

Henry and Lionel: An Argument in the Metaxy

For Eric Voegelin, the realm of the "in-between" is humanity's proper habitat. Temptations to depart this realm, which may be termed the historical condition, come at us from two sides. The gnostic temptation departs history *upward*, toward a thought-world where actual problems find a resolution that is total and systematic -- but *fictional!* The reductionist temptation quits history *downward*, so that challenges besetting the human heart, the calls to moral combat or spiritual attunement, all get trivialized as mere fluctuations of brain chemistry.

If some part of the proper business of religion is to give guidance for life in history, then the religion of the Jews stands out as historically oriented. In Hebrew scripture, the players are exhorted to commemorate actions even *before* they are completed; new disclosures are linked on the time line to the founders' originating covenant; reproofs and consoling predictions involve comparisons to exemplary precedents on the same time line. Its heroes do not live perfect lives but they manage to live in approximate accord with the God who makes Himself known in the midst of pressing, real circumstances and asks them to get aligned with the divine *then and there*.

Many explanations have been proffered as to why, in the course of recorded history, Jews have been so ingeniously and flexibly hated. In the great Ages of Faith, they were hated for killing God when He chose to incarnate as a Jew; in the Age of Reason, they were hated for their tribalism; in the Romantic Age, for their rootless cosmopolitanism, in the Age of Eugenics, for being the sole natively toxic race, and -- in the present, Post-Colonial Age -- for being the only colonial power whose mother country is identical with its alleged colony.

My own hypothesis: Jews are hated because of their spiritual assignment, which is to *live with God in history*. They are therefore hated, not for

whatever they might fail to be, but for what -- in the light of their own self-understanding -- they are ideally supposed to be.

I would like here to look at this covenantal summons as it made itself felt -- or not felt -- in the lives of two young Jewish intellectuals of the 1920's, who were best friends in college and for some years thereafter. One of them, Lionel Trilling, would become an influential critic and opinion-shaper in the culture of the twentieth century. The other, Henry M. Rosenthal, in his youth a rabbi and later a philosophy professor, was my father. While they were still friends, each published a short story about the other.¹ Both stories depict a defining *argument* over whether they had -- or did not have -- some obligation pertaining to the fact that they were Jews in their time. Henry Rosenthal's story is called "Inventions," after the verse in Ecclesiastes, "God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions." Lionel Trilling's story is titled "Impediments," after Shakespeare's "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments."

Each story portrays a combat. On the one hand, it's the generic competition between young men, each struggling for advantage of ground, each testing his mettle against the other. At the same time, each friend is a kind of mirror for the other, where he can see himself true -- absent which he will know less about himself. In both stories, the narrator has a weakness that is exposed by the other. So we see a brilliant male friendship: exploratory, risky and unsparing, playing itself out on the theme of how to live in history.

Lionel's story is the shorter and simpler one. It's dated the year they both graduated, from Columbia University's stellar class of 1925. Lionel's stand-in (not named) is the smoother one. In the story, he tolerates but does not like the Henry character (surnamed Hettner), whose "straining eagerness," unkempt blue serge suit, and intensity threatens to break through the

¹ Trilling, Lionel, "Impediments," *The Menorah Journal*, 1925, and Rosenthal, Henry M., "Inventions," *The Menorah Journal*, 1928.

narrator's "tower of contemptible ivory," which was his "convenient barrier ... against men who were too much of my own race and men who were not of my own race and hated it."

Above all, Lionel's narrator rejects Hettner's drive to "give me hints as to what he really was, to tell me things about his soul." Of himself, the narrator admits, "I do not want to know about people's souls. ... I like people's outsides, not their insides, and I was particularly reluctant to see this man's insides; they would be, probably, too much like mine."

Their combat will occur in the course of a night visit that Hettner (the Henry character) pays, uninvited, to the narrator's dorm room, interrupting his composition of a paper on Robert Browning. That paper will be formulaic *intentionally*. He plans to refrain from "saying what he wanted to say," and instead to fashion the approved sort of paper with "a few paragraphs of discrete eulogy, very graceful, cursory rereading ... discreet comment" -- all garnished with the literary jargon of the day.

Their interaction begins with the reluctant host's offer of tea but morphs by degrees into a verbal battle, "Hettner grave and purposeful, myself listening intently to what he had to say, polite and flippant. ... With a steady battering of talk, he was trying to make a breach in my tower, to force for himself an opening through which he could reach in and snatch out my interest and sympathy, but I defended my citadel valiantly, almost enjoying the struggle, and when words did not serve me, I poured gin into his cup."

By the end, Lionel's narrator feels that, by maintaining his imperviousness, he's emerged the winner. That is, he feels victorious until Hettner, standing ready to leave at the door, turns back to exclaim,

"What a miserable dog you are!"

Lionel's story is about maintaining surface appearances in order to conceal underlying vulnerability. By his own account, he succeeds in this, but at the price of dodging something essential.

Henry's story has a different problematic. His stand-in (named Starobin) sees Lionel's "mannered nerveless" as giving him the possibility of "nursing a character he did not quite have and did not really want." As to the question in Starobin's mind, of whether his friend has internalized the anti-semitic's contempt for the Jew, Starobin finally decides that he has not. The fact remains that his friend (named Dolman) actually does not care much about such questions. He really *is* "spiritually blond."

Since Starobin (Henry's character) cares profoundly, his friend puzzles him. He needs to find out what kind of a Jew Dolman is. He decides to try to convert his friend, if only to find the answer.

As Starobin tells it, it would become "a subtle competition, as when two people run hand in hand, ostensibly keeping together while deeply below the surface their nerves race tensely. Two prophets were prophesying the same news, but vied with each other in prophecy."

Starobin tries various approaches, but none proves quite suitable for the project of converting his friend. He falls back on words like "the soul," and these words move him onto the ground that smart young men of the period cover over with "indifferent epigrams" and "brittle denials." So the conversion project fails. "The subtle virus of irony ... had begun to corrupt the mood ... the moment he stepped on ground which their career of denial had long rendered unstable for them. Mockery enters into your soul. You take it in gradually increasing doses until you at last become immune to it, but then you are also a creature of the habit of mockery. ...The idea could flame only in the atmosphere of eloquence, and against his will he had poured over it a familiar acid."

At this point, Dolman (representing Lionel) pronounces his verdict on their contest. "Take it easy Starobin. I love you very much. You are all right. But *find* your God before you try to sell him to me."

It's a fair hit, and -- between two verbal athletes -- probably counts as a knockout blow. But they go on talking, like two weary veterans, after the fight is over. "Don't separate yourself from the mystery," Henry's Starobin remarks to his friend. "I have been trying, very long, to tell you that whether you will or no you are of this mystery. And if you think you can reject it you are terribly mistaken You are still a questioner, Dolman; you walk among happy images which trouble you, and your mind works. But your children will be doctors and lawyers, not questioners; and their minds won't work. Unless you make them Jews."

The pair of stories are of interest partly because of the device whereby a radical denunciation of the character who is the writer's fictional counterpart is put into the mouth of his fictional friend. We almost forget that it's each writer himself who, by means of this device, sees through his own defenses and shares with the reader his unsparing inner self-exposure.

Do these stories of a lost friendship have anything to tell us about the task of living in history? Henry is self-exposed as ironical where he needs to be sincere. Lionel is self-exposed as a "miserable dog," which is to say, not quite a man, or not quite his own man.

For the sake of argument, let us suppose that they are both right, as to each one's (let us say, tragic) flaw. These flaws are, I should think, traceable to their shared situation. They are both Jews, for that reason targets of the most continuous hatred in recorded history. By 1928, the date of Henry's story, the worst is getting nearer. Each young man has adopted a self-diminishing coping strategy, and each man despises himself for it. He knows it is not the best. It is only the best he can do.

I knew my father better than Lionel, whom I never met. But I would judge that each one did very well indeed, making of his imperfections the best use he could.

And that -- bracketing God's unspecifiable role in the business -- is the way to live in history.