeking "the houses and streets where her childhood happened." Putting on shorts and running shoes, this "woman inside the steamy energy of middle age runs and runs," jogging through the past city and the city present, her breath "long and deep" as she enters "the old neighborhood"--both physical presence and psychic reality. As she lives in both, she "learns as though she was still a child what in the world is coming next" ("Long-Distance Runner" 198).

Her journey implicates us as city residents as it inscribes her presence in this world. In this story, dialogue--in a gesture characteristic of much of Paley's best work--takes place outside quotation marks and inside the mind of the narrator, actors, and reader. The shock of our recognition comes with the realization that the city through which Faith runs is intersubjective. Encountering the meanings she is making in her life as a city person, Faith discovers how they intersect the lives of the other citizens of this place in fateful ways:

Suddenly I was surrounded by about three hundred blacks.  
Who you?  
Who that?  
Look at her! Just look! When you seen a fatter ass?  
Poor thing. She ain't right. Leave her, you boys, you bad boys.  
I used to live here, I said.  
Oh yes, they said, in the white old days. That time too bad to last.  
But we loved it here. We never went to Flatbush Avenue or Times Square. We loved our block.  
Tough black titty.  
I like your speech, I said. Metaphor and all.  
Right on. We get that from talking.

Yes my people also had a way of speech. And don't forget the Irish. The gift of gab.

(181-82)

Meeting those who now live where she used to, Faith runs out of the Jewish community of her past into the new black ghetto that has replaced it. The moment echoes many such events, the stuff of contemporary New York life, and thus carries the realities of urban interethnic encounters into this brilliant theatrical exchange. Notice how in response to Faith's statement "I used to live here," these black voices play with her--and our--linguistic and social expectations, answering, "in the white old days," capping the statement with "That time too bad to last." We participate in a contrapuntal exchange of accents, voices, and meanings. Perhaps there is as well here an intentional echo of the brilliant end of *Call It Sleep*, when the voices of the multinational residents of New York in the 1930s join in an urban ritual, an opera of language, consciousness, and ethnic encounter.

At risk, Faith hears with keen ears and responds in steady recitative. The speech acts of this street exchange between Jewish woman and black crowd perform the meaning of urbanism: they articulate the idea of the urban. This difficult meeting between Jew and black does not lead to the suburban politics of rage, anger, and hate coursing through our national politics but to the powerful sharing between the black and Jewish women that takes up the rest of the story. As such it differs significantly from other encounters between blacks and Jews in other American Jewish writing. In a world where white and black males often find it difficult to listen, this redeeming city idea depends upon the acts of a Jewish woman, for they are encounters made possible by a woman's understanding of diversity. Focusing on marginal characters and devoting their energy to refiguring marginal forms, these Jewish women writers find ways to express their skepticism about myths of urban heterogeneity--perhaps in response to the profound difficulties of Judaism in recognizing its women outside the closed values of its traditional world.

The plot of Paley's story focuses the issue. The Jewish narrator, led upstairs to see the apartment in which she grew up, frightens her young black guide, who flattens herself against the wall and screams for help. Fleeing the crowd, the narrator finds shelter in her old apartment, taken in by Mrs. Luddy, the black woman who now lives in it. The comedy of the story depends upon the sudden changes of this world, for its characters undergo breathtaking transformations that make it possible for them to maneuver in this urban kingdom. Mythical metamorphosis or not, Faith finds herself back in her childhood world. A good woman, she participates in its everyday life with Mrs. Luddy, washing diapers, doing dishes, and helping the children with their homework. A member now of this blended family, she learns its past through the familial tales and songs recounted by the children and Mrs. Luddy, who like her sits and looks out the window at the flow of urban life beneath.

This life is one of stories nested within each other, an endless stretch of talk and self-expression. Like them, Paley's stories partake of the wonders of oral storytelling. They are the talk by which we come to know ourselves. Told about the past, they shape the future, by helping us to live in the eternal present of their telling. They are made possible by the gift Grace Paley, a Jewish woman, makes to her readers--the ability to

hear. That is what distinguishes her women from her male characters. In teaching us what it means to listen, hearken, and thus truly speak, Paley's story defines a central aspect of the lives of women in the modern world.

This defining intercourse of Paley's world brings to mind Tevye's conversations with God in Sholem Aleichem's classic tales. The sympathy and love with which Tevye was endowed by the greatest writer of modern Yiddish literature are not accidental to the powers of the *mamaloshen*, the mother tongue of the Jews, with its access equally to the culture of the folk and the stern Hebraic force of the divine. Neither is it chance that makes possible Paley's astounding art. It is the result of her exploration of her civic premises. City-dweller, citizen, woman, and Jew, Grace Paley believes with Jane Addams "that woman has no right to allow what really belongs to her to drop away from her." Her power lies in the "ability to perform an obligation" in the knowledge that its meaning "comes very largely in proportion as that obligation is conscientiously assumed" (Addams, *Position* 123). In this world, the obligations of living are the truths of speaking. To think here is to encounter the absurdities of the contemporary human condition with the honesty characteristic of women, mothers, lovers, and sisters, and to continue the struggle to make a difference. That is, it is neither to give up the effort to change the school system nor to give up on the promise Faith made to her children to end the war before they grew up (Paley, "Wants" 5). A world of obligations is not a chaos; it has the possibility of community, which is, after all, the assumption of the duties and obligations that articulate our humanity. And it is in this urban world alone that we can perform them.

Out of the small forms with which she works, from these lyric stories, Paley proffers a large and redeeming effort, no smaller than Bellow's concern to write the epic urban literature of his day. Through this dramatic encounter and theatrical voicing of the ethnic accents of contemporary city life, Paley proposes no less than the articulation of the language of America. It is an urban tongue, quick, explosive, inter-sected, meditative and honest, steady and direct in facing its respondents. Encompassing the accents of the Irish, Italians, blacks, and Jews, it also reaches out to the language of children's stories (see "Gloomy Tune") and the idiolects of advertising and politics. What Grace Paley thus provides us is a language by which to conceive our urban selves.

In so doing Paley retrieves the classic role of the American writer, inflecting it with the sympathy so central to her understanding of her woman's and her Jewish experience. She is then the American Poet of whom Tocqueville wrote so many years ago. Expressing the range of our diversity by exploring our multiple selves, she brings us together as a people and a nation. For the poet, writes Tocqueville, "cannot dwell upon any one of" the "citizens who compose a democratic community . . . but the nation itself invites the exercise of his powers." The result is a literature that articulates "the hidden nerve which gives vigour to the frame" of the whole. Furthermore,

in democratic ages, the extreme fluctuations of men and the impatience of their desires keep them perpetually on the move; so that the inhabitants of different countries intermingle, see, listen to, and borrow from each other's stores. It is not only then the members of the same community who grow more alike; communities are themselves assimilated to one another, and the whole

assemblage presents to the eye of the spectator one vast democracy, each citizen of which is a people.

As a result, American literature "displays the aspect of mankind for the first time in the broadest light. All that belongs to the existence of the human race taken as a whole, to its vicissitudes and to its future, becomes an abundant mine of poetry." The scope of this democratic literature has a fateful power, for the "poets who lived in aristocratic ages have been eminently successful in their delineations of certain incidents in the life of a people or a man; but none of them ever ventured to include within his performances the destinies of mankind" (chapter 17). No less a subject than our urban fate as a nation of immigrants and ethnic groups, our city destinies as men and women, forms the matter of Grace Paley's work. This is not the epic of Chicago but the matter of New York--America's city for the world.

In the demise of the idea of the individual and the urban conditions that make individualism possible Bellow locates the end of modern Jewish writing. For Paley, by contrast, we have the beginning of the Jewish writing of the modern situation. Her exploration of urban experience reveals it to be the necessary condition for reflection. This city idea makes thinking possible. This realization results from Paley's understanding of the city world that women have--by contrast with a progressivist perspective. For women, the city makes possible the claiming of power. A fulfillment of Jane Addams's program, this is an act of gender liberation.

It is clear that despite Bellow's elegy, the modern American city still holds a fascination for the contemporary American Jewish writer, though we have reached a point of change in modern American Jewish writing as in the life that is its source. "In a nation now more suburban than urban," as a recent *New York Times* report notes, "with residential segregation common, jobs increasingly following residences out from the urban core, and regional growth and corresponding political power moving away from the most affected areas" (Applebome 1), most people do not feel the impact of the destruction and decay of the center city. As a result, the urbanism central to city culture is no longer a generally operative principle. When the other is glimpsed only through a car's windshield, everyday life no longer involves the encounter of all kinds and is reduced to suburban homogeneity. Nevertheless, though most American Jews no longer come to the city as immigrants in search of the promises of modernity, the new immigrants of the 1980s have made an impact, helping to recover the civic claims of past generations: "In Chicago, where strong neighborhood identities have blunted much of the sense of urban decline, the downtown area remains the hottest real estate market in the metropolitan area. Even in New York, a surge of immigration-Russian Jews, Haitians, Dominicans, Vietnamese--is bringing the promise of new vitality to some sections of the city even as some other sections continue to decline" (Applebome 1). Though many claim that the "evidence is strong that in general America's cities are continuing a long, slow decline," others have argued just as persuasively that "the growing ethnic pluralism that characterizes the city may turn out to be its salvation rather than its downfall" (Applebome 12; Salins 14-15).

The literature of immigration has led to the immigration of literature about new arrivals into a form committed to representing their diversity. The multiculturalism of the contemporary fiction of Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee thus recovers the

classic force of the realistic novel in its commitment to the urban exchanges of city life. Reclaiming a past literary form, this literature represents the contemporary realities of New York: "The city's immigrant-driven culture has given it a ragged energy reminiscent of American cities at the turn of the century. How much better a fate than that of so many other American metropolises, their newly rehabilitated but half-empty downtowns surrounded by a sea of physical, social, and population decline" (Salins 14). In its brashness and new energy this New York is an unfamiliar New World. Perhaps for some, the city has become strange because these new residents are not Western and thus not assimilable to the notion of the wandering Jew. Then too, for some the Jews have lost the status and credential of "Everyman" by moving to the suburbs, leaving to recent urban immigrants not only the city but this role as an American legacy. Whatever the reasons, this new, overdetermined city in its very strangeness reasserts those optimistic, world-making possibilities whose loss Bellow's elegy for the city mourns. Have we not returned to the city Carl Sandburg celebrates?

And having answered so I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city,  
and I give them back the sneer and say to them:  
Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive  
and coarse and strong and cunning.

("Chicago" 3)

These old/new possibilities inform a brilliant novel, published in 1990, which resumes the urban literary history of American Jewish writing. In it past and present turn into each other, history presses on the everyday, and language shapes myth in a play of reciprocals. Sandra Schor's *The Great Letter E* is a meditation on character and doubling, the action of this city novel rotating through the New York boroughs. The characters of this novel often find themselves on the bridges linking Queens, Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn (and occasionally on the ferry going to Staten Island), and their responses elicit these transitional passages and structures as the novel's subtext, its liminal image. Not only do the bridges connect, they also serve as part of the novel's structures of delay, procrastination, avoidance, and elusiveness. They are the form which the tenuousness of the city's connections take, for all New Yorkers know how bridges and tunnels in New York make the essential connections possible--but *mean* that these connections are made only with great difficulty. In this fiction, each borough provides a different psychogeography, echoing the changes enforced by the plot on its protagonists. Its characters grow up in the Bronx, pursue their marriages in Queens, move to Brooklyn to carry on their separate existences, flirt on the Staten Island ferry, and earn a living in Manhattan. Their lives resume the patterns of three generations, as they chart the effects of Americanization. Entering into the fullness of possibility of modern Western culture, they discover the cost/benefit analysis implicit in their embrace of Jewish emancipation (Wolfe).

Not only space but time is doubled here as the great letter E of the novel's title takes character and reader from the optometry shop owned by Barry Glassman (note the deftly administered pun of his name) to his psychic and philosophic double, Baruch Spinoza, whose life and work in seventeenth-century Amsterdam as a Jew-philosopher and lens grinder is folded into the greater metropolitan symbolism of the work. This novel thereby

doubles the situation of the modern freethinker and his liberating urban world, taking it from historical origins to contemporary consequences. Glassman's meditations early in the novel underline these connections:

Hadn't Professor Winning always said it, half-consoling, half-mocking our flustered attempts to follow the Spinoza geometry? "Our confusion is part of our perfection." How he misled me into believing I could be a philosopher, praising me after class for my methodical readings of the *Ethics*, for espousing the system with less confusion than anyone else--or so I thought. Then the B+ in "Spinoza," and a glowing recommendation went to Yale in behalf of Lorenzo Levi, the orthodox son of an Italian Jewish mathematician from Sunnyside. Who could forget those ice-cream silk shirts, those blazing eyes, and the tiny scars on his wrists, barely perceptible under the rubber bands he arranged there for emergencies? But he wrote like an angel! I swore then to out-Spinoza Spinoza and out-Levi Levi. Levi and his rubber bands went to Yale and I to the New York School of Optometry. Eventually, they dropped his fellowship: a suicidal Orthodox Jew was the wrong risk for a philosophy department. I finished with honors. Why then do I still see pudgy Lorenzo Levi riveted to my dream of boola-boola and all that crap, while all I have is a drafty optometry shop, lit with a capital E, among the crazies on Eighth Avenue?

(9)

Glassman struggles to make sense of his marital troubles, staving off impending separation from his wife (and a decision about divorce), so that their son's bar mitzvah--just weeks away from the action with which the novel begins--can proceed as planned. As he struggles to come to grips with his troubles, all of which come to crisis together, Glassman plots a holding action yet is forced to make a series of choices, without the markers that had once guided him through everyday life. At this moment, philosophy and theology rather than optometry offer him the help he needs.

Responding to his rabbi's comment that he is a marginal Jew, Glassman turns to the examples of Spinoza and Einstein. Though his situation echoes that of Bellow's Herzog, who must roam through all of Western thought to deal with his wife's marital infidelity and his own sexual desires, the mise en scene of Schor's novel fuses idea and psyche and makes Glassman--marginal as philosopher and Jew--central to the quest for knowledge and enlightenment, this stroke of genius revealing the dialectic relation of modern and Jewish life in an astonishing novel of blindness and insight. For despite his ritual skepticism, Barry constantly engages his rabbi in philosophical discussions. Rabbi Mayberg's engagement in these conversations reveals their intoxicating quality: these discussions are carried on in the *nigun*--the melodic chant--of Talmudic learning, as if the two men were not just friends and colleagues, rabbi and congregant, but traditional study partners. Barry encounters another double in Brooklyn in the person of Bernard Messenger, a blind student of philosophy, from whom, after the bar mitzvah of his son, Michael, and his formal separation from his wife, Marilyn, Barry rents a room.

In the course of the novel, the great letter E comes to stand not only for the optical chart and all that it implies about making one's way in the world, but, among other meanings, for Elohim; thereby it signals Spinoza's, Rabbi Mayberg's, and Barry's

philosophic/religious intoxication. Once Barry is reacquainted with Cousin Enid, the letter E gathers erotic force. Like the protagonist of I. B. Singer's *Enemies: A Love Story*, Enid has three lover-spouses, and her effort to sort out the meanings of her many loves as well as the negotiations involved in responding to each and all further echo Singer's novel. Unlike Singer's Herman Broder, however, Enid's is not a travail of deferred meetings and angry demands. Scientist and family member, Enid understands the needs of passion and desire more coherently; she loves Bernard, Barry, and her husband, Lutz, who returns from Israel to regain her trust, because each makes it possible for her to express another aspect of her complex, rich being. Unlike Herman she has not been traumatized by the Holocaust; she is not desperate to hide but instead seeks to create the conditions for new life. Her city does not threaten her, as it does Herman, but instead makes possible her transition between alternative roles, multiplying rather than reducing them. Together, these lovers teach her in a world of fragmented traditions what the full meaning of love might be. With the practiced ease of a native New Yorker going for a subway ride, she leaves for Israel at the end of the novel committed to bearing and raising her children in the Jewish State. Similarly, for Barry, philosophy, Jewish practice, the rigors of optometry as a science and the business cycle to which it is tied as an independent profession, the obligations of parents and children, communities and rabbis, teachers and pupils, husbands and wives all intermingle, as Glassman seeks to come to grips with a personal past constantly echoing national history and the sources of modern Jewish life.

The philosophical/theological focus of the novel leads to the reclaiming of Spinoza's thought and life as the first modern Jew by engaging the pantheistic roots of his work, echoing questions raised by Cynthia Ozick in *The Pagan Rabbi* but finding a more ecumenical response. Issues of character, philosophical thinking, and theological questioning are all brought to a focus in *The Great Letter E* through the lens of personal decision-making: how, for example, can Barry, Bernard, and Lutz deal with sexual jealousy? This intersection of economics and eroticism is resolved at one level by research in optics in which all these partners participate with Barry. Still, a sexually perplexed Barry wonders how "to be friends, cousins, scientists while Enid Moscow's female body is in the way" (149), discovering he cannot evade the body and hide in thought. As he learns from Bernard Messenger, personal life in its everydayness claims its place over and against the abstraction of philosophic thought: "I say you've misled yourself, Barry. Your systems have misled you. They're too vast. You don't see the next guy's necessities. You worry only about *your* necessities. The philosophic life is a self-centered life that deludes itself into thinking it is not" (139). The novel thereby dramatizes Spinoza's views and his place in the history of philosophy and thus suggests the boundary conditions for each of its dialectical extremes. Insisting on limitations and freedoms, Barry realizes that "Seeing matters, not sight. And loving matters, not love. The mind's capacity to imagine is its freedom--and its link to error" (107). Here Glassman's discovery parallels that of the philosophical protagonists of Rebecca Goldstein's novels, especially the meditation on self-deception of *The Late-Summer Passion of a Woman of Mind*.

When a plane carrying a group of Barry's friends to an optometry convention crashes, killing most of them, the novel invites both character and reader into a meditation on chance, life, and death. Glassman has just finished the year of mourning for his mother, driving to Bayside to his synagogue every afternoon and religiously reciting the Kaddish at evening prayers. His mother had asked him to say Kaddish for her almost at the same

moment she had insisted she be cremated. The bridge he crosses from Manhattan en route to prayers comes to stand for the transitional moment, that instant of life and the moment of death, as it also speaks to the irony at the heart of these changes. In the absence of his colleagues, Barry's business picks up; he makes his Puerto Rican helper his partner; he brings in another employee, who leads him amid the noise of the street to a moment of recognition: it is children that are needed, the rush of new life. How glad Glassman is then for Michael, his son, how much he meditates on the low sperm count that has kept him from fathering more children.

This meditation on death and life also encompasses a dramatic remembering and retelling of Spinoza's excommunication by the Amsterdam Jewish community. Walking by the canals of his native city in growing isolation, Spinoza has only philosophy as consolation, echoing the alienation and loneliness Glassman feels at the beginning of the novel's action. By the end of *The Great Letter E*, however, Barry's world is peopled by his cousin and lover, Enid, his friend Bernard Messenger, his uncle Nathan, Feliz, his new partner, and Linda, his new assistant. They join Marilyn, from whom he is now separated, and Michael, along with Rabbi Mayberg and other members of Barry's synagogue community, in constituting the clan for whom and because of whom he seeks philosophical enlightenment and Jewish wisdom. They are the ones who help him imagine the Staten Island ferry as a crossing of the river Styx, bringing that forgetfulness which allows them all to live in the moment--and help him understand Judaism as a philosophy of transition. In Sandra Schor's world, this dialectic of thought and action leads to a discovery of indwelling meaning in the city, from the wondrous multicolored light of its rainbow (caused to be sure by urban pollution but a striking presence nevertheless which Barry investigates from a professional perspective to help alleviate the discomfort of contact lens wearers) to the passions and desires of its diverse inhabitants. These are not ideas or objects to be possessed but experiences to be reached for, understood, and woven into the fabric of everyday life, existing in the quick talk and vivid habits of these characters. Driven by the city's energies, their conversations lead them to self-discovery, city encounters rescuing them from solipsism and self-deception. Schor's discourse balances their nervy talk with Glassman's meditations, thereby complementing each aspect with its fulfilling opposite.

The novel epitomizes the epic career of modern Jewry as it concludes with Barry driving into the countryside with Bernard to look for land of his own to buy. The scene echoes the classic Zionist claim that only on one's own land can one shape a people's identity, at the same time that it recalls the boundaries of the Bronx, the borough of parks so close to the more open countryside of upstate New York and northeastern New Jersey. And the rural dream echoes the philosophic ideal of meditation, knowledge, and tranquility, achieved by Glassman as he follows in Spinoza's footsteps, recalling as well the conclusion of Bellow's *Herzog*. Resuming the literary history of modern Jewish writing, Schor's novel reconceptualizes the urban form, carrying Bellow's project forward, her vivid characters reclaiming the classic civic and personal values of an adventurous, urbane tradition. For Glassman too is a Columbus figure. Like Augie he is an immigrant to the city, in this case the boy from the Bronx now earning his living in Manhattan, living out a suburban crisis of isolation in his Bayside home, and returning to city connectedness in Brooklyn. But Augie's optimism is not fully available for Glassman, who lacks Augie's sexual and linguistic force, as metropolitan pride has given



way to urban fragmentation. What Bellow imagined, and young Augie embodied, Mr. Sammler has been left to mourn. Put another way, it is the difference between Bellow's speaking for the city and Schor's speaking with the city.

Imaginative social analysis, Dean Corde believes, will get at the root of the decay of the city; then political power, properly applied, will re-create urban public life. At the center of his vision of the city is the voice of the metropolis, the objective force implicit in third-person narrative. By contrast with Bellow's commitment to this fictive strategy, Schor, Goldstein, and Paley all write first-person fictions. Their narratives challenge conventional belief in an objective reality and evoke the limits of personal knowledge, articulating the reconstruction of everyday life through their focus on the personal gaze. Rather than speaking for the center, their perspectival fiction speaks with the city as its characters are spoken to by urban life. They articulate the doubled gaze--of looking and being looked at--of the street.

The change in narrative strategy may also be due to the fact that "speaking for" the city has since the 1980s no longer been a possibility for the Jewish writer. The ground from which to fashion an effective response to the whip of institutional racism crumbled with the dissolution of the coalition politics of FDR, Truman and Stevenson, the Kennedys, and LBJ as the city became part of the rust belt of a service-oriented economy. The urban rage that results can be justified but does not constitute an effective program of political action. Nor does self-justification help in bringing together diverse groups to make common cause for a shared urban idea. Just as the names put into the mouths of Jewish writers by black critics have not often included James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, or Michael Schwerner, so the long and sustained American Jewish history of standing up for black rights and sharing black pain has recently not often been acknowledged. What the Jewish writer has heard is not a call for justice but the cry for a scapegoat: the attack of the black critic has sounded as another version of the ancient, perhaps founding anti-Semitism of Christianity. Though Spike Lee feels no compunction about speaking for the Italian or the Jew, Julius Lester understands what has been left out (Lester 62-63, 128-32). The human connection established in *Goodbye, Columbus* between Neil, the librarian reserving the picture books of Gauguin for the young black inner-city boy seeking to feed his imagination and reclaim the possibilities of sexual, economic, and political liberation in an act reciprocal to those Neil is struggling with in his relationship with Brenda, the suburban girl, has not in recent years been an acceptable fictional topos. Nor is Lore Segal's urbane account of the Jewish immigrant girl's awakening to her social, cultural, and sexual identity through the encounter with "her first American," wise and black and male, a model current in the genre--though the realities both Roth and Segal underline through their fiction are more prevalent than ever before in multicultural, diverse, affirmative-action contemporary urban America. Confronted with such a truncation in life and in the repertory of city fiction, refusing to be co-opted out of their flesh-and-blood difference into the ideological flatness imposed by "the myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition" (Cohen), novelists like Steve Stern have emphasized Jewish history, Jewish ethics and religious traditions rather than urban and ethnic social experience for their subject matter. Emphasizing the fantastic and the surreal, their discoverers recall not Augie but the Columbus who set sail at the moment of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

In this context, Schor's decision to evoke Spinoza and place his ideals in the contemporary American city is to invoke once more the promise of modernity as liberation from the deformations of party hegemony, patriarchal rule, and the deepest religious tyranny. The force of Spinoza walking along the Amsterdam canals as part of his meditation, his speaking-with-God, makes it possible for Schor to resist the contemporary critical attack on the very idea of the city as the site of exchange in order to reclaim the human possibilities of urbanism. After three decades of clamoring for roots and the rights of clan and tribe, with identity-making heading the social agenda, and despite the current parlous state of the American city, including the murder of Yussef Hawkins, the actions of Bernard Goetz, and the Crown Heights pogrom, Schor's novel articulates a way of beginning a different era of multicultural interchange and ethnic reconciliation. We hear its echo in Sara Paretsky's world, when in the recent movie *V. I. Warshawski* Kathleen Turner responds to a self-justifying woman with the tart "I'm not your shrink." Rather than the recovery of the family as the sentimental shell of tribalism, this is the moment for the assertion of the responsibilities of the individual. Here, the self striving for autonomy makes its claim, asserting the right of individualism. It is the voice of Bellow's Henderson, leaving the world of rain-making and tribal ritual for the difficulties of self-articulation. Henderson self-consciously takes evasive action, escaping from the grinding, fateful obligations of the clan which Warshawski confronts. And both know that their destiny as individuals is a philosophical quest that can only be realized in the modern city. Though Bellow's "speaking for" is currently out of fashion, Schor's "speaking with" the city makes possible a parallel order of human exchange.

At the end of Schor's fiction, the great letter *E* comes to designate the enormous energy of New York. Enigmatic, elusive, and ever-present, this city and its informing *E*, most-used letter of the English alphabet, enables the recovery of the idea of cooperative individualism, sweeping away the splendid isolation of political correctness. Caught despite themselves in a moral process of bridge-building, these characters learn to speak with the city and each other and discover that this urban value, accessible only in the city, also contains the seeds for the regeneration of their lives--"with energy enough," as Jane Jacobs notes, "to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves" (448). Living in this pantheistic city--in New York that bridges all the ages--is to partake of urban rite, religious hope, and modern Jewish possibility.

From Bellow to Schor, city life has a philosophical function, in bringing people to the process of reflection about their lives and the production of meaning. Between them, Augie March as Columbus and Barry Glassman as Spinoza focus the question of the historical genesis of the modern world. For the Jews, Columbus is the discoverer of their most recent haven, the place of their greatest diasporic success, while Spinoza is a spectacular example of the modern Jewish dialectic between Enlightenment and exile. Spinoza's personal fate is that of the Jews repeated in a finer (read *modernist*) tone: to be a Jew is to choose one's God and suffer exile; to be a modern Jew is to think freely and suffer angst. Glassman, of course, comically disappoints the example of his hero; he incurs (for a time) the pains of isolation, excommunication, and exile without being able to dwell in the empire of the mind. For such dwelling is how the novel defines the philosophical life. Glassman is stalled, muddled, soliloquizing, playing Prince Hamlet to Augie March's Prince Hal. The novel's strength and generosity is that Glassman's fate is comic but not ironic or sardonic; his moral seriousness is partly comic and partly the real,

the necessary thing. The modernist Jewish dialectic between freedom and exile broods over the novel, but Glassman gets away with a separate peace. He, like Augie March and Mr. Sammler, makes us realize that the philosophic life, dwelling in an empire of the mind, not only evades the demands of the community but isolates the self in its moral superiority, unless the philosopher is willing to take seriously the encounters of the street.

Schor's novel begins with a bar mitzvah and ends with Yom Kippur, begins by setting maturation decisively within the context of culture (a milestone, a rite of passage) and ends with more private, internal reckonings that must be annually repeated. Perhaps Glassman's trip to the country prefigures retirement or at least the withdrawal that heals Herzog. And in its force of renewal and tone of reconceiving of what was there all along, *The Great Letter E* echoes the rededication of Hanukkah, joyous festival of light that promises, at the darkest moment of the year, when solstice and the absence of moonlight might make us give in to the powers of darkness, the hope of renewal and new life.

Brash, bountiful, quick and energetic, Schor, Paley, and Bellow blend the varied rhetorical levels of city life into that daring urban language that alone can bring us to consciousness of our human opportunities. They thereby reveal the sources of our power as they take us back to its linguistic resources, for as Wittgenstein notes, "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (18.8e). And that of course is the answer to our thought experiment. If there weren't any cities, we Jews would have to invent them. And then build them, wherever possibility beckoned, if only out of the fateful urban words which form our lives.

*Kresge College*  
*University of California, Santa Cruz*

## WORKS CITED

- Addams, Jane. *Position of Women: A Centennial Reader*. Ed. Margaret E. Dungan. New York: Macmillan, 1960.
- Applebome, Peter. "Although Urban Blight Worsens, Most People Don't Feel Its Impact." *New York Times* 28 Jan. 1991:1+.
- Barth, Gunther. *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1980.
- Bell, Daniel. "Crime as a Way of Life: A Queer Ladder of Social Mobility." *The End of Ideology*. Glencoe, IL: Free, 1960. 127-50.
- Bellow, Saul. *The Adventures of Augie March*. New York: Modern Library, 1965.  
 ----- . *The Dean's December*. New York: Harper, 1981.  
 ----- . *Humboldt's Gift*. New York: Viking, 1975.  
 ----- . *A Theft*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Choay, Françoise. *The Modern City: Planning in the Nineteenth Century*. Trans. Marguerite Hugo and George R. Collins. New York: Braziller, 1969.
- Cohen, Arthur A. *The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition, and Other Dissenting Essays*. New York: Schocken, 1971.
- Fuss, Peter. "Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Community." *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*. Ed. Melvyn A. Hill. New York: St. Martin's, 1979. 10-00.
- Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Vintage-Random, 1961.
- Lester, Julius. *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew*. New York: Holt, 1988.
- Mill, John Stuart. "The Subjection of Women." *Essays on Sex Equality*. Ed. Alice Rossi. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970. 123-242.
- Paley, Grace. "A Conversation with My Father." *Enormous* 159-67.  
 ----- . *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute*. New York: Farrar, 1974.  
 ----- . "Gloomy Tune." *Enormous* 51-56.  
 ----- . "Living." *Enormous* 57-61.  
 ----- . "The Long-Distance Runner." *Enormous* 177-98.  
 ----- . "Wants." *Enormous* 1-6.

Salins, Peter D. "In Living Colors: New York's Surprising Ethnic Future." *New Republic* 21 Jan. 1991: 14-15.

Sandburg, Carl. "Chicago." *Complete Poems*. New York: Harcourt, 1950. 3-4.

Schor, Sandra. *The Great Letter E*. San Francisco: North Point, 1990.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Vol. 2. Trans. Henry Reeve. 1840. New York: Schocken, 1964.

Trilling, Lionel. "Manners, Morals, and the Novel." *The Liberal Imagination*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1954. 202-7.

----- . "The Princess Cassamassima." *The Liberal Imagination*. New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1954. 68-71.

Warner, Sam Bass. *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard LT, 1978.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1968.

Wolfe, Alan. "The Return of the Melting Pot." *New Republic* 31 Dec. 1990: 27-34.