

HARRY LEVIN: PORTRAIT OF A SCHOLAR AS YOUNG MAN

SUSANNE KLINGENSTEIN
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Toward the fall of 1929, Harry Levin left his hometown Minneapolis for Boston. There he would cross the Charles River to reach Cambridge and his ultimate destination, Harvard University. His first journey east Levin made in a Model-T, but for all subsequent travel he took the train. Thinking back, some four decades later, on his first trips between his old and his new home, Levin recalled that the thirty-six hour trainride marked "a transition from one way of life to another, and all but induced in the passenger a state of cultural schizophrenia." The young man, barely seventeen years old, was in search of history and culture. He had enrolled with alacrity in what he perceived to be the most traditional of American colleges, and he was propelled on his journey east by the peculiar sense of despair that descends on the bright, eager, and curious when they realize that the pleasant environs of their youth are a cultural desert. Years later, these beginnings would enable Harry Levin to relate Perry Miller's "immense avidity" for history and culture to his colleague's midwestern origins and to the fact that out there culture "was not to be taken for granted at any point." His own youthful *ennui* Levin attributed to his feeling then that in the Midwest he was outside history. History was over, he thought; at most it was something that happened in Europe and perhaps on the east coast. In Minnesota he felt marginal to the culture he had begun to care for.¹

But there was something else, which increased his desire to move on. Harry Levin was Jewish, and as his much younger fellow townsman, the poet Allen Grossman, was still compelled to realize two decades after Levin's departure: "Jews in Minnesota weren't going anywhere. There was no future for the mind in Jewish culture, at least not in Minneapolis. If you wanted to grow, you had to leave." Grossman went east in 1950, "because Harvard was the only place I had ever heard of." Levin had certainly heard of others. In fact he had also applied to and been accepted at Yale. With a little effort, however, he might have found out that locally, at the University of Minnesota, he could have learned more about Shakespeare from Elmer Edgar Stoll than at the feet of Kittredge in Cambridge. But Levin, though in his own assessment "shy, awkward, and socially backward," was determined to leave the middle of America

1. On Levin's transition from Minneapolis to Cambridge see Harry Levin, "A View from Within," in John Lydenberg, ed., *Political Activism and Academic Conscience: The Harvard Experience, 1936-1941. A Symposium*. 1975 (Hobart and William Smith Colleges, 1977), 1. Harry Levin, "Memoirs of a Scholar: Perry Miller" (1964), reprinted in Levin, *Grounds for Comparison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 155. Harry Levin's self-description is taken from the extensive marginal notes pencilled on the manuscript of a draft of this chapter in October 1991. I will refer to these "marginal notes" throughout this chapter.

for the great "world elsewhere." The lure of Harvard was irresistible. Encouraged by one of his favorite teachers, Hannah Griffith, a Radcliffe-trained Quaker, and with the blessings of his parents, Levin applied to Harvard and got in. Whatever awaited him at the end of his travel could not be worse than what Minneapolis, later called "the capitol of anti-Semitism in the United States," would have in store for him.²

Under the circumstances, Harry Levin's father, Isadore Henry Levin, had done very well for himself. He had come to America as a boy from a rural part of Germany (East Prussia) and settled with his family in Minnesota; first on a farm unsuccessfully, and then in the city with a fair amount of success as a furniture manufacturer in partnership with two brothers. He married Beatrice Tuchman, whose grandparents were born in Germany. They had migrated to Pennsylvania and Missouri, respectively, in the mid-nineteenth century, just in time to send a son by the name of Daniel Greenwald into the Civil War. As was typical for German Jews of that period and background, Beatrice was brought up with barely a touch of Reform Judaism. The emptiness of her religious education and the anti-Jewish snobbery of her environment made her the willing convert of an aunt, Daniel Greenwald's wife, who had become a practitioner of Christian Science. As a new religion that rejected "the validity of the testimony of the senses" and substituted in its stead the will to be healed, As Harold Bloom pointed out Christian Science provided an escape from the aches of being Jewish for ill-adjusted but socially ambitious women. "When we perceive ourselves as Mrs. Eddy," Bloom wrote, "then we too will be perfect and good, and absolutely healed. We will not be mortal, and all aches -- whether of head or belly -- will vanish from us. And being free of illness, we will be free to prosper, and so become both very wealthy and immortal to boot." Beatrice's conversion to Christian Science occurred not at home but in New York, where she was living for a year under the guardianship of her aunt to study music at a conservatory. Without strong ties to Judaism or deep religious convictions of her own and outside the parental umbrella, Beatrice was easily swayed. As a result, her son Harry, born on July 18, 1912, was sent to Christian Science and Jewish Reform Sunday school and thus saw, as he put it, "the two religions at their

2. Carey McWilliams, "Minneapolis: The Curious Twins," *Common Ground* 7 (Fall 1946): 61. Allen Grossman, conversation with the author in Waltham, Massachusetts on 14 December 1987.

thinnest.³ Like his mentor Irving Babbitt Levin would always find religion unappealing.

Beatrice's Christian Science and Isadore's affluence made it possible for the Levins to move into a gentele upper-middle-class neighborhood. Levin recalled, their presence there "often produced little bits of social snobbery on the part of socially climbing neighbors" (interview). The problem was in fact quite serious. When Harry Levin was ten, Jews were excluded from virtually all social organizations in Minneapolis. In 1922, the remarkable year that saw the publication of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, from which Ezra Pound had successfully excized Eliot's Bleistein, and that witnessed the assassination of Germany's Jewish foreign minister, Walter Rathenau, as invoked in a vulgar folk poem, in that year Maurice Lefkovits wrote in the Rosh Hashanah number of a Minneapolis Jewish weekly: "There is not, to my knowledge, a single Jewish member in any of the numerous city and country clubs; nor are Jews solicited in the Boat Club or Automobile Club; and even the Athletic Club, I understand, has raised the barriers against any further Jewish accessions above those who were permitted to enter when its sacred precincts were first opened some years ago."⁴

Isadore Levin, who had no college education, was a member of the Athletic Club. The Levins were friendly with Lefkovits, a brilliant immigrant from Hungary, who had a rabbinic education; incidentally, it was with his son, the later film critic Harold Leonard, that Harry Levin took his very first rambling trip eastward in a Model -T Ford in 1929. Isadore Levin, fondly nicknamed "Busy Izzy" in the community, was the only Jew in the Chamber of Commerce, a director of the Northwestern National

3. Harry Levin, letter to the author, 22 July 1989. Biographical information about Harry Levin's life before his arrival at Harvard is hard to come by. My reconstruction is based on the few autobiographical remarks Levin made in various essays (cited in the course of the chapter), on two long conversations with Levin, one in his library study at Harvard on 15 December 1987, the other at his Cambridge home on 19 October 1989, on a letter he sent (in answer to a list of questions) from his summer home on Cape Cod on 22 July 1989, and on the marginal notes Levin pencilled on a draft of this chapter in October 1991. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 132, 140.

4. Quoted in Charles I. Cooper, "The Jews of Minneapolis and Their Christian Neighbors," *Jewish Social Studies* 8 (January 1946): 32. The "poem" about Rathenau revives a medieval image: "Schlagt tot den Walter Rathenau/ die gottverdammte Judensau" [Kill Walter Rathenau/ the dod-damn Jew-sow]. See Henry Pachter, *Weimar Etudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 171. On Ezra Pound's editing of the *Waste Land* manuscript see Harry Levin's gentle treatment in "The Waste Land from Ur to Echt" (1972), in Harry Levin, *Memoirs of the Moderns* (New York: New Directions, 1980), 43-44; and Christopher Ricks's more explicit presentation in *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 38-39.

Bank, and, very briefly, a member of the State Republican Committee. The Levins belonged to the upper middle class of Minneapolis, and it was precisely there that the city's antisemitism made itself most felt until at least the mid-forties. A Jewish home-owner in a fashionable section of the city had his windows shot through with buckshot to make him move, and prospective Jewish buyers were approached by neighborhood committees urging them not to purchase in their particular area because it was "a Christian neighborhood."⁵ Despite their financial and social success the Levins were aware of such incidents. Choosing a school for Harry, the older of two sons, forced them to recognize their dilemma. Their social status and affluence would have made it possible to send Harry to a good private school. They thought indeed of sending him to the one country day school nearby. But partly fearing that Harry might experience antisemitism in an exclusive environment and partly clinging to their belief in the rationality and soundness of the American people, they chose a public school.

It was a good decision. Harry Levin was happy there. He became editor of the weekly newspaper as well as president of two clubs. It was clear that he was bright and a little bookish. At the age of eleven the only book he took along to camp was a volume of Shakespeare's plays; at fourteen he was an avid reader of *The Dial*, an avowedly "aesthetic" magazine, and at seventeen, he was on his way to Harvard. His father certainly hoped that he would return ready to enter the family business. But the apprentice jobs he had assigned his son during vacations convinced Harry that he would never be a businessman. Levin was glad, however, to have had those assignments, he wrote five decades later, "since they gave me a clearer impression of how most Americans pass their lives," an impression that in all probability only strengthened his determination not to return, but to enter for good the world of culture and scholarship.⁶

A few short summer months before Harry Levin got off the train in Boston, Harvard's president, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, had preached his twentieth Baccalaureate sermon to the graduating class of 1929. He had taken his text from Deuteronomy: "And it shall be, when the Lord thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, ... vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not: when thou shalt have eaten and be full; Then, beware lest thou forget the Lord, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage" (Deut. 6: 10-12). In keeping with the tradition of the university, the president interpreted this text typologically. He spoke about the American mission, the "noble future" arising from a "worthy past"; about America's responsibilities as a preëminent nation; about self-control, discipline, and energy; and about the obligation

5. Albert I. Gordon, *Jews in Transition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949), 46; Selden Menefee, *Assignment: U. S. A.* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1943), 101-102. Knowledge of Isadore Levin's nickname I owe to a conversation with Eric Solomon in San Francisco, December 29, 1991.

6. Harry Levin, "A Personal Retrospect," in *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 8-9.

to make cautious use of America's bounties "so that all mankind may be the better because America is inhabited by Americans."⁷ One of the scandals of the Lowell administration had revolved precisely around the question *who* was an American and thus chosen to participate in the noble and nobilitating enterprise. In Lowell's view the people to whom the American mission was entrusted were outstanding individuals assimilated to each other and transformed into a homogeneous group by a singular experience. The Israelites' preparatory sojourn in the Sinai desert, one of the types for the Pilgrim Fathers' preparatory crossing of the Atlantic, became in Lowell's sermon a type for the preparatory years spent at Harvard before these young men entered the promised land, America, and dealt responsibly with its bounties.

It is not surprising, then, to find that Lowell opposed continued large-scale immigration of "alien races." He believed that American social and political institutions could not survive in a heterogeneous society. While his predecessor at Harvard, Charles W. Eliot, had made countless statements on behalf of the National Liberal Immigration League, and had not only expressed his belief in the ability of the United States to assimilate immigrants without stripping them of their individuality, but proven his faith by opening Harvard to a diverse student body, Lowell was terrified of what the ever-swelling flood of immigrants might bring. Three years after succeeding Eliot as president of Harvard in 1909, Lowell assumed the national vice-presidency of the Immigration Restriction League, founded in Boston in 1894. He had come to the conclusion "that no democracy could be successful unless it was tolerably homogeneous" and he was certain, as Marcia Synnott put it, "that some Europeans could not be easily assimilated into American life." He also thought this true of Asians, blacks, and Jews. In a letter to George F. Moore written in 1922 Lowell wished, a little paradoxically, that "the Jews who come to Harvard College should retain their characteristics, but on admission be overcome with an oblivion of the fact that they were Jews, even though all the Gentiles were perfectly aware that they were Jews."⁸

For Lowell, a former professor of government, Harvard College was not simply an institution for the education of American leaders; rather, it represented the goals and ideals of American society. Foremost among them was the idea that America provided a unifying experience and was an undertaking of a community of men. The self-segregation of the Jews at Harvard, more imagined by Lowell than real, was only one disruptive factor. Another was Eliot's elective system, which Lowell deplored because it gave free reign to the whims of the individual. He replaced it with a more systematic plan of undergraduate study to be supervised by tutors. They brought

7. Abbott Lawrence Lowell, *Facts and Visions: Twenty-four Baccalaureate Sermons*. Ed. Henry Aaron Yeomans (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944), 138-144.

8. Lowell to Moore on 3 October 1922, Lowell Papers, 1922-1925, folder 8 "Jews," Harvard University Archives. I am much indebted to Marcia Graham Synnott's excellent exposition of Eliot's and Lowell's views on immigration in her book *The Half-Opened Door*, pp. 34-37.

coherence into their students' course work which now terminated in general examinations at the end of the senior year. The "intellectual cohesion" Lowell hoped for was to be paralleled and supported by a new "social cohesion" fostered by collegiate living in the original sense of the word. Lowell, who as a student had not accepted his election to a final club, was disturbed by the increasing social polarization and snobbery at Harvard that had been tolerated by Eliot. The poor commuted or huddled together in Cambridge digs, while the rich resided in the clubs or residential buildings along the Gold Coast of Mt. Auburn Street; the Jews congregated in "Little Jerusalem," that is Hastings Hall, and a handful of African American students were hiding wherever they could. This had to end. "I fear," the professor of government had written to president Eliot in 1902, "that with the loss of that democratic feeling which ought to lie at the basis of university life, we are liable to lose our moral hold upon a large part of the students, and that this feeling can be maintained only when a considerable proportion of every section of students is living within the walls" of the *collegium*.⁹

In 1914 the freshman halls opened. African Americans were excluded; but the president had high hopes that the dormitories would encourage democratic life by breaking down segregation based on schools and geographic distribution. Living together in freshman halls, he had predicted in his report for the year 1909-10, "would give far greater opportunity for men from different schools and from different parts of the country, to mix together and find their natural affinities unfettered by the associations of early education, of locality and of wealth; and above all it would tend to make the college more truly national in spirit."¹⁰

Fifteen years later, a generous gift from Edward S. Harkness, a Yale graduate, allowed Lowell to realize his long-cherished "House Plan" that was to provide relatively inexpensive rooms in communal dormitories for the men of the three upper classes. "The Houses are a social device for a moral purpose," Lowell claimed. But when the

9. Quoted in Henry Aaron Yeomans, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell, 1856-1943* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 166.

10. Quoted in Yeomans, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell*, p. 169; on the exclusion of African Americans cf. Yeomans, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-177, and Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door*, pp. 49-51. During a press conference on June 4, 1993, Lani Guinier said about her father Ewart G. Guinier that he "was denied financial aid at Harvard College in 1929 on the grounds that one black student had already received a full scholarship; and he was not allowed to live in a dormitory on the grounds that no black student had resided there with the exception of a relative of a United States Senator" (Broadcast on "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, June 4, 1993). Ewart G. Guinier graduated in 1933. Thirty-six years later he became the first chairman of Harvard's newly established Afro-American Studies department. See Werner Sollors, Caldwell Titcomb, and Thomas A. Underwood, eds, *Blacks at Harvard: A Documentary History of African American Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 7.

Houses opened, the first two in 1930, the other five in 1931, Lowell had a hard time convincing the fashionable social set that "democracy" was good for them. Eventually, with the depression in full swing, most students moved in and immediately resegregated. In March 1933, Kenneth B. Murdock, a professor of American literature and Master of Leverett House, wrote to the Dean of Harvard College that "there is growing up a marked social classification among the Houses, and the result we must anticipate is, I think, that ... some of our most 'fashionable' and 'successful' students will refuse to enter the Houses at all unless they gain admission to one of the two or three 'socially eminent' ones." Two years into Lowell's democratic experiment, it threatened to fail.¹¹

One of the reasons why residency in the Houses was unpalatable to the fashionable set, the administration surmised, was the large number of Jews admitted to the dormitories. A memorandum on "Suggested Procedure for Assignment to Houses" circulated in 1934 advised all masters that "care must be taken at this point to see that the total number of Jews does not exceed what 'the traffic will bear.' By this method, the racial problem can be squarely met and we shall avoid last year's situation, in which, because of racial difficulties arising in some particular House, superior Jews were vetoed by some Master too late for them to be given an opportunity in another House in which Jews with inferior claims had been accepted."¹² The problem was that as long as the main criterion for admission to the Houses was scholastic achievement, Jews, and particularly those with no other means to live by than their wits, would continue to do well. Between 1933 and 1942 thirty-two percent of the students who made the dean's list were Jews, compared to only eleven percent of the students from "selected private schools," Harvard's social cream. Conversely, seven percent of the Jewish freshmen had unsatisfactory records, compared to twenty percent of freshmen belonging to the social elite; the class average was sixteen percent. Marcia Synnott summarized these figures aptly when she wrote, "as a student's social standing rose, his academic standing often declined."¹³

11. Murdock to A. Chester Hanford on 20 March 1933, Dean of Harvard College Correspondence File (DHCCF), 1927-1933, A. C. Hanford, folder 115, Harvard University Archives; on the Houses as a social device for a moral purpose cf. Yeomans, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell*, p. 189.

12. "Suggested Procedure for Assignment to Houses," 20 March 1934, DHCCF, 1933-1957, box House Plan - Houses (to 1938), folder Houses 1933-1934, Harvard University Archives.

13. Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door*, p. 114. A more detailed table is reprinted by Synnott on p. 116. The group "selected private schools" changed slightly over time. At the core were five Episcopal boarding schools: St. George's, St. Paul's, St. Mark's, Groton, and Middlesex, the so-called "St. Grotlesex." They were followed by Brooks, Milton, Noble and Greenough, and Pomfret. Later additions were Belmont Hill, Gunnery, Hill, Kent, and for California's cream: Santa Barbara. In the 1940s Dearfield

There was really no way of controlling the number of Jewish students in the Houses unless the admissions criteria were changed. This is exactly what happened. Consequently, the percentage of Jewish resident freshmen plummeted to ten percent in 1934 and recovered only one percent point in 1935. Obviously, Lowell's "moral purpose" was not the creation of a democratic community based on individual merit. In 1933, Lowell was succeeded in office by James Bryant Conant. But his administration was still in place and many officers remembered Lowell's attempt in the early 1920s to regulate the number of Jews admitted to Harvard. Lowell had failed, but his executives succeeded. Concealed from the public eye they began to apply subjective categories to keep at least the number of resident Jews to an attractive minimum.

Ever since Lowell's plan to establish a numerus clausus for Jews admitted to Harvard College had been defeated by a faculty vote in 1923, the president was haunted by the idea that Harvard had a "Jew problem." His nightmare had begun in February 1920, when during a fifteen million dollar fundraising campaign the letter of an alumnus arrived inquiring into the exact number of Jewish undergraduates. Although the inquiry had no further consequences at the time, the president was put on the alert. In April 1922 research brought to light that the number of Jewish students at Harvard had risen from seven percent in 1900 to 21.5 percent in 1922. Lowell blew the whistle. He sent a proposition to the Committee on Admission aimed at limiting the number of successful Jewish applicants. The committee refused to adopt the measures without the consent of the faculty. The issue was brought before the faculty and hotly debated during four meetings in May and June of 1922.

Demanding clarification in writing, William Ernest Hocking, a professor of philosophy, asked Lowell "whether our concern is on account of the increase of Jews as Jews, or on account of the increase of 'undesirable Jews'. ... It seems clear to me that if the 'undesirable Jews' were eliminated the question of the proportion of Jews would automatically disappear. The presence of the undesirable Jew casts a spot-light on all his compatriots and makes them conspicuous." Hocking suggested to take advantage of a split in the Jewish community and to let the acculturated and successful (German) Jews do the sifting of Jewish applicants. This would reduce the number of undesirable (poor Eastern European) Jews "without raising the cry of racial discrimination." But Lowell saw through Hocking's clever maneuver to avoid the taint of racism at the eleventh hour by granting the Jews autonomy on the issue. A sort of *Judenrat* was to do the dirty work and leave the WASP establishment unblemished.

and Hotchkiss were added. Andover and Exeter formed a separate group, because together they sent about one hundred students to Harvard every year. See Synnot, *The Half-Opened Door*, p. 112, 114. On the superior academic achievements of Jews at Harvard and on the class stratification of learning and leisure see also Seymour Martin Lipset, David Riesman, *Education and Politics at Harvard* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 145-150, 152-153.

Lowell hated hypocrisy. If any measure was taken at all, he wrote to Langdon P. Marvin, senior partner in F. D. Roosevelt's firm, one had to be direct and open about it. To Hocking Lowell replied that "the main problem caused by the increase in the number of Jews comes ... not from the fact that they are individually undesirable, but from the fact that they form a very distinct body, and cling, or are driven, together, apart from the great mass of the undergraduates. ... We must take as many as we can benefit [read: assimilate], but if we take more, we shall not benefit them and shall ruin the college." To save the college Lowell wanted to establish, as he wrote to Rufus Tucker, a clear Jewish quota of fifteen or sixteen percent. What Lowell really resented, as so many before him, was that the Jews resisted assimilation, a position not unrelated to resenting the very existence of Jews. In Lowell's case, however, the resentment was limited and clearly linked to his frustration that his idea of a homogeneous America was not to be. Hocking eventually understood that the issue debated by the Harvard faculty was not just the composition of the student body of some college, but ultimately, as he wrote in a letter to Felix Frankfurter, "the constituency of the nation." Seeing that the *idea* of America was at stake, Hocking, although he was clearly no friend of the Jews, voted consistently against any measure that could lead to a quota.¹⁴

Most faculty members, however, were so confused that a motion was carried on May 23, 1922, which stated in part that "the Committee [on Admission] be instructed, in making its decision in these cases [admission of transfers from other colleges and of candidates with unsatisfactory requirements], to take into account the

14. The quotations in this paragraph are from the following sources: "Jew problem" Lowell to Kittredge on 3 June 1922; Hocking to Lowell on 18 May 1922; Lowell to Marvin on 10 June 1922; Lowell to Hocking on 19 May 1922; Lowell to Tucker on 20 May 1922, in Lowell Papers, 1919-1922, folder 1056 "Jews", Harvard University Archives. Hocking to Frankfurter on 17 July 1922, Felix Frankfurter Papers, Harvard Law School Library, box 191, folder 19. The best published account of the quota discussion is that presented in Synnott's *The Half-Opened Door*. Penny Hollander Feldman's 1975 dissertation *Recruiting an Elite: Admission to Harvard College* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1988) deals mainly with the effects of affirmative action in the 1960s and 1970s. She writes: "Today, although academic standards far higher than those employed in earlier years function as an important determinant of selection, the strict merit principle is still rejected by Harvard for social and institutional reasons. The same practices which were instituted in the 1920s and 1930s to exclude academically qualified applicants are used in the 1960s and 1970s to include applicants who could not be admitted on the basis of academic credentials alone" (p. 8). For a discussion of this reversal see Alan Dershowitz and Laura Hanft, "Affirmative Action and the Harvard College Diversity-Discretion Model: Paradigm or Pretext?" *Cardozo Law Review* 1 (Fall 1979): 379-424. About Hocking's pervasive anti-Jewish bias I was informed by his former student Lewis Feuer in a conversation in Waban, Massachusetts, on 24 September 1992.

resulting proportionate size of racial and national groups in the membership of Harvard College." Five days later two petitions circulated which pointed out that the recent decision "relating to controlling the percentage of Jews in Harvard College is a radical departure from the spirit and practice of the College." The thirty-one signers -- among them very few of the famous humanities professors -- believed "that racial discrimination should not be an element in the conditions of admission to Harvard College before a careful and deliberate study of the whole question of the Jews shall have been made by the Faculty." A special faculty meeting convened on June 2, 1922, rescinded its vote of the previous week, and recommended that a special committee look into the matter, but that publicity be avoided. Lowell was displeased. The next morning he dictated an addition to the minutes of the meeting: "The President stated that there should be no doubt that the primary object in appointing a special Committee was to consider the question of the Jews and that if any member of the Faculty doubted this, let him now speak or forever after hold his peace."¹⁵

The Committee on Methods of Sifting Candidates for Admission submitted its report in April 1923. It objected to racial and religious discrimination, recommended the rejection of academically weaker candidates, and suggested that the college make an effort to attract more applicants from the south and west. The latter was to be achieved through the so-called "highest seventh": The top seventh of good high schools was offered admission without examination. The stricter scholastic requirements were meant to block transfers from New York and Boston colleges as well as students with weak secondary preparation, for instance, in English composition. If Lowell had hoped that this would decrease Jewish enrollment he was in for a surprise. While the stricter requirements designed to block transfers may have prevented the admission of a few Jewish students, the "highest seventh" ruling increased it. In 1923, thirty-two percent of those admitted without examination were Jews; the figure rose to forty-two percent in 1925, bringing the total of Jewish freshmen to almost twenty-eight percent. The administration, which by and large supported restrictions, was getting desperate. It planned to resort to selective admissions without the explicit consent of the faculty. In December 1926, the chairman of Harvard's Committee on Admission, Henry Pennypacker, informed the dean of Yale College, Clarence W. Mendell, that Harvard's admissions officers were "now going to limit the Freshman Class to 1,000 including dropped and rated which means about 850 new men. After this year they are going to discontinue - for the East at least - the "first seventh" arrangement which is bringing in as high as 40% Jews. They are also going to reduce their 25% Hebrew total to 15 % or less by simply rejecting without detailed explanation. They are giving no details to any candidate any longer. They are getting small representation from the West and none from the South and have no plan for improving the situation... ." In the following

15. Documents quoted in Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door*, p. 65,66; 58 and 69. The two petitions are kept in the Lowell Papers, 1919-1922, folder 1056 "Jews", Harvard University Archives.

years Jewish enrollment at Harvard dropped indeed. Selective admissions continued into the Conant years. Between 1933 and 1942 Jews made up about fourteen percent of each freshman class. The informal quota limiting Jewish enrollment was not dropped until after the Second World War.¹⁶

It is important to know these facts in order to understand what it meant when Levin spoke of the "Harvard indifference." He experienced it as a "liberation." This assertion reflects, on the one hand, just how crippling and oppressive the situation in Minneapolis had been. On the other hand, "Harvard indifference," the catchword of Levin's student days, reveals a truth about the college: Once you were in, you were a Harvard man like everybody else. Anti-Jewish sentiment was limited to a specific kind of social snobbery and could be easily ignored. Levin was lucky. Not only had his midwestern origin almost certainly been an advantage during the admissions process, but at the beginning of his sophomore year he was accepted as resident by the master of the newly opened Lowell House, Julian Lowell Coolidge (Harvard class of 1895). Levin remembers him as a "rather snobbish professor" who used to refer to anyone from outside New England as an "Ohioan." Coolidge, whom Levin describes as "a pudgy little character with a speech defect," was a professor of mathematics and amateur astronomer, and a Boston Brahmin of the old kind. Fit in mind and body, the former track star, notorious cyclist, and Plattsburg trainee (who had taught Military Science I in the fall of 1916) took an active interest in the selection of his residents. Most important to him was scholarship; hence athletes and final club men were scarce in Lowell House. Levin was reasonably happy there. "There were a number of Jews in Lowell," Levin recalls, "some of whom were my good friends. I would have said that in associating together we recognized [the fact that we were Jews]; but it meant not much more than recognizing a number of other middlewesterners."¹⁷ At the time, when Harvard was still very much perceived as an upper-crust New England institution, being Jewish or from the Midwest could produce the same sense of marginality; or so at least Harry Levin felt.

Compared to the crass discrimination practiced in Minneapolis, whatever social snobbery surfaced at Harvard, among students or faculty, must have seemed a piece of cake for Levin. What he perceived and appreciated as the "Harvard indifference" - the admissions process was not open to scrutiny - left him free to pursue what he really cared for: the world of literature and ideas. "To leave Minneapolis for Cambridge," Levin wrote some forty years later, "was to immerse oneself in a live tradition, a central concern for intellectual matters which might elsewhere [namely in

16. Document quoted in Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door*, p. 110; all figures are cited in the same work on pages 107 and 115; cf. also Lipset and Riesman, *Education and Politics at Harvard*, p. 179.

17. Harry Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989. On J. L. Coolidge see Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*, p. 378, 457, 478; and Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door*, p. 117-118, and Levin's marginal notes.

Minneapolis as much as in the business-oriented house of his father] have been regarded as on the fringe." The key words here are "immerse" and "central concern." At Harvard Levin felt liberated from "the middle-class conformities of the business-world (as satirized by [Sinclair] Lewis and Mencken."¹⁸ He was fascinated by the world of literature and derived great pleasure from it. The literary world suited his temperament and appeased his soul. The deeper his immersion in it, the more intense would be his participation in a central concern, and the greater, alas, his distance from the world of his parents. Moreover, mastery of the intellectual tradition of America's dominant culture would surely put an end if not to discrimination itself, then at least to his sense of being an outsider. Harvard as the oldest college with its reputed emphasis on individual excellence was, in Levin's eyes, an ideal locale to achieve immersion in the world of his choice. Choosing to acquire a tradition meant to assert a freedom that only America, and never Europe, had been willing to grant as a right to all, including the Jews.

There was a happy confluence in Levin's passions, which were intellectual as well as social. His intense love of literature and history made study an exhilarating pleasure. At the same time academic achievement was a possible ticket to acceptance and integration in the new world Levin entered. Mastery of the (gentile and genteel) literary tradition could indeed be achieved. Tradition, T. S. Eliot had written in 1917, "cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which ... involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence." Levin set out to make Eliot's cultural tradition, "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country" his own. "My years as an undergraduate, 1929-1933 registered not a growth but a lag in my awareness of the twentieth century," Levin remembered. "Possibly I was too busy finding my way back to traditions barely glimpsed on an earlier and more distant horizon [...]."¹⁹

Levin studied everything, classics, Old English, Middle English, medieval romance, Elizabethan drama, Shakespeare, and so on. And he studied with men of every shade and conviction, from the pope of the "Philological Syndicate," Kittredge, to the leonine Babbitt. He was, in his own description, "a good boy, *un bon élève*"

18. Levin, marginal notes; about leaving Minneapolis see Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 6. About "Harvard indifference" I learned in my conversation with Levin on 19 October 1989; see also "Delmore Schwartz's Gift," in Harry Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 161. The phenomenon of "Harvard indifferentism" or "Harvard indifference" as an undergraduate attitude is also mentioned in Bliss Perry's 1935 memoirs *And Gladly Teach* (p. 233), and in Timothy Fuller's mystery *Harvard Has a Homicide* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1936), 38.

19. Levin, "A View from Within," p. 2. T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1917), reprinted in T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays, 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1932), 4

(interview). Levin worked so hard that the incoming freshmen class perceived the junior as a legendary figure. Yet at the same time that he was acquiring "an old fashioned education in the humanities," listening to pope Kittredge and his nemesis Babbitt, he made close friends in the other camp. They were the modernizers in the department, especially F. O. Matthiessen and Theodore Spencer. Such antithetical moves had been and would remain typical for Harry Levin. They suggest that his periods as *bon élève* repressed energies that needed to be released on the fringe, in areas of mischief tolerated by the central groups. Levin's great delight in being fondly called a "young Turk" by the established poet and critic Allen Tate, can almost serve as an emblem for this psychological structure of antithetical moves. This inner disposition makes plausible Levin's sympathies for the populist Farmer-Labor Party back in Minnesota, and explains why the very beginning of Levin's scholarly career is split between Elizabethan drama and the "aberration" James Joyce.²⁰ One might hold, of course, that passions for Renaissance and modernist literature are perfectly compatible as T. S. Eliot demonstrated and F. O. Matthiessen argued. But the adversarial stance Levin signaled to the elders in his department by his early dedication to Joyce was of utmost importance to the young man. It counterpoised immersion with intellectual independence.

Precisely such a balance of sympathy and opposition, characterized Levin's relation to the three men who, more than his other teachers, assisted his integration into the world of Harvard and all it stood for. The three men, F. O. Matthiessen, Irving Babbitt, and T. S. Eliot, were ideal as initiating mentors, because they were centrally Harvard and yet belonged to the fringe. Levin's relation to these teachers in his freshman, sophomore, and senior year was not simply ambivalent, but intensely sympathetic and adversarial at the same time. The sympathy arose from a social similarity Levin perceived; the adversity was created by the socially exclusive intellectual positions held by his mentors. A reconstruction of Levin's critical dialogue, with Matthiessen, Babbitt, and Eliot, reveals the dynamics at work in the transformation of a precocious Jewish boy from the American hinterlands into one of Harvard's outstanding professors and kingmaker in literary academe. I acknowledge readily that such a reconstruction is highly speculative. Yet it may illuminate why Levin insisted on historical accuracy and avoided partisanship in his critical work. My speculation may also indicate the enormous costs of Levin's achievement.

Harry Levin always considered it his "great good luck" that he was a freshman in the fall of 1929 and in the very first course F. O. Matthiessen ever taught at Harvard. Their encounter led to a fortunate academic match. Matthiessen, as Levin put it years later, was associated with the "shift from the philological to the critical approach and from a historical to a contemporary emphasis." His mind was "richly associative rather than strictly logical," as was Levin's, and he had a "feeling for the

20. Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989; Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 6

relations between the arts and above all for the interrelationship between social problems and cultural developments."²¹ Matthiessen's critical practice indicated new directions and possibilities in literary academe and helped to shape Levin's own critical approach. On the other hand, the fields of their academic pursuits did not really overlap, except for brief forays into what could be considered the other's chief domain. Late in 1929 Matthiessen began to rework his Harvard dissertation (written under the direction of John Livingston Lowes) on translation as an Elizabethan art, which he published in 1931; whereas Levin undertook a study of Hawthorne, Poe and Melville, published as *The Power of Blackness*, in 1958. Yet the cross-over is accidental rather than causal. The one academic and intellectual passion the two men shared was, significantly, one that had deep personal reverberations for both of them and that linked the Elizabethan world to modernism: the poetry of T. S. Eliot.

To love the poetry of Eliot at Harvard in the early thirties required coming to some accommodation with the man Eliot, that visiting specter in Eliot House where Matthiessen was head tutor.²² Matthiessen and Levin, for different reasons, were intensely ambivalent about Old Possum. The central document here is Levin's long letter to Matthiessen written in the summer of 1934 in which he commented on the manuscript of *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, Matthiessen's singular failure to probe, much less to articulate, his ambivalence. This letter was Levin's declaration of independence that concluded his student days. I will turn to it later in the chapter.

Matthiessen's presence in Levin's freshman year was in many ways powerful and enabling. It was also a piece of "great good luck" for entirely personal reasons: Matthiessen was simultaneously so completely inside Harvard and so hopelessly outside that he could serve as role model for a Jew who perceived Harvard as "a rich man's New England gentleman's institution" (interview), and had no hope of ever becoming an integral part of it. Matthiessen could teach Levin how to negotiate being inside and outside, and if not that, then provide at least the consolation that there were now people at Harvard on whom that very bliss inflicted pain. Levin believed that he and Matthiessen were somehow in the same boat. Levin's visit to McLean Hospital in January 1939, where Matthiessen weathered a severe depression, was an expression of connectedness; it confirmed an emotional tie and a feeling of solidarity. Matthiessen may have sensed as much when he noted about Levin's appearance at McLean: "I wonder what went through Harry's head at coming to a place like this." By 1938 Levin thought of Matthiessen as a friend and years later wrote that "it might have been

21. Harry Levin, "The Private Life of F. O. Matthiessen," in *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 228. The part of the essay from which these quotes are taken was first printed in a memorial issue of *The Monthly Review* 2 (October 1950) and reprinted in *F. O. Matthiessen (1902-1950): A Collective Portrait*. Eds. Paul M. Sweezy and Leo Huberman (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), p. 125.

22. Harry Levin, "Old Possum at Possum House," in *T. S. Eliot: Essays from the Southern Review*. Ed. James Olney (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 155.

callous if I had not paid that visit." What may have gone through Levin's mind and informed "the simple directness of gesture" with which he gave the suffering man a book on Daumier, was perhaps the ever-present thought that Matthiessen, too, was conscious of "belonging to a harassed minority."²³

It was through the example of personal conflictedness that Matthiessen opened a path into life at Harvard for Levin. Matthiessen, ten years Levin's senior, was born in Pasadena, California, in 1902. But due to his father's unsettled life-style he spent a good deal of time in La Salle, Illinois, in the house of his grandfather Friedrich Wilhelm. Like Levin's father, old Matthiessen was an immigrant from Germany who became a wealthy business man. Because of his time in Illinois, Francis Otto considered himself a "small town boy" from "the midwest."²⁴ He prepared at Hackley School in Tarrytown, New York, and after a short period of service in the Canadian Air Force entered Yale in the fall of 1919. Here, while swimming in the mainstream of campus life, the interests, views, and tendencies developed that would set Matthiessen apart from the majority of his colleagues at Harvard. His emotional, undogmatic Christianity intensified, his heterodox political opinions formed, propelling him far to the left, and his homosexuality emerged as an unavoidable, upsetting fact in his life. When he was tapped for the "Skull and Bones" in his senior year, he felt compelled to tell his "brothers" about it, believing then, erroneously, "that it was entirely a question of early environment, having been led into the wrong sexual channels by older boys at school." He graduated in 1923 and went on to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar. There, in the spring of 1924, he read *Sexual Inversion* (1897) by Havelock Ellis and John A. Symonds and was deeply upset. "Then for the first time it was completely brought home to me that I was what I was by *nature*." Some months later, on the boat to England, where he was to begin his second year at Oxford, he met the painter Russell Cheney (Yale class of 1904). The prospect of loving Cheney slowly healed the shock of "coming face to face with the fact that I could probably never marry." Life with Cheney was the unexpected escape from the depressing alternatives Matthiessen had gloomily envisioned: repression, self-abuse, and promiscuity.²⁵

Matthiessen returned to America in 1925. He had earned an Oxford B. Litt. with a thesis on Oliver Goldsmith and decided to pursue a graduate degree at Harvard. In Cambridge he met a set of teachers unlike any he had studied with so far. "By far the most living experience," Matthiessen recalled in 1947, "came through the lectures

23. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 227. For Matthiessen's comments see *Rat and the Devil: Journal Letters of F. O. Matthiessen and Russell Cheney*. Ed. Louis Hyde (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1988), 258. The assessment of his visit to Matthiessen is found in Levin's marginal notes.

24. Joseph Summers and U. T. Miller Summers, "Matthiessen, Francis Otto," in *Dictionary of American Biography*. Supplement 4, 1946-1950 New York: Scribner's Sons, 1974): 559.

25. Hyde, ed., *Rat and the Devil*, p. 47, 47-48.

of Irving Babbitt, with whose neo-humanistic attack upon the modern world I disagreed at nearly every point. The vigor with which he objected to almost every author since the eighteenth century forced me to fight for my tastes, which grew stronger by the exercise." William Cain pointed out that despite ideological differences Matthiessen admired Babbitt's prophetic intensity, his advocacy of educational reform and commitment to the idea of a university that was not just a Ph. D. mill. But what appealed to Matthiessen above all was a social similarity, Babbitt's isolation and stance as an "outsider" within the institution.²⁶

Matthiessen received his M.A. in 1926 and his Ph. D. in 1927. He had planned to write his dissertation on Walt Whitman, an indication, perhaps, that through his relationship with Cheney Whitman's poetry had taken on a new glow, and that he may have felt strong enough to engage in his criticism the aspect of homosexuality in Whitman's poetry. Matthiessen was then already moving toward Eliot's theory, expounded in the Norton lectures, that the enjoyment of a poem is the basis for the critical process: "The element of enjoyment is enlarged into appreciation, which brings a more intellectual addition to the original intensity of feeling."²⁷ In the case of Whitman, Matthiessen's original intensity of feeling would have been caused to a significant degree by the thrill of recognizing the experiential source of Whitman's exuberance. Matthiessen may have said about Whitman what he would say about Eliot: You begin to understand his poetry "by listening to the lines, by regarding their pattern as a self-enclosed whole, by listening to what is being communicated instead of looking for something that isn't." The act of listening can lead back, through the rhetoric of the poem, to the experience of the poet. "Only in this way," Matthiessen claimed, "by experiencing the poem as a whole, and then by evaluating it 'from the inside,' so to speak, by trusting the evidence of your senses for its effect, can you determine whether or not the poem is alive; and thus, in turn, whether or not the poet has a sense of his age, whether what he believes and imagines about human destiny springs from a direct contact with life."²⁸

Had Matthiessen written a book about Whitman based on that theory - which he refined in the early thirties under the influence of T. S. Eliot's *Use of Poetry* - it might have been a fascinating study, a belated as well as ground-breaking experiment in gay aesthetics. Ironically, Matthiessen was denied permission to carry out the project with the argument that there was nothing more to be said about Whitman.²⁹

26. William E. Cain, *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 57. Matthiessen on Babbitt see *From the Heart of Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 74.

27. T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 19.

28. F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*. Third edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 110, 46

29. Cain, *F. O. Matthiessen*, p. 47.

When he finally got around to writing about the poet in *American Renaissance* (1941) he did so while recovering from a depression that had made him seek refuge at McLean's. His buoyancy and the elation of the mid-twenties, when he first knew Cheney, were gone. Matthiessen was harsh on Whitman and his assessment of the exuberant first part of "Song of Myself" as regressively self-indulgent, reflects, perhaps, the direction of Matthiessen's relentless self-criticism during the late thirties and early forties. The man, who in 1924 had written to his lover: "But the heart no longer slumbers on the edge of life. It glows, it vibrates;" and "I looked at the stars and your eyes winked back at me. And as I rode slowly the rest of the way your bicycle was just beside mine;" now said of Whitman's ecstatic verse: "Readers with a distaste for loosely defined mysticism have plenty of grounds for objection in the way the poet's belief in divine inspiration is clothed in imagery that obscures all distinctions between body and soul by portraying the soul as merely the sexual agent. Moreover, in the passivity of the poet's body there is a quality vaguely pathological and homosexual. This is in keeping with the regressive, infantile fluidity, imaginatively polypervse, which breaks down all mature barriers, a little further on in 'Song of Myself,' to declare that he is 'maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man.' Nevertheless, this fluidity of sexual sympathy made possible Whitman's fallow receptivity to life."³⁰ Overall, Matthiessen's treatment of Whitman was highly favorable. In his book on Henry James (1944), to which Matthiessen turned next, he did not touch upon the issue of homosexuality at all. Admittedly, that aspect can be considered marginal to James's work. A year later, in 1945, Cheney died, leaving Matthiessen devastated and inconsolable. Five years later, in 1950, during a period of political disappointments and

30. Matthiessen to Cheney in Hyde, ed. *Rat and the Devil*, p. 44, 46. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 535. David Bergman in his essay "F. O. Matthiessen: The Critic as Homosexual," [*Raritan* 9 (Spring 1990): 62-82] disagrees with the trend of this reading. He claims that what William Cain and I consider a harsh assessment of Whitman's poetry reflecting Matthiessen's growing disappointment about his inability to unify his life, to bring together thought and emotion, to integrate his love and his criticism, is in fact a product of insensitive reading. Rather, "Matthiessen tacitly shows [in *American Renaissance*] that the finest strain of expression in American culture is found in gay works, those derived from the homosexual's 'divine gifts' as 'the advanced guard of any hope for a spirit of brotherhood.' In short, *American Renaissance* is Matthiessen's ultimate expression of his love for Cheney and a covert celebration of the homosexual artist" (73). I maintain that the key to Matthiessen's depression is found in Bergman's need to use the words "tacitly" and "covert." They reflect the necessity for concealment in the homophobic atmosphere of the late forties and early fifties. Nevertheless, Bergman's essay contains a useful discussion of the subject.

of increased public pressure on homosexuals, Matthiessen jumped to his death from the window of a Boston hotel.

Would *American Renaissance* have become a different book if Lowes had allowed Matthiessen to write his dissertation on Whitman? Maybe. As it was, Matthiessen produced a scholarly study of Elizabethan prose translations, took his degree in June, established a household with Cheney in Kittery, Maine, the same month, and left for his first teaching job at Yale in the fall of 1927. Two years later he was back in Cambridge as a tutor in History and Literature, Harvard's new undergraduate honors program. Houghton Mifflin in Boston had just published his mannered, somewhat sentimental book on Sarah Orne Jewett, a relative of his beloved mother. This study, together with a graduate seminar on early American historiography taken with Kenneth Murdock at Harvard, were Matthiessen's only credentials as an Americanist. But Murdock knew a good man when he saw one, and entrusted to his former student a course on the "Literature of the West and South centering around Whitman, Poe, and Mark Twain." Matthiessen was thrilled: "The prospects of what I am to give are so exciting as to send shivers through my already too stimulated body." In the following spring, he changed the title of his course to "American Literature outside New England" so as to feel "no absurdity in including Melville."³¹

This, however, was not the direction in which Harry Levin was headed. He had come to Harvard "largely in quest for links with the past." And the past for Levin was classical and European, and if at all American, it was certainly not found outside New England. Inevitably, Levin passed on (or, perhaps, turned back), albeit not without reservations, to Matthiessen's own mentor, Irving Babbitt. Nevertheless, Matthiessen had been ideal as initiator. His critical stance, striving to combine political and aesthetic concerns, his Ivy League credentials yet social marginality, and finally his origins in the midwest, yet easy acquisition of New England culture, eroded for Levin the imagined monolithic quality of Harvard and made it appear permeable and accepting of those who thought they did not belong. After one of his first teas with the Murdocks, Matthiessen had written jubilantly to Cheney: "[It] was really great fun; pleasant and easy and giving me the sense of belonging."³² In turn, Matthiessen made Levin feel at ease and at home through the way he taught literature. His trick was to pretend in class that the question of belonging, the problem of inside and outside, did not exist. What mattered was literature alone, and that belonged to anybody who

31. Hyde, ed., *Rat and the Devil*, p. 156, 215.

32. Hyde, ed., *Rat and Devil*, p. 156. Whether Matthiessen was indeed successful in combining his political concerns and aesthetic views is still a matter of dispute. William Cain in *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism* denies it, while Frederic Stern affirms it in *F. O. Matthiessen: Christian Socialist as Critic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981). Levin, "A View from Within," p. 1; on Levin's view of the past see Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*. 1958 (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980), vi-vii.

cared enough about it. This recalls a passage from one of Lionel Trilling's essays where he defines snobbery as a set of questions: "Do I belong - do I really belong? And does he belong? And if I am observed talking to him, will it make me seem to belong or not to belong?" To the extent that these questions had no significance to Matthiessen, he represented the new Harvard that emerged from the demise of the genteel tradition. This new indifference to pedigree was connected to the single most important aspect of Matthiessen as a teacher of ideas. "Matty," John Rackliffe wrote, "was in many ways as American as they come. ... Yet he was always somewhat rootless, he had no province, no 'pays'."³³ Herein he was like Babbitt and unlike T. S. Eliot.

Harry Levin took Babbitt's course on Romanticism as a sophomore in just about the last year he gave it. Babbitt was exactly the kind of teacher Levin needed: fully in command of the universe of literature, classical, biblical, scholastic, humanistic, oriental; he was demanding, challenging, committed and expecting commitment, intellectually shaped by Harvard, yet clearly not of it in speech and manners. "I was very devoted to him," Levin remembered; "he was a very inspiring teacher. Often he inspired you to react, especially if you were committed, as I was, to the moderns."³⁴ The engagement with Babbitt resulted in Levin's first academic laurels. His paper for Babbitt's course won the Bowdoin Prize and was published under the title *The Broken Column: A Study in Romantic Hellenism* by Harvard University Press in 1931. It was dedicated to Matthiessen; its theme and attitude were inspired by Babbitt; but its style was Levin's, an ironic preciousness that later yielded to a graver mode. The speaker of the opening lines falls gracefully into the pose of an epigone of Walter Pater's, but veers around suddenly to expose the luscious scenery as stage props.

Archæology is a sentimental science. It indulges our modern fondness for the fragmentary; we strike postures before its ruins, reconstruct vanished golden ages from corroded copper coins, and soliloquize on the transiency of time in accents of exquisite melancholy. Mention of Greece calls to our minds the vision of a cypress grove, a heap of shattered marble, clear sunlight and cool shade, a wooded hillside, and the blue Mediterranean below. The solitary figure who invariably stands in the corner of the picture may appear, from this distance, to be Ajax, but closer inspection is certain to reveal the spectacles and side-whiskers of Herr Schliemann.

33. John Rackliffe, "Notes for a Character Study," in Sweezy and Huberman, eds. *F. O. Matthiessen: A Collective Portrait*, p. 86. Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and the Novel," in Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 209. Harry Levin wrote "I felt at home in [sic] Harvard from the beginning. Tutorial and the house system helped me fit in." Levin, letter to the author, 22 July 1989.

34. Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989.

Levin's topic was "the changes which affected the classical tradition in the romantic age, and, perhaps, through an examination of the conception of Greece held by two or three representative romantic poets [Byron, Shelley, and Keats], to discover, in the discrepant points of view, certain fundamental distinctions between the two ways of thought." The tension between devotion to and reaction against Babbitt was fully played out in the essay and remained unresolved. Levin actually liked the poetry of Byron, Shelley, and Keats, who were among the favorites of Babbitt's academic antagonist, John Livingston Lowes. But when he spoke of the Romantics in general he descended into satire. "The romanticists," Levin wrote, "have discovered that the supposed simplicity of Greek life disagrees with their own experience of life. Rather than change their interpretation, they conclude that they are undergoing a phase of experience which the Greeks did not know."³⁵

Echoing Babbitt and anticipating Allan Bloom by fifty years, Levin deplored the decline of classical education beginning with the Romantics and ending with Harvard's elective system. Wittily, Levin made his point in French, a language Babbitt considered "only a cheap and nasty substitute for Latin," by quoting Stendhal: "Vous n'avez à la bouche que les noms de Sophocle, d'Euripide, et d'Homère, et vous ne les avez seulement pas lus." Levin demonstrated that he had, and in Greek, too, by quoting from Sappho and Thucydides in the original. Adding a liberal sprinkling of Latin quotes for good measure, he showed that the classics were not Greek to him, as they had been to "poor Keats."³⁶ His German quotes were a bit flawed, but served their purpose. Despite Babbitt's complaints about Harvard's shift in emphasis from the classical to the modern languages, the attitude of the college administration toward modern languages was far from professional. In 1920, president Lowell had written to Kittredge in regard to a course in modern Scandinavian: "A student can teach himself to read a modern language without great difficulty if he needs to; - we have all probably taught ourselves to do so; and therefore it certainly does not seem necessary to have a course on this subject every year."³⁷ Quite probably Levin had learned German not from his father, but in the manner suggested here by Lowell. True to Babbitt's American ideal of disciplined self-education, however, Levin had acquired a lot more than just German. In the course of his sixty-three page essay, he mentioned some one hundred and forty names, from Abbé Barthélmy, Aeschylus, and Alcman to Vico, Villemain, Villoisin, Winckelman and Wordsworth. He did it elegantly and with grace; yet the endless name-dropping is reminiscent of the fact that Babbitt's more

35. Harry Levin, *The Broken Column: A Study in Romantic Hellenism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), 13, 17-30.

36. Levin, *The Broken Column*, p. 69. For Babbitt's comment on French see William F. Giese in Manchester and Shepard, eds., *Irving Babbitt*, p. 4.

37. Lowell to Kittredge, then chairman of the Division of Modern Languages, on 9 June 1920, Papers of George Lyman Kittredge, Harvard University Archives, HUG 4486.10.

enterprising and less dedicated students used to pool their pennies and bet on how many exponents of this or that literary theory Babbitt would mention in during his lecture. The winning number was usually around seventy, which translates into an average of two names every three minutes. In the course of his career Levin learned to control his wealth of information; yet an abundance of names, quotations, references remained a hallmark of his writing. Levin had not simply mastered "the tradition," he had become its guardian.³⁸

Unlike Babbitt, Levin would develop two critical techniques, the comparative and the contextual method, that turned the mastery of mass, at which Babbitt had excelled, into an asset. During the fifties Levin learned to weave the pearls that Babbitt would simply have dropped *seriatim* into a complicated texture. "The comparative method," Levin wrote in 1950, "enables us to follow an individual process of development by bringing together different manifestations which have taken similar forms." But twenty years earlier, in *The Broken Column*, Babbitt-style series still abound. Here is an example: "So the Greeks become a static people and life to them is, according to Browning, 'an eternal petrification.' They are not even allowed to have feelings; Herder, Winckelman, and Schlegel all join arms against Lessing for suggesting that poor Philoctetes experienced any agony."³⁹ Later in his career, Levin might have examined the differences between the philosophies of the four German aestheticians in order to get a better grip on German idealism and to describe precisely how it differed from English Romanticism. In addition, he might have related each of the four to his particular background, recreated his context, in order to arrive at a clear understanding of the times and the ways in which historic conditions give rise to certain ideas. The contextual method reflected Levin's view of history as a complex, yet graspable, describable set of events. As Burton Pike explained, history for Levin was "a succession of constantly changing constellations of people, conventions, values, fashions, and ideas. He takes history as the fluid collective form of a society as it moves forward in time. He marks out certain thematic constants in this variable

38. Levin, *Irving Babbitt*, p. 28; Harry Levin, "Irving Babbitt and the Teaching of Literature," in Levin, *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 328. A dazzling example of controlled abundance are Levin's 1950 essay "The Tradition of Tradition," reprinted in Levin, *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 55-66, and his 1968 essay "Thematics and Criticism," reprinted in *Grounds for Comparison*, pp. 91-109; less successful perhaps is Levin's 1985 essay "From Bohemia to Academia: Writers in Universities," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 44 (January 1991): 28-50.

39. Levin, *The Broken Column*, p. 31. The description of the comparative method is taken from Levin's essay "New Frontiers in the Humanities," *Contexts of Criticism*, p. 8. The contextual method is first mentioned in Levin's 1934 letter to Matthiessen, see Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 235.

succession of steady states, constants of development and change in social and literary convention, and examines individual works and authors against this background."⁴⁰

It is quite possible to claim Matthew Arnold as an ancestor of Levin's comparative and contextual method, because the Englishman argued in his inaugural lecture at Oxford in 1857, that "no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures." Levin quoted this sentence in his own inaugural lecture as Irving Babbitt Professor in 1960. Yet it seems more realistic to suspect the immediate influence of Babbitt and other urgencies at work. To master the literary tradition of European and American letters was for both Babbitt and Levin a source of pleasure; at the same time this achievement was the trajectory that propelled them from the margin to the center. It worked for Levin because with the election of a new president in 1933 the university was ready to shift its focus from social standing to academic merit and thus began to retain young Jewish scholars whom the Lowell administration would have let go. The premise from which both Babbitt and Levin operated was that those belonged who "owned" the place intellectually. This view also shaped their understanding of the critic and his task. Babbitt was quite perplexed, for instance, when Levin told him that his course paper would be published; Babbitt considered Levin not old enough to practice as a critic. "It was a question of gaining a critic's license," Levin wrote about Babbitt's reaction, "by getting to know one's business, so to speak, by mastering a complex and voluminous body of material. How could one judge or discriminate or generalize or trace relevant connections or, in short, make valid interpretations without such groundwork?" On the other hand, sheer amassing of knowledge was not enough. "Scholarship was the precondition of criticism, for [Babbitt and Levin], as criticism was the consummation of scholarship."⁴¹

How important Babbitt's beginnings as outsider were to Levin became evident in the inaugural lecture Levin gave in 1960 as the first incumbent of the Irving Babbitt Professorship of Comparative Literature. The occasion canonized Babbitt and provided Levin with a pedigree. It was safe within that framework to point out

40. Burton Pike, "Harry Levin: An Appreciation," *Comparative Literature* 40 (Winter 1988): 33. In his essay "Leech Gathering" Levin pointed out that his interest in "thematics" was an offshoot of the comparative method; "the effects of fantasy can be studied through the progressive transformation of images or myths" (*Grounds for Comparison*, p. 23). In his introduction to "Thematics and Criticism" Levin explained that he tried to utilize the method of thematics in *The Power of Blackness* (1958) and *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (1969). See also Cándido Pérez Gállego, "El método crítico de Harry Levin," *Arbor: Ciencia, Pensamiento y Cultura* 114 (February 1983): 99-107.

41. Levin, *Refractions* p. 327, 328. On the decline of academic scholarship during the Lowell administration see Lipset and Riesman, *Education and Politics at Harvard*, pp. 153-155, 167-169.

otherness. Levin's lecture certainly honored Professor Babbitt; but, subterraneously, it was about new kinds of pedigrees. Levin began lightly with a line of notable Harvard professors: James Russell Lowell, Francis James Child, and Irving Babbitt, counterpoised by a line of dissenting appointees, George Ticknor, John Fiske, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Henry Adams. Like the latter, Babbitt was opinionated and doctrinaire, but unlike Adams, would never think of leaving Harvard. The reason was Babbitt's sense of mission. President Eliot, "who represented the Puritan temperament at its best," had relaxed educational standards in Babbitt's view. "Hence it required a maverick to present the case for tradition." Babbitt's intellectual pedigree was of Harvard's finest. Levin stated "that the two portraits [Babbitt] placed in his Widener study were those of Sainte-Beuve and Charles Eliot Norton." Sainte-Beuve's picture also hung in Emerson's study in Concord; Emerson had been Norton's mentor, and Norton had been Babbitt's. Levin sketched Norton as "highly cultivated and many-minded yet somewhat amateurish and provincial." But Norton, the scholar, was less important for Babbitt, a "rugged young Midwesterner" than Norton, the gentleman, a role that Levin considered "very strategic in Babbitt's thought." The appearance of Emerson in Babbitt's intellectual lineage left his eulogist somewhat at a loss, because Babbitt, who knew intimately what life west of Concord was all about, had no patience for Emerson's optimism. Despite a shared reverence for Sainte-Beuve, Emerson and Babbitt did not make a pair. Levin settled for the safest common denominator and opened the section about Babbitt's rough childhood with the sentence: "Ralph Waldo Emerson was a strikingly untraditional thinker; but," Levin continued, "his conception of the American scholar is by now a tradition in itself, to be saluted in passing on these occasions, and emulated all the more earnestly by outlanders migrating from the Midwest to New England."⁴² The last phrase, incidentally, indicated Levin's own pedigree. As first incumbent of the Babbitt professorship and as his former student Levin "inherited" Babbitt's Harvard lineage. But politely adversarial, Levin clung to his own. He preferred a series of middlewestern boys who, by way of New England, managed to enter the mainstream of literary culture -- Babbitt, T. S. Eliot, F. O. Matthiessen.

But there was something else about Babbitt. Like Matthiessen, he had a blemish. Levin revealed it with the gesture of the detached researcher: "Though [Babbitt] was suspicious of the quest for origins, and too proud to welcome an intimate scrutiny of his background, it is always illuminating to find latent sources of inspiration more profound than the entries in a curriculum vitae." Levin had come across two letters whose revelation, he felt, "cannot embarrass [Babbitt's] inherent dignity at this stage." They were by Babbitt's father. The first had been written in 1847 by a lad of nineteen teaching country school in Missouri. It was addressed to Longfellow and asked him to support his application to Harvard. The enclosed writing sample consisted of two cantos of a romantic poem, "Gem of the Sea." The second letter had

42. *Ibid.*, p. 330-331; other quotes are from pages 329 and 324.

been sent from Los Angeles by Edwin Dwight Babbitt, M.D., to William James in 1898. "This time his enclosure was part of a set of books titled *Human Culture and Cure*, replete with testimonials and illustrations, including a diagram of the author's brain." Letter and literature revealed that the sender, "who could be consulted by mail, practised in the light of hypnotism, spiritualism, phrenology, clairvoyance, massages, sun-baths, electrical treatments, inhabited planets, and utopian socialism. ... As author, publisher, and bookseller, he brought out such items as *Babbitt's Health Guide*, *Vital Magnetism*, *The Fountain of Life*, and *Marriage, with Sexual and Social Up-Building*."⁴³

William James had acquired the reputation of being precisely the right address for that sort of thing. As Santayana observed, James had "kept his mind and heart wide open to all that might seem, to polite minds, odd, personal, or visionary in religion and philosophy. He gave a sincerely respectful hearing to sentimentalists, mystics, spiritualists, wizards, cranks, quacks, and impostors - for it is hard to draw the line, and James was not willing to draw it prematurely." Santayana, who was very fond of James, called him a "genuine and vigorous romanticist."⁴⁴ That was exactly what Irving Babbitt thought wrong with him. James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* he retitled "Wild Religions I have Known." Having grown up under the tutelage of an eccentric father and suffered the attendant social and economic hardships, Babbitt developed an intense distrust of all ideologies promising comprehensive salvation, including Christianity. It speaks for T. S. Eliot's astuteness when he remarked about Babbitt: "His attitude towards Christianity seems to me that of a man who had no *emotional* acquaintance with any but some debased and uncultured form: I judge entirely on his public pronouncements and not at all on any information about his upbringing." Alfred Kazin was equally perceptive when he claimed that Babbitt's conservatism, "from his youth, was not a philosophy but an emotion."⁴⁵ It was the *saue qui peut* of a terrified child that had witnessed "breaking up housekeeping" too often.

Of course, the Levin household in Minneapolis had been eminently stable despite the fact that one parent oddly combined science and religion. Levin's (imagined) blemish was of a different sort from those of Babbitt and Matthiessen but equally determining (in the peculiar way of blemishes that touch on social acceptability) of the direction and intensity that came to characterize the young man's scholarship. Levin was Jewish in a world where Jewishness was still perceived as a stigma. Slowly that view had become unacceptable in the course of Levin's academic career. By the time Levin gave his inaugural speech in 1960, his audience may not have felt in the

43. *Ibid.*, p. 331, 331-332.

44. George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy" (1911), reprinted in Santayana, *Winds of Doctrine: Studies in Contemporary Opinion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 205.

45. Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of American Prose Literature*. 1942 (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1956), 225; Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, p. 42.

least compelled to look "for latent sources of inspiration more profound than the entries in a curriculum vitae" that may have shaped Babbitt's successor. But the incumbent was aware of the importance and power of those subterranean forces. In fact, he thought his own "blemish" not subterranean but quite visible. He had never tried "to pass," as it was then called. "I have known such [Jews]," Levin remembers, "we never had any great respect for them, those of us who knew about them. I was always grateful that my name and physiognomy put that temptation out of the way."⁴⁶

On one occasion, in particular, Levin may have welcomed what he imagined to be his Jewish visibility because it relieved him of an explanation. The occasion was Levin's first visit to the rooms of T. S. Eliot in Eliot House to have tea with the poet in the fall of 1932. The subject was off the table and in the long friendship between Eliot and Levin "the matter of my Jewishness never came up, of course." Eliot's tenure as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry was the pedagogical event of Levin's senior year and the encounter with the poet completed his initiation.⁴⁷

For Levin's slightly younger contemporaries, who would congregate around *Partisan Review* in the forties and fifties, Eliot was "a commanding literary figure, who had no successful rivals, and whose formulations were in fact revered."⁴⁸ Jewish intellectuals, too, were under Eliot's spell; those among them who knew about the tough life in the big cities, found Eliot's poetry particularly appealing. Eliot was, as Irving Howe explained, "a central figure in modern culture, a writer of the highest literary intelligence. Eliot wrote poetry that seemed thrilling in its apprehensions of the spirit of the time, poetry vibrant with images of alienation, moral dislocation, and historical breakdown. If his vocabulary came to draw upon unacceptable doctrine, his sensibility remained intensely familiar. It is very possible that the power and the charm of Eliot's poetry, which touched me closely as a young man, kept me and others from acknowledging the streak of bigotry in his work." The key point is that Eliot was perceived as central to a culture to which Jews considered themselves newcomers. Characteristically overstating the case but bringing out a truth, Leslie Fiedler recently

46. Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989. An extraordinary novel about Jewish self-consciousness at Harvard College and the phenomenon of trying "to pass" is Myron S. Kaufmann, *Remember Me to God* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1957). The novel is set in the years 1938 to 1942.

47. Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989. Cf. Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 7. The major event of Levin's college career was "working up -- at the last minute, because someone had dropped out -- a major role in a tragedy of Sophocles put on by the Classical Club in which I was an officer (in Greek). Since that meant dropping out of classes for a fortnight, Kittredge called me a 'nuisance' for not being there to recite when he called on me in his Beowulf course. When I apologized and explained, he characteristically said: 'Well, I've heard worse excuses.'" Levin, marginal notes of October 1991.

48. Ozick, "Eliot at 101," p. 120.

confessed in an interview "that he adopted the anti-Semitism of James, Pound, and Eliot to 'establish my credentials as a full fledged up-to-date citizen of the Republic of Letters."⁴⁹

Levin, five years Fiedler's senior, read Eliot's poetry in high school and fell prey to its magic. "It was the most exciting thing in the world. ... We admired his poetry tremendously; we used to chant it - a few of us, who read poetry - in the Poetry Club." For Levin's generation, Eliot became the "poetic revolutionary as well as the critical arbiter." And if Irving Howe (born in 1920) thought that Eliot's "journey from provincial St. Louis to cosmopolitan London" could help New York Jews "negotiate a somewhat similar journey from Brooklyn or the Bronx to Manhattan," we may imagine the excitement of a Minneapolis public high school graduate at the discovery that "this American, with so strong a sense of the past, had also come from the middle west and gone to Harvard seventeen years before." If Eliot was not exactly a god for Levin, he certainly was a giant. In a retrospective essay Levin summed up Eliot's significance for him in 1932. He would become the most eminent figure in his pedigree when he reappeared at Harvard to deliver the Norton lectures: "And here was a legend become a reality before our very eyes - the legendary reality of a middlewestern boy who, by way of New England, had somehow managed to enter the mainstream of English literature. It was quite improbable and, obviously, inimitable."⁵⁰

Levin stopped well short of imitation. Yet he had done work on the Metaphysical poets. Theodore Spencer showed Levin's paper on John Cleveland to Eliot. Although, as Levin recalled, it "took issue with some of Eliot's views, his generous response was to accept it for publication in his *Criterion*" where it appeared in October 1934. Their acquaintance began. Levin attended Eliot's public lectures but not his course. Late in the spring of 1933, Eliot returned to England and Levin graduated. He received a traveling fellowship (on recommendations from Babbitt and Matthiessen) and decided to divide his year of leisure between London and Paris, between the British Museum and the Sorbonne. Eliot had graciously invited the young man to come see him in London and had furnished Levin with a letter of introduction to James Joyce who was then living in Paris and whom Eliot considered "the greatest master of the English language since Milton."⁵¹

His sojourn in Europe left Levin in doubt what to do next. "I was sure I did not want to go back to Harvard in order to take the doctorate in English." He was not

49. Sylvia Rothchild, "Was Assimilation a Mistake? Interview with Leslie Fiedler," *Jewish Advocate* (Boston) September 13-19, 1991: 4; Irving Howe, "An Exercise in Memory. Eliot and the Jews: A Personal Confession," *The New Republic* 204 (March 11, 1991): 31

50. Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 7; Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October, 1989; Howe, "An Exercise in Memory," p. 31.

51. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 135; Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 7.

even sure that English would remain the focus of his literary studies. A cablegram from Kenneth Murdock, then Dean of the Harvard Faculty, ended his indecision. It invited him to join the newly established Society of Fellows. The founding of this Society had been one of Lowell's pet projects. Modelled on the Fondation Thiers in Paris and on the Prize Fellows at Trinity College in Cambridge, England, the Harvard Society of Fellows offered three year fellowships to some two dozen superb college graduates. They were encouraged to pursue whatever research they liked, but could not work on a Ph. D.. Lowell wanted to offset the mass production of Ph.D.s and the ever greater conformity of doctoral candidates by creating a nest for the hatching of "the rare and independent genius." The plan had been worked out and rooms in Eliot House left empty, but no donors could be found. It did not diminish Lowell's enthusiasm for his dream. "To be thoroughly effective," he stated in one of his last presidential Reports, "the Society should be well endowed, but where conviction of value is strong and enduring the means of execution are sometimes forthcoming." Soon afterward the university received an anonymous gift to get the Society off the ground. It had come from Lowell. The president emeritus had pledged two million dollars, nearly all the money he had. On September 25, 1933, the new fellows sat down to the first of their ritual Monday night dinners. In the fall of 1934 Harry Levin joined the hand-picked group.⁵²

But before he could begin this new period of his life, old issues demanded clarification. Levin spent the summer of 1934 in Minnesota. He was disappointed that Matthiessen had not been more encouraging in the matter of his academic career. "Matthiessen had a misleading idea of my family's affluence," Levin recalled, "he felt I could afford to be an independent scholar." But Matthiessen knew that it could be tough for a Jew, even of Levin's accomplishments, to obtain a position at a first rate institution. Matthiessen himself had no doubts about Levin's academic abilities. He sent him a copy of his recently completed manuscript, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* and asked for his response. Exiled in Minneapolis Levin "clung to it deliberately, as tangible evidence of the existence of interests that are not cultivated and values that have never been recognized hereabouts, or as the only experience of the summer that I should like to remember."⁵³

What Levin had in hand was Matthiessen's first sustained attempt at a critical study for which neither his impressionist essay on Sarah Orne Jewett (1929) nor his scholarly dissertation on Elizabethan translations (1931) had prepared him. He had chosen a confoundingly difficult subject. It was obvious that T. S. Eliot had been moving rapidly into a political direction contrary to Matthiessen's own and that this

52. Smith, *The Harvard Century*, p. 97; Lowell quoted from Yeomans, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell*, p. 531; Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 9.

53. Harry Levin, "Appendix: A Letter to F. O. Matthiessen (About T. S. Eliot)," in Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 232; Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989.

direction informed his poetry. Matthiessen himself observed that "Eliot dwells repeatedly on the integral relation of any poet's work to the society of which he is a part, to the climate of thought and feeling which give rise to his expression. In line with such reflections Eliot can say: 'The great poet, in writing himself, writes his time'." Yet in his study Matthiessen deliberately ignored Eliot's politics. "In my evaluation of Eliot's poetry I have not been concerned with tracing the development of his thought ...". Thus Matthiessen accepted willy-nilly a theory which the humanist Paul Elmer More had called "heretical" in a letter to Austin Warren in 1929 and for which he scolded Eliot, namely "that ethics and aesthetics are to be kept rigorously separate." Without wincing Matthiessen quoted from *After Strange Gods*, mentioned it approvingly, and considered "Gerontion" -- the poem he cites most frequently in his study -- "the most mature, balanced work of art among Eliot's earlier poems [because] he hit upon a situation in the sombre brooding of the old man that enabled him to set down a particular statement of life in concrete objectified form."⁵⁴ This reading indicated why Matthiessen was not concerned about the poem's antisemitism and other bigotry: The prejudices were the made-up views of Gerontion and not convictions held by the poet.

In Matthiessen's further explanation of the poem we get a glimpse of the ties that bound Matthiessen to Eliot despite their political differences, and of the deep accord in their views of life. Eliot, Matthiessen wrote, "can project into the thoughts of Gerontion an expression of one of his most moving, recurrent themes: the horror of a life without faith, its disillusioned weariness of knowledge, its agonized slow drying up of the springs of emotion." Matthiessen shared Eliot's Christianity-derived sense of evil as arid; the dry rot of evil perverted the world into a bleak and hopeless wasteland. William Cain argued that "this dimension of [Matthiessen's] Christian belief leads him in the final analysis to be deeply skeptical about the potential of socialism to convert minds and reorder society and its institutions." But this is not necessarily so, because Matthiessen's view of socialism was neither Marxist nor Leninist, but inspired by Whitman. Matthiessen thought of social democracy as originating in fellow-feeling and producing in turn a sense of brotherhood; the same was true for Christianity. The liquid exuberance of Whitman's "Democratic Vistas" and his *Leaves of Grass*, or the luscious humidity of Melville's "A Squeeze of the Hand" chapter in *Moby Dick* were very much part of Matthiessen's utopia. The fluidum in which fellow-feeling thrived, the utopia of brotherhood (be it homosexual or socialist or Christian; the terms become synonymous here), counterpoised the arid wasteland of evil. Evil, religiously, socially, and politically, was a drying-up of the springs of emotion. Matthiessen perceived this thought in Eliot's poetry and found in it a reflection of his own anxiety: "The dry intellectualized distrusting of the emotions,

54. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 59, 153, viii, 19. Paul Elmer More to Austin Warren on 11 August 1929; quoted in Dakin, *Paul Elmer More*, p. 269 (see also note 57 in the previous chapter).

which Emerson recognized as the worst blight that had been left by waning Puritanism, still prevails in the vestiges of the genteel tradition, and thus produces distorted lives in which thought and feeling find no harmony. And the jagged cleavage that separates such lives from that of Sweeney and the mass of the populace is sufficient measure of our continued failure to establish anything like a balanced social order.⁵⁵ To remedy with love was, of course, an impossible program, yet it was one in which the writers of the American Renaissance and their scholarly critic firmly believed.

Matthiessen argued that "the prevailing theme of Eliot's poems is the emptiness of life without belief, an emptiness that finally resounds with sickening fear and desperation in "The Hollow Men'." This summary sounds almost too facile, too neatly put; Matthiessen chose to conceal (in order to protect himself) how close Eliot had come to touching a raw nerve in his life. But we get a glimpse of his troubled soul in one of the most convincing passages of his book: When Matthiessen speaks about the interconnectedness of sexuality, religion, and suffering, about the penance of the lustful, his sentences reverberate with a deep, physical awareness of pain.⁵⁶

Although Matthiessen's readings of Eliot reflected his early conviction, namely "that the enjoyment of poetry cannot be wholly divorced from the beliefs it expresses," Matthiessen took great care to emphasize "that for an appreciation of Eliot's poetry the question of our own acceptance or rejection of his doctrine remains irrelevant. The point is fundamental to any understanding of the nature of art, and hence is one of the cruxes of my interpretation of Eliot." Indeed; because Matthiessen's makes possible the separation of content and form, thought and aesthetics. Consequently, an antisemitic, misogynist, or racist poem can still be a good *poem*. Matthiessen explained that this is also Eliot's later position. In the course of his study of Dante Eliot came to the conclusion "which is similar to what [I. A.] Richards has reached from a very different angle, that it is perfectly possible 'to have full literary or poetic appreciation without sharing the beliefs of the poet'.⁵⁷ This view refined More's crude theory of the rigorous separation of ethics and aesthetics and split aesthetics from religion. It was a belated acknowledgement of Enlightenment thought and provided the necessary precondition for the full acceptance of non-Christians as interpreters of English and American literature. The strict separation of religion and aesthetics, which Matthiessen's interpretation of Eliot reaffirmed and which Eliot's later work tried to undo, made Jews acceptable as teachers of a literature whose fundamental convictions, principles and thought processes had been, until quite recently, largely Christian. The first significant books of American literary criticism written with precisely that split in mind were M. H. Abrams's study of English Romanticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953) and Charles Feidelson's *Symbolism and American Literature* (1953). The latter

55. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 106, 59. William Cain, *F. O. Matthiessen and the Politics of Criticism*, p. 89, 66

56. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 100-101, 99.

57. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 111, 109.

was specifically directed against Matthiessen's Christianity-inspired views in *American Renaissance* (1941).

Levin returned the manuscript of *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* on the last day of July 1934. In his lengthy comments Levin made it very clear that despite its problems the separatist stance was the only tenable one. It meant that one would have to accept that immoral minds could produce exquisite poems; but it meant also that Jews could be interpreters of Christian literature. Levin was not to be excluded from the world he loved by an admired modernist turned reactionary. He was shocked to discover that Eliot had "transferred his intellectual burdens to the Church." Levin was understandably upset. He was back in provincial Minneapolis; his hopes of embarking eventually on an academic career had been deflated by the teacher he most trusted; in Europe he had discovered that the recent direction of Eliot's political thought indicated the wave of the future, that reaction was on the advance in France, to say nothing of Germany; and to top it all, Matthiessen had written a book that did not roar a thundering No!, but, to use Howe's formulation, mewed like a pussycat under the strokes of Eliot's new orthodoxy.⁵⁸ It was all quite outrageous.

Graciously, deferentially, Levin attacked both Matthiessen and Eliot. He had praise for Matthiessen's detachment and open approach, but found his literary analyses inexact and insufficient. "An epigraph from Charles Maurras is not, in my opinion, sufficient recompense for the half-dozen pages you might have devoted to a concrete technical analysis of Eliot's style." He deplored Matthiessen's failure to reconstruct fully Eliot's context, since "the habit of literary reminiscence [...] is Eliot's most characteristic and, in a sense, most original trait." Failing to grasp Eliot's literary and historical context, Matthiessen was either unable or unwilling "to distinguish style from thought." Furthermore, Levin accused Matthiessen of complicity in the construction of Eliot's exclusive (literary) pedigree: "Eliot, no doubt, will be pleased with the austere and discriminating taste you have shown in selecting his influences. Latterly he has revealed an increasing disposition to cover his tracks... . A man cannot choose his own ancestors, after all: and if we ignore Eliot's immediate literary environment in favor of more remote ones, we put him in the awkward situation of a rich costermonger who leases a place in Surrey and fills it with spurious portraits."⁵⁹

Such fastidiousness in Eliot's pedigree of poetic influence was counterbalanced by Eliot's air of complete control over European culture between 1300 and 1850, which Levin exposed as equally spurious. To be effective the technique of the "objective correlative" depended on the recognizability of the object, on the fact that the correlative triggered vaguely the same response in reader and poet. That presupposed a shared frame of reference. Taking "Coriolan" as his example, Levin demonstrated with wit and brilliance that Eliot could not "control an inference, once he has touched it off." He could not control the web of associations that constituted intellectual

58. Howe, "An Exercise in Memory," p. 29. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 247.

59. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 239, 235, 234.

culture. Was Eliot able, then, to avoid "associative anarchy"? Levin had his doubts. "If the system of poetic suggestion that Eliot employs is to be regulated by anything stronger and more universal than personal caprice, the poet must not only be sensitive, erudite, and precise; he must be omniscient." If Eliot had hoped that Christianity, "the only milieu broad enough to envelop both Dante and Baudelaire," would hold it all together, he was mistaken, because "a background stretched out so thin loses its uniformity and continuity, and becomes too vague for critical purposes." Eliot's actual joining of the Church of England Levin found a bit peculiar, because he regarded Eliot's religion as a purely "literary conception." But the act had encouraged Eliot to pontificate. "His penchant for citing the titles of books approved by himself I find a trifle irritating," Levin complained. Eliot did not realize perhaps that his authority was rather limited and in fact dwindling to the degree that "the traditions to which Eliot attaches himself have become fragile and tenuous." He did not control the culture, neither did Christianity; and any hope to the contrary would be disappointed. "In the last analysis, Eliot's critical technique is impressionistic, his dogma based on nothing less ephemeral than good taste, and his authority a personal authority."⁶⁰ The idol had fallen; Levin was free as Matthiessen was not.

When Levin returned to Harvard in the fall of 1934 to begin his first three year term as junior fellow, he had great doubts about his future. He knew that although Jews were occasionally invited to teach in junior positions, they rarely attained senior faculty status. A classic case in the English department was Theodore Silverstein, a medievalist, who could not find a job for years. John Livingston Lowes kept rehiring him as his assistant, partly because Lowes had become quite forgetful and at one point had had to teach his course from Silverstein's notes. At one of the Society's Monday night dinners, Levin took the bull by the horns and asked senior fellow Lowes why he thought Silverstein could not find a job. "He praised him to the skies," Levin recalled, "what a wonderful man he was, so intelligent, so few people had his scholarly learning, his knowledge of the middle ages, and skill." But Lowes professed himself ignorant of the reasons why Silverstein had such trouble finding employment. When Levin pushed the matter and suggested that antisemitism might be a factor, Lowes replied, "I can't believe it.' And after a pause he added, 'Of course, it might be, because he retains certain objectionable Jewish traits."⁶¹

60. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 244, 245, 242, 246, 238-239.

61. Levin, conversation with the author, 19 October 1989. When I asked Prof. Silverstein about his time at Harvard he replied with a brief note: "The difficulty was my timing; I came at a moment when Harvard was still a New England college and before it became the great national institution which it subsequently announced itself to be. I was of course too innocent to understand these matters. Fortunately I finally came to another great institution, where anti-Semitism doesn't exist -- but then we are not stylish out here." Letter to the author, 12 March 1992. Theodore Silverstein got a job at the University of Chicago where he established himself as a superb medievalist

During his five years as junior fellow Levin became briefly active in the Harvard Teacher's Union for which he claimed to have recruited F. O. Matthiessen. Otherwise he concentrated on his research, building up a store of knowledge that served him for decades to come. Although he continued to stay in touch with modern French and English literature, he made Elizabethan drama his academic field. During his second year as junior fellow he was invited by John Tucker Murray to teach a graduate seminar in that area. When Murray quite unexpectedly went blind over the summer of 1939 and was forced to retire, Levin, who had published a few articles and edited a selection of Ben Jonson's works in 1938, was appointed to a very junior faculty position.⁶² Nobody objected to the appointment on the grounds that Levin was Jewish. Howard Mumford Jones, however, who had recently arrived from the University of Michigan, only grumbled his consent, as Levin learned later. But Jones was above suspicion; not only was his wife, Bessie Zaban Jones, Jewish, he had also brought along a Jewish assistant, Daniel Aaron.

In the spring of 1939, Levin married a beautiful young Russian emigrée, Elena Zarudnaya. The couple moved into a row-house on Memorial Drive. Here Delmore Schwartz and his wife Gertrude were their neighbors from 1940 to 1942. Although Levin and Schwartz would often sit out on the front steps together, "talking pessimistic," they were an ill-matched pair. Schwartz held an insecure appointment as

known for his meticulous editions. His students perceived him as a man with "a great sense of style about him. One had the sense of someone who was almost British and of someone who believed in the English tradition." He was known to say to his students that "this line of study separates the scholar from the shoe salesman." Conversation with Dan Isaac in San Francisco on December 29, 1991.

Because Jews were thought to be unemployable in English literature many professors discouraged their Jewish students to undertake graduate work in this field. Charles Wyzanski, Jr. (Harvard class of 1927) remembers that his two friends, Paul Freund and Merle Fainsod, "both wanted to become professors of English and American literature. They were called in by an older member of the faculty, who said to them: There is no first rate university that will elect a Jew in this field. You ought to choose some other field." Interview in Nitza Rosovsky, *The Jewish Experience at Harvard and Radcliffe*, p. 87.

62. Elena Zarudnaya Levin reports that for one week her husband could not make up his mind whether or not to accept the appointment. He was then at work on a study of French Realism. Confronted with the choice between a job at the institution he loved and finishing a book, he felt that his entire career was at stake. "He was very tormented. He did not know what decision to make. For one week he thrashed around, because he wanted to finish his book on the French Realists." In the end he made pragmatism prevailed and the study on the French Realists, which became *The Gates of Horn* was not published until 1963. Conversation with Elena Z. Levin, 17 March 1995, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Briggs-Copeland instructor, while Levin had just joined the regular faculty; Schwartz was self-conscious and abrasive, and very unsure about his creative and critical powers, Levin was smooth and gracious, and not only in the process of building a career as a brilliant scholar or Renaissance drama, but also increasing his reputation as a learned critic of modernist prose, which was the area that meant most to Schwartz. And finally, while Levin sailed through Harvard with an unperturbed air, Schwartz was always hyper-conscious of his Jewishness. He regarded Harvard as "enemy territory" and thought modernist literature riddled with anti-Jewish bigots. The overt antisemitism of Pound and Eliot disturbed him profoundly, and, as his biographer put it, he "felt personally slighted whenever his literary heroes expressed distaste for Jews, for it fed his self-hatred and cast doubt on his self-chosen identity as their cultural heir." Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* infuriated Schwartz so much that he wrote a letter to the author that ended with the sentence: "I want to resign as one of your most studious and faithful admirers."⁶³

Levin seemed to have made peace with it all. Schwartz observed his neighbor and was simultaneously fascinated and repelled. His portrait of Levin in the story "Modern Romance" was unsparing and ungenerous. Yet another sketch of Levin is concealed in Schwartz's later fiction, "The World Is a Wedding." Here one of the characters tells an anecdote about Mortimer London, a young teacher and critic reputed to be brilliant.

"London told me (keep in mind the fact that London himself tells this story about himself) that when he was in England last year, he had paid a visit to T. S. Eliot who had given him a letter of introduction to James Joyce, since he was going to Paris also. Now London says that he was confronted with a cruel choice, whether to use the letter and converse with the author of *Ulysses* or to keep the letter in which a great author commends him to a great author. He decided to keep the letter!"

Levin took the gibe in good humor. It was only when asked by the *Harvard Advocate*, some time after Schwartz's death in 1966, to explore his memories of the poet that he offered a few sentences in his own defense.

Well, I must confess that I had happened into that situation, and had talked about it with Delmore. ... I had been embarrassed by the letter of introduction, since I could not think that such an encounter would be anything more than an importunity. Yet I felt obliged to forward it, together with a covering note which suggested that no answer was necessarily expected. To my great relief, Joyce never answered. I was later told that he would have, one way or

63. James Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz: The Life of an American Poet* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977), 164, 163. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 159.

another, if only out of courtesy to Eliot, had it not arrived during a crisis precipitated by his daughter's breakdown. Five years afterward [in 1939], when we had something to talk about (namely *Finnegans Wake*), he voluntarily sent a postcard.⁶⁴

Joyce's postcard to James Laughlin, in which Joyce declared that Levin was the only man who understood what he [Joyce] wrote,⁶⁵ had been sent in response to Levin's essay "On First Looking into *Finnegans Wake*," which the young scholar had been invited to contribute to Laughlin's *New Directions*, after a shorter version of this bold review had appeared in John Crowe Ransom's *Kenyon Review* in the fall of 1939. Laughlin then encouraged Levin to write a longer work on Joyce.⁶⁶ In 1941 Levin published *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction* with Laughlin's press. It marked the beginning of an enormously fruitful academic career that peaked in the sixties. Levin published some twenty-seven books and over two hundred and fifty articles covering Renaissance and Shakespeare, theoretical aspects of realism and comedy, nineteenth-century French and American novels, and twentieth-century English and American literature. His favorite fields, however, remained Shakespeare and the modernists, particularly Proust, Eliot, and Joyce. About Pound Levin always had reservations. To the Renaissance and modernist poets Levin returned again and again, confirming Matthiessen's observation that "it is not accidental that the same people

64. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 163-164. Delmore Schwartz, *The World Is A Wedding* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1948), 31. About the relationship between Schwartz and Levin there are many entries in the poet's notebook published in Elizabeth Pollet, ed., *Portrait of Delmore: Journals and Notes of Delmore Schwartz: 1939-1959* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986), and Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz*, pp. 193-197.

65. Recollection by Elena Z. Levin in a conversation with the author, 17 March 1995. James Laughlin sent the card to Harry Levin; it is now lost in Levin's papers. However, Laughlin confirmed the content of the card in a letter to José-Antonio Gurpegui.

66. On 8 April 1940, Laughlin wrote to Levin about a second card he had from Joyce:
 I have just had a card from Joyce in which he says: "many thanks for having sent me the book with Prof. Levin's article. Please convey to the writer my thanks also for his kindly and painstaking study of my book. In the opinions of all those to whom I have shown it this article, beginning with the title, is the most striking one that has appeared so far."

I thought you would be pleased with that, as I was. And I hope it may help inspire you to undertake the book on Joyce in our makers of Modern Literature Series. I really feel that you could whack that on the head.

who respond to Proust and Joyce have also found something important in Donne.⁶⁷ Among Levin's best known works are *The Overreacher: A Study of Christopher Marlowe* (1952), *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (1958), *The Question of Hamlet* (1959), *The Gates of Horn: A Study of Five French Realists* (1963), *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (1969), *Shakespeare and the Revolution of the Times* (1976), and most recently *Playboys and Killjoys: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Comedy* (1987). His academic advancement was fast. He was promoted to associate professor of English in 1944 and to full professor in 1948. From 1955 onward, he was both professor of English and comparative literature. In 1960 he was named Irving Babbitt Professor. His visiting appointments outside Harvard were numerous and included the Eastman chair at Oxford. More important, however, than the accumulation of published scholarship and academic honors is the fact that Levin's work was actually read. It entered and informed the culture so that in an article in *The New Republic*, for instance, Nadine Gordimer could refer with natural ease to what Harry Levin once wrote about the whale Moby Dick. Asked more specifically about the respect commanded by Levin's work in Renaissance literature Stephen Greenblatt and Stephen Orgel agreed in their assessment: Levin's scholarship is "what we know" and all later research is based on that knowledge.⁶⁸

One of the constants in Harry Levin's career as a critic was his effort to maintain a stance of Arnoldian "disinterestedness." Literary criticism, he believed, "should stand by in sympathetic detachment, and set its sights by an ultimate prospect of understanding, rather than engage in the fluctuating traffic of revaluation." Repeatedly Levin emphasized that he has gone out of his way "to avoid identification with any particular school or coterie or set of dogmas." We may suspect that his effort not to take sides was not so much inspired by Matthew Arnold, but by the "monitory examples" of Levin's partisan teachers Babbitt, Eliot, and Matthiessen. The ideal of objectivity that Levin encountered as the first literary person in a Society of Fellows composed of scientists, he found very soothing. That environment, Levin said, influenced him a great deal. But the desire to remain neutral, detached, invisible as a critic, also reflected the wish not to stand out, not to become a target. An undercurrent of fear connects that wish to Delmore Schwartz's epigram about the Jewish source of brilliance: "Anti-semitism ever/ Sharpens Jews to be more clever." Years later Levin wrote about Schwartz as if replying to his epigram: "Delmore's peculiar gift was his *Angst*, his unreassuring certainty that discomfort is a basic

67. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*, p. 11. Levin, "Putting Pound Together," *The New York Review of Books* 36 (9 November 1989): 45-47.

68. Nadine Gordimer, "Three in a Bed," *The New Republic* 206 (18 November 1991): 36; interview with Stephen Orgel in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 3 March 1991; interview with Stephen Greenblatt in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 13 December 1991.

component of our psychological condition, his accusation leveled against all who are complacent enough to feel at home in the universe he rejected."⁶⁹

Schwartz did suffer from a severe case of paranoia, as Levin recognized early on. Yet it is difficult to see how American Jews could not experience extreme discomfort during the late thirties and early forties when the Jews of Europe were systematically being reduced to stench and ash. By the fall of 1942, Americans knew about the German atrocities in Eastern Europe. Given that historical context, a remark in the preface to Levin's *The Power of Blackness* (1958) might strike one, at first, as an instance of the complacency against which Schwartz so vehemently rebelled. There Levin acknowledged the generosity of the Guggenheim Foundation which "during the year 1943-44 provided me with the leisure to accumulate a backlog of reading upon which I have been subsequently relying." Anyone familiar with the cataclysm in Europe, even to extent that it was known in the early forties, must find the juxtaposition of these dates, 1943-44, and the words "leisure to accumulate a backlog of reading" painfully jarring. One owes it to a man of Levin's intellectual stature and moral seriousness, to ask what indeed was going on in his mind and soul -- if one may still use such an old-fashioned word -- when he sat down to read fiction in those catastrophic years.

Levin was never a man who spoke about his feelings in public; he was diffident where his own person was concerned. Therefore one has to arrive at his soul by indirection. The opening chapter to *Power of Blackness*, the book Levin was working on as a Guggenheim fellow, is titled "The American Nightmare" and begins with the story of Peter Rugg, a home-spun American version of the Wandering Jew. When after a nightmarish journey the weary traveler finally reaches home, he arrives just in time to see his ruined estate being auctioned off. A voice in the crowd proclaims,

"Time, which destroys and renews all things, has dilapidated your house and placed us here You were cut off from the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone, and you can never have another home in this world."⁷⁰

Given the historical context, one is tempted to speculate that Levin, a master of allusion and indirection, began his study of Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville with a story that could very well have summed up his own cultural situation at the time. The home he had come from, by way of his father, was lost to the barbarian onslaught, his people destroyed. Indeed, one of his father's sisters perished in Germany. Indirectly, perhaps, Levin's worry and concern at the time found their way into the book that

69. Levin, *Memories of the Moderns*, p. 165; Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz*, p. 163; Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, p. 4, 19; Pike, "Harry Levin," p. 35; Levin, marginal notes.

70. Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville*. 1958 (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980), 3.

dealt with the despair of American intellectuals a century earlier. But such speculation obviously grants Levin a great deal.

Yet what could Levin do? His brother Jack, Harvard class of 1940, had joined the Navy and was serving on a destroyer in the Atlantic. Like his brother, Levin would have applied for officer's training, but didn't because he was told by his doctor that he would fail the physical exam. He was classified 3A, married with child, and as a teacher was thought to contribute to the war effort on the homefront. Accepting the Guggenheim fellowship meant that Levin would be reclassified 1A and could be drafted any day. All through the Guggenheim year the Levins lived in a state of great uncertainty. But Levin was too deeply committed to his literary scholarship to play it safe. More than anything he wanted to write his book.

Moreover, the argument could be made that humanity had to be saved from the barbarians, and that the way to do it was to contribute to the intellectual life.⁷¹ There had been a famous precedent for that argument. In 1941, E. M. Forster delivered a speech at the 17th International PEN Congress, which, he wrote later, had been politely dismissed. The issue he had chosen to raise before this prominent gathering, summarized succinctly by Cynthia Ozick, was this: "Art for Art's sake? I should just think so, and more so than ever at the present time. It is the one orderly product which our muddling race has produced.' He offers history as proof: 'Ancient Athens made a mess,' he says, 'but Antigone stands up. Renaissance Rome made a mess -- but the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel got the painted,' and so on. He ends by citing Shelley -- the usual quote about poets as unacknowledged legislators." In an essay about the responsibility of intellectuals, Ozick inquires: "How do we know when a thinker formulates an issue badly? In just this way: When an ideal, however comely, fails to accord with deep necessity. In 1941, 'blood, sweat, and tears,' is apropos, a dream of the 'possibility of aesthetic order' is not. It is not sufficient to have beautiful thoughts while the barbarians rage on. ... People who are privileged to be thinkers are obliged to respect exigency and to admit to crisis."⁷² It is perhaps just such an explicit admission of crisis, of confusion at the collapse of the moral foundation of European high culture, that one misses most in Levin's published works. The trained eye may occasionally catch glimpses of his confusion, pain, and anger. In 1942, between finishing his book on Joyce (1941) and becoming a Guggenheim fellow (1943), Levin edited one of the most damning poems ever written about the human race, "A Satyr Against Mankind" by John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-1680). In his introduction to the poem Levin, then thirty years old, wrote: "No other age except our own, perhaps, has been so painfully conscious of those extremes [virtue and vice], or so bent upon

71. Elena Z. Levin, in a conversation with the author, on 19 May 1995, about Levin's mindset at the time of the Guggenheim fellowship.

72. Cynthia Ozick, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," unpublished paper presented at "What Has Neoconservatism Wrought: A Conference on the 50th Anniversary of Commentary," Harvard University, 27 February 1995.

realizing their conflicting possibilities." What, exactly, in our age Levin was thinking of is not clear. It is striking, however, how closely the world views of John Wilmot and Levin's neighbor in those years, Delmore Schwartz, resemble each other. Schwartz scorned the bigots, but (mis)directed his bitterness against the Jews and finally against himself; Wilmot's contempt was for all mankind. Thus his satiric poem had a certain appeal in 1942. Among the many horrible things Wilmot found to say against man there is what one might call a more catholic rendition of Schwartz's scathing epigram about the source of Jewish cleverness.

The Good he acts, the Ill he does endure,
 'Tis all from Fear, to make himself secure.
 Meerly for Safety, after Fame they thirst;
 For all Men would be Cowards if they durst:⁷³

One of the copies of Wilmot's poem, shelved in Harvard's Widener Library, once belonged to Karl Viëtor, Kuno Francke Professor of German Art and Culture, 1935-1952. It bears an inscription by Levin, dated September 1945. At first sight, Levin's gift to Viëtor looks like one of the unsettling, ironic gestures Levin was capable of that reveal their barb long after the pleasantries have passed. But in this case, Levin's present conveyed straightforward admiration. Viëtor, who was married to a Jewish wife, had left Germany in 1934 and come to Cambridge. During the war, when students flocked to hear Levin, Viëtor's classes were tiny. Hardly anyone was taking German apart from a handful of European refugees, and over them Viëtor would soon cast his spell. One of his most devoted students at that time was an emigrant from Vienna, an accomplished young lady from an upper class Jewish family who had been educated on the run.

Dorrit Cohn left Vienna and her Gymnasium at the age of 13, a few days before the *Anschluss*, the Nazi take-over of Austria in March 1938. Subsequently she attended, in steady flight further west, the Zugdorf Schule near Zürich, St. George's, a British boarding school in Montreux, the American school in Paris, and finally, from 1939 to 1942, the French lycée on East 95th Street in Manhattan, where she received a *baccalauréat* in both the sciences and the humanities. Cohn went up to Radcliffe, because some of her classmates did, and majored in physics, because "the sciences were non-linguistic territory. The sciences to me were a kind of escape hatch from my linguistic confusions," Cohn remembers.⁷⁴

73. John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *A Satire Against Mankind and Other Poems*. Ed. Harry Levin (Norfolk: New Directions, 1942), 21-22. The introduction to this edition was reprinted in Levin, *Grounds for Comparison*, pp. 207-211; (my quote is from p. 208).

74. Dorrit Cohn, interview with the author in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 16 April 1988.

She learned about Viëtor's courses from another emigrant, a girl from a Prague family, who belonged to her circle of friends. With Viëtor's course on *Faust II*, German came back into Dorrit Cohn's life and stayed. Three decades later, in 1971, she was offered a professorship in Harvard's Comparative Literature department, which had been completely revamped by Harry Levin during the 1950s. She accepted because she recalled Harvard as a vibrant, interesting place, and because, as she confessed, she was just a bit of an Ivy League snob. She had left Harvard after taking her master's degree in 1946, when Harry Levin, the "Young Turk" (Allen Tate), was stirring up the English department with his course on Joyce, Proust, and Mann that "prompted students to plan their entire course load around it."⁷⁵ While at Radcliffe, Cohn had sat in on Levin's "enormous course on the European novel. People were hanging from the rafters for that course. It was the glamorous event of the week that one went to Levin's course." Levin was then barely thirty years old. When Cohn returned three decades later, in 1971, as one of the first five women hired to tenure at Harvard she was quite surprised. "My Ivy League snobbishness had a rude awakening. I had the sense of having come into a backwater intellectually. I had the sense of being back in the nineteenth century."⁷⁶

Levin's innovations of the 1940s, such as the introduction of the troubling "moderns" into the Harvard curriculum, had turned into tradition itself. Their dissent had been completely assimilated. Levin's protest against the old fogies of his time, such as it was, had been tied up with the rise of the moderns; and as they passed into tradition, so did he. Like his mentors, Babbitt, Eliot, and Matthiessen, the Young Turks of their time, Levin became a custodian of culture, a remembrancer and preserver of the great tradition which, he had once feared in the 1920s, was not to be

75. "Harry Levin, Literary Critic, Is Dead at 81," *The New York Times* 1 June 1994: B9.

76. Ibid. The other women hired to tenure in 1971 were in English, History, Anthropology, and Music. Incidentally, the commission charged with investigating the situation of "Women at Harvard" was headed by Morton Bloomfield, chair of the English department from 1968 to 1972. Bloomfield (born in Montreal in 1913) was a medievalist, who had published books like *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Concept With Special Reference to English Literature* (1952) and *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (1961). He had joined the Harvard English department in 1961 as its second Jewish faculty member (the third would be Joel Porte who was promoted from instructor to assistant professor in 1964); but to date he has remained its only observant Jew. And he will certainly remain the only one whose "Faculty Minutes" were co-signed by a rabbi. Bloomfield, who was widely recognized as an excellent medievalist, was also an open, liberal soul, much beloved by students and colleagues. During his chairmanship (1968-1972), for instance, the first tenured woman, Isabel MacCaffrey, joined the English department (in 1971). Bloomfield died in 1987, a few months before I was beginning to interview Jewish academics.

had in a midwestern immigrant Jewish household. Harry Levin died in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on May 29, 1994. To his students and colleagues he left not only his impeccable scholarship, but, as his former student Donald Fanger declared, "standards of intellectual curiosity, commitment, and seriousness that we could try to make our own."⁷⁷

77. Donald Fanger, "Remembering Harry Levin," *Harvard Magazine* 97 (January-February 1995): 79