A HERMENEUTICS OF TRUST:
STUDIES IN GERTRUDE STEIN, S.Y. AGNON, AND NATHAN ENGLANDER

Amy Sapowith

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INTRODUCTION

Openness and trust, as well as human bonding
across class, race, age, and gender, rank high
on the list of signs of spiritual being.

Lawrence Hoffman[1]

In this rabbinic thesis I begin to answer several questions that first emerged from and took shape over the course of my doctoral studies in Comparative Literature at UCLA. In direct response to the works I was studying and the identity politics I was living throughout the decade of the 1990's, I began to ask, "What is "trust" between cultures and between individuals, and how is it so difficult and yet so necessary? At that time, the loss of an erstwhile idyllic alliance between the African American and Jewish American communities was mourned even as tepid gestures were offered towards its repair. Extreme responses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were and continue to be fueled by the deaf arguments among post-colonial theory, Zionist ideology and Palestinian nationalism. These developments focused my attention on the fundamental absence of trust in the political life around me. The Jewish literature that I was reading, moreover, exclaimed about trust. "You think I'm like you, mistrusting everybody?" cries the Rebbe to his wife in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*. "I trust people. The whole world is built on trust. The bank, the mines, the Government could never exist unless people trusted each other."[2] The Rebbe cries out in his defense, the victim of an unscrupulous business deal. I was further influenced by the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, who concludes that owing to the counterintuitive nature of truth, doubting supplanted trusting as the hallmark of the modern condition.

> [T]he then recent discoveries in the natural sciences had convinced him [Descartes] that man in his search for truth and knowledge can trust neither the given evidence of the senses, nor the 'innate truth' of the mind, nor the 'inner light of reason.' This mistrust of the human capacities has been ever since one of the most elementary conditions of the modern age and the modern world; but it did not spring, as is usually assumed, from a sudden mysterious dwindling of faith in God, and its cause was originally not even a suspicion of reason as such. Its origin was simply the highly justified loss of confidence in the truth-revealing capacity of the senses. Reality no longer was disclosed as an outer phenomenon to human sensation, but had withdrawn, so to speak, into the sensing of the sensation itself. It now turned out that without confidence in the senses neither faith in God nor trust in reason could any longer be secure, because the revelation of both divine and rational truth had always been implicitly understood to follow the awe-inspiring simplicity of man's relationship with the world. . . . The fundamental experience underlying Cartesian doubt was the discovery that the earth, contrary to all direct sense experience, revolves around the sun.[3]

If my training at UCLA sharpened my *din*, my judgment, my tenure at rabbinical school nurtured my *chesed*, my compassion. I continued with my questions of trust as the answers would potentially have relevant meaning for me and other Jews seeking responses over time to personal crises of faith, relationships, or political disillusionments. It was here at HUC that academia's surgical fascination with a deconstructive critical

approach, which distrusts a text's capacity to produce truth and devotes itself entirely to investigations of a text's a priori assumptions and governing prejudices, is met by an equally urgent passion to construct meaning atop trustworthy, enduring, and defensible assumptions, the infinite subjectivity of which is bounded by the collective understanding of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. No doubt the opposing approaches—the one philosophical and the other theological—engendered a personal struggle to integrate the two in my own world view. My questions about trust multiplied. What does it take to trust others and, conversely, to be considered trustworthy? Can there be trust between adversarial ways of knowing? Can acts and atmospheres of suspicion teach us about trusting? Can we as individuals and as societies improve in the ways and the willingness to trust?

The prevailing view within intellectual circles that modernity inaugurates an era of whole-scale distrust and suspicion led me to wonder what answers the examination of three modern Jewish literary texts if viewed through a lens framed by these questions would provide. From the Rebbe's resignation cited above, we learn that betrayal is the some time consequence of trusting. The author, Yezierska, more critically suggests that distrust is the ethos of a sovereign marketplace. The three texts featured in the following chapters are Gertrude Stein's novella, "Melanctha," written in 1905-6 and published in 1909; S.Y. Agnon's short novel *A Simple Story*, published in Hebrew in 1935 and which describes a turn of the century Eastern European village; and Nathan Englander's short story, "Gilgul of Park Avenue," from his collection *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges* published in 2000.

In "Melanctha," Melanctha and Jefferson fail to bridge the fundamentally different ways that each knows and expresses love. The competing epistemologies of the

erstwhile lovers teach that enduring relationships must move from knowing to trusting, where the latter describes a leap out of what you know toward what one needs in order to grow. For this insight I've relied on Hans Georg Gadamer's notions of risk and transcendence in the context of the dialectic.[4] I conclude that the motivation to leap must lie in something akin to a commitment to a shared vision of continued spiritual growth. In the absence of such a twofold commitment, the power of love or desire alone proves insufficient to bridge adversarial worldviews.

For its intensity and its mystery, romantic love as experienced by Jefferson in "Melanctha" and by Hirshl in *A Simple Story,* is not trusted. The experience of sexual passion threatens each protagonist with a radically foreign self-understanding that would potentially topple or utterly transform their very foundations, and in Hirshl's case, his family's as well. In *A Simple Story,* romantic love is the arena in which a young man attempts to establish his independence from his family, and in particular from the tight reins his mother holds over his future. Like Jefferson and Melanctha, Hirshl and Blume fail to create a healthy, enduring relationship. But unlike Jefferson who remains wedded to reason at the expense of emotion, Hirshl's inability to consummate his love for his cousin is a function of his inability to truly separate himself from social convention. Blume is not Hirshl's social equal. Neither Melanctha's sexual nor Jefferson's rational way of knowing proves adequate in Hirshl's case to break the social bonds that would give him the experience of freedom. The pressure of the conflict between personal fulfillment and social acceptance defeats Hirshl, and he suffers a nervous breakdown. Temporary insanity will offer his needed escape. Yet the system that brings about Hirshl's collapse paradoxically proves itself capable of restoring Hirshl back to health.

Like Jacob who will forever limp after his midnight struggles with the angel, however, Hirshl's recovery entails its sacrifices.[5] In a context in which Agnon suggests that all modern existence is haunted by the nightmarish suggestion of inauthenticity, I conclude that modernity forces us into an awareness of 1) the multiple ways daily life demands that we trust and 2) the concomitant responsibility to develop a practice of trust that allows us to more comfortably negotiate the multiple risks we are forced into taking; that is, that we develop a hermeneutics of trust. *A Simple Story* suggests that social conventions may be a trustworthy, if only partial, guide to this end.

Finally, Englander's story "Gilgul of Park Avenue" features the magical, mystical conversion of a more than middle aged man to Judaism. In this case, the radical power of passion that so intimidates Jefferson's and Hirshl's worlds plays itself out in Charles's epiphany, which threatens to ruin his longstanding marriage. Moreover the relationships among reason, faith and insanity that in some combination figure in each of these texts reach an unwitting synthesis in Englander's work. Whereas the confrontation between reason and faith reaches an impasse in "Melanctha," and where we realize that the distinction between reason and madness is largely a question of perspective and power in *A Simple Story,* in "Gilgul," faith asserts its own logic in an epistemological coup over scientific reason and exerts its authority in the face of those who would call it crazy. Charles's mystical experience appears unreasonable but he trusts he has never been saner. "Gilgul" achieves what the other two texts approach: personal transformation. "Gilgul" also posits what the other two texts fear, that personal transformation constitutes a betrayal of the status quo. "Gilgul" asks us to consider how one might begin to trust a radically new world order. Without being conclusive, the story suggests that the answer

lies in the power of established and trusted commitments to provide the connecting, stable thread that would link a past world to a future one.

My study did not from the outset presume a connection among these three authors but I discover in the course of this inquiry that the changes in the relationship between reason and faith trace a meaningful pattern; from their polarization in "Melanctha," to their surrender to madness in what amounts to a show of existential despair in *A Simple Story,* to their hierarchical reversal in "Gilgul of Park Avenue." In this pattern we detect the priorities of the literary currents in which each text was written, moving between the modern and the postmodern and returning in "Gilgul" to something impishly pre-modern, reflecting in its playfulness an undeniable postmodern sensibility.

These texts attempt to bridge the worlds that I and others, perhaps even the Reform Jewish movement as a whole, struggle to integrate: the logics of science and of faith; the values of reason and of feeling. And because I am committed to an integration of these worlds, I seek out the places of peaceful engagement within limited compatibilities. As opposed to a hermeneutics of suspicion, I aim, through these texts, toward a hermeneutics of trust. To this end, the theologian Rachel Adler is instructive in setting forth not a naively utopian longing that pines for a lost simplicity but rather a hermeneutics that "struggle[s] to bridge the discontinuities between who we were and who we are, what we did and what we do now, to compose a coherent narrative with which to extend ourselves into the future. This narrative is our construction of integrity. Through it we seek to assume responsibility for our fractures and our fracturing without relinquishing our hopes of being trustworthy and being trusted."[6]

CHAPTER ONE

Blinded by the Light: A Case of the Failure to Trust Difference in Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha"

The tragedy of life is not so much what men suffer,
but rather what they miss.

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881)

If I try to be like him, who will be like me?

Yiddish Proverb

Melanctha, a passionate, caring young woman with a somewhat reckless past, and Jefferson, an upstanding doctor and gentleman of good repute, are the ambivalent lovers who must come to terms with their desire both as it manifests for them individually and as it takes form in relationship with the other. Consequently the text of "Melanctha" is largely devoted to the construction of the desiring subject—first Melanctha and subsequently Jeff—before it turns to the deconstruction of the very same. Melanctha falls head over heels for Jefferson's mild manner yet resists his efforts to domesticate her; Jefferson, in turn, is attracted to yet distrusts Melanctha's strong feeling. The constructed entanglement of self with desire seems so complete as to preclude exploration into their discrete workings. A similar insight is what originally led the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, to abandon his project of tracing a hermeneutics of desire for the related project of tracing a hermeneutics of the self. At some point in his work on the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault reasoned that if he is to understand the *subject* of desire, he must undertake a genealogy of the construct of subjectivity.[7] Exactly how Foucault relates the construction of the self to the practice of desire is instructive for an understanding of "Melanctha" where Stein scholars attest to Stein's preoccupation with the problem of

self-reference.[8] Foucault helps us to see how Stein's characters "focus their attention on themselves... decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire."[9] Ultimately both Jefferson and Melanctha will conclude that their mutual attraction threatens their independent senses of well-being; the risk of intimacy outweighs the trust they establish.

While critics debate whether "Melanctha" attempts to illustrate or refute the theory of a "bottom nature" of individual personality, which was a subject of Stein's early scientific training, most agree that "Melanctha" narrates a quest for wisdom or self-knowledge through a direct confrontation with the wilds of sexual experience.[10] This Dionysian seduction is partly fueled by a middle class prudishness that extends beyond Jefferson's character and dwells in the text as an instigating bias. Foucault's work explains the resulting tension between modesty and immodesty as, on the one hand, an impulse "to cloak sexual experience in proto- to post-Victorian rituals of absence and silence" and, on the other hand, an incitement "to expose, examine and exorcise 'the truth of sexuality.'"[11] Foucault categorizes the first impulse within "the repressive hypothesis," and the second, he calls *scientia sexualis.*[12] Also influencing this tension is the racial masking in which Stein participates as a White author exploring human sexuality through Black characters. According to Michael North, "One of the most objectionable aspects of 'Melanctha' is certainly its fixation on the sexual lives of its subjects, as if African American characters are to be understood primarily in sensual terms."[13] North's objection complicates Foucault's treatment of contemporary western desire by identifying race as a power dynamic that needs to be accounted for in the calculation of desire, and in particular, that plays itself out in Stein's text.[14] In so doing,

however, North implies the more controversial conclusion that Stein's white privilege outweighs both her anti-racist position and the liabilities that went along with being a woman, a Jew and a lesbian in the first decade of the twentieth century.[15]

Janice L. Doane also addresses the double-edges of the sexual dynamic in her study, *Silence and Narrative*. Doane asserts that the fear of making sexuality explicit in the text of "Melanctha" leads to a pervasive silence that manifests itself in endlessly repetitive dialogues. "[W]hat Melanctha has to teach [Jeff] not only remains unspoken, but its very incapacity to be spoken lies at the basis of their relationship, generating endlessly repetitive dialogues frequently punctuated by their protests."[16] Their relationship effectively becomes "a performance of [the] inability to communicate."[17] Corinne Blackmer too cites "an encompassing theme of private and public forgetfulness and speechlessness."[18]

Blackmer synthesizes many of the critical issues raised concerning "Melanctha," when she characterizes Stein's story as a tale about a black woman negotiating desire through racial and sexual taboos in order to define herself. Applying the metaphor of the African mask to the way the reader moves through the "imbricated narrative significations of race, gender, sexuality, education, and 'environment,'"[19] Blackmer visualizes the strategy by which both author and central character "articulate their desires subversively and thus... 'pass' undetected through worlds marked by oppositional boundary lines of race, sexuality, and gender."[20] Blackmer argues more precisely that the metaphor of the African mask functions within the story as a principle of abstraction or abstract persona.[21] It is the nature of both the mask and the metaphor to imply

simultaneously what is and what is not, indicating, through felt absences in the text, the express presence of subversive identities.

A central subversion in Stein's novella is Melanctha's lesbian desire. The railroad yard, the site of endless heterosexual flirtation and fascination, does not ultimately yield up the knowledge of sexuality and the power of intimacy that Melanctha desires. It is only with Jane Hardin that Melanctha's personal ambitions are fulfulled. One might also argue that the central love interest for Melanctha is Rose, "Rose Johnson had worked in to be the deepest of all Melanctha's emotions" (140). Though Melanctha eventually sets her romantic sights on Jefferson Campbell, a member of the rising Black middle class, the eventual failure of that relationship supports Blackmer's contention that Melanctha was looking in the wrong (read "heterosexual") places for her fulfillment. Indeed Melanctha's partnering efforts vis-a-vis Rose far outweigh the rather arid, awkward and isolated encounters with Jefferson. What Jefferson is wont to characterize as an inveterate flirtatiousness is perhaps displaced desire. Thus when Blackmer cites "an encompassing theme of private and public forgetfulness and speechlessness," she means that Melanctha's private desire is "voiceless and invisible" because the public world has no language, form, or memory of women desiring women.[22] For Blackmer, "Melanctha's inability to articulate her desires symbolizes the problem of constructing an adequate language of lesbian sexuality in the absence of a historical record of lesbian community. . . .Without an active history to explain herself to herself, Melanctha and those around her are to some extent obliged to regard their conditions as immutable if incongruous 'facts of nature.'"[23] According to Blackmer, Melanctha's silences recognize that "the limitation resides not within her, but within the structures that inhibit her powers of expression."[24]

Doane and Blackmer agree that the story illustrates the inability to communicate. Doane leaves this silence a mystery or implies that it reflects a Victorian reticence around the question of sex. Blackmer argues that the silence represents more than the result of prevailing social conventions. She suggests it reflects the conditions out of which language is or is not possible. Bereft of history, the language of lesbian experience remains without referent. It would require two pioneering spirits to break the ground of new language; a project Stein herself rejects "Of course you might say why not invent new names new language but that cannot be done."[25] According to the foregoing interpretation, Melanctha's silence is the result of profound dissatisfaction and self-alienation. She cannot admit or articulate her sexual desire for other women, she lives in a kind of exile from her body, and she eventually dies of consumption, which may as well be a metaphor for the takeover of her body by a hostile environment that cannot ultimately embrace or nurture her being in the world.[26]

Melanctha's exhibited idiosyncracies may indeed be seen as the result of her inhibited and wounded desire; a phenomenon characterized by passivity, silence, superficiality, and forgetfulness: what some might identify as symptoms of denial. Consequently, the dialogues between Jefferson and Melanctha, which form the centerpiece of their relationship and of the novella, are such that truth is always partly masked.[27] If in "Melanctha" exploring sexuality serves as the volatile playing field for a flirtation with trust, as I contend, the trust then that the would-be lovers attest to is one not based on a mutual understanding of another's truth but on behaviors informed and overdetermined by their own interpretive contexts. Similarly, I will articulate in the next chapter how in *A Simple Story* Hirshl's love for Blume is not based on mutual

understanding but on Hirshl's unilateral interpretation mired in his own hermetic world.

My own sense is that the story of "Melanctha," and more specifically of the relationship between Melanctha and Jefferson, is about competing epistemologies of love.

> [Melanctha] found [Jefferson] good and strong and gentle and intellectual, and all her life Melanctha liked and wanted good and considerate people, and then too he did not at first believe in Melanctha. He held off and did not know what it was that Melanctha wanted. Melanctha came to want him very badly. They began to know each other better. Things began to be very strong between them. Melanctha wanted him so badly that now she never wandered. She just gave herself to this experience (62).

Melanctha's trust in the experience of her feelings is countered by Jefferson's distrust of all passion. When Jefferson seeks to know the motivations behind her interest in him, Melanctha knows only to increase her intensity. Perhaps misinterpreting Jefferson's hesitation as a need for confirmation of her strong feeling, Melanctha blusters forth with more emotion. More likely, however, Melanctha's experience of intensity speaks legitimately for itself. The strength of feeling itself serves as her explanation. As their relationship progresses in this inarticulate and imbalanced way, it comes to represent a battle of apparently mutually exclusive philosophical discourses concerned with the possibility or impossibility of knowing another. How can one person come to know, to trust, to love and to commit to another person wholly other from oneself? Are the processes of knowing the same processes as those of trusting, loving and committing?

According to Stein, the ways we know are influenced by the hegemonies of our times. "I cannot repeat this too often any one is of one's period."[28] Just as at the start of the twenty-first century we might consider ourselves caught between the ultimate relativity of a postmodern secularism, on the one hand, and the absolutism of religious fanaticism, on the other, the late nineteenth century when Stein was attending the university witnessed the confrontation between the two opposing philosophical systems of idealism and empiricism.[29] *Understanding* usually conceptualized in psychological terms was pitted against *explanation* thought to belong properly to the empirical sciences.[30] In "Melanctha," the realm of "understanding" has the related connotations of being, feeling, and experiencing, and is more properly Melanctha's domain. Jefferson struggles with and against this form of truth, alternately embracing and rejecting the wisdom it has to offer. "Perhaps what I call my thinking ain't really so understanding," admits Jeff (78).

Jefferson and Melanctha come to know one another through quiet meetings and conversations. When the two meet, they mostly talk about "outside things and what they were thinking. . . they never said anything about their feeling" (72). Gradually, Melanctha's attentions inspire "little thinking and sometimes a beginning feeling" (77). The secretive quality to their meetings heightens their intensity and suggests that what the two are seeking is a hidden truth. "It was as if it were agreed between them, that they should be alone by themselves always, and so they would work out together what they meant by what they were always saying to each other" (83). Left alone Melanctha and Jefferson have little recourse but to their own perceptions. The silences and the distance, the visiting and revisiting of issues characteristic of two people trying to trust their love

take the form of a dialectic as the two lovers consider a commitment to one another. While instances of strangeness and distrust are arguably the norm in today's political, economic and social climate, I argue by way of this dialectic that the process of trusting shows itself to be essentially a process of knowing, of interpreting and understanding; in other words, a hermeneutic. "[Jefferson] was beginning to feel he could almost trust the goodness in her. But then, always, really, he was not very sure about her. Melanctha always had ways that made him feel uncertain" (79). Jefferson's and Melanctha's relationship is a revealing example of how the desire to know and the necessity to interpret another's behavior are inherent to some degree in the act of trusting.

Melanctha's love is experienced, not reasoned. "I certainly do care for you...less than you are always thinking and much more than you are ever knowing," says Melanctha to Jeff early in their relationship (77). Later she will repeat this frustration, "I certainly never did see no man like you, Jeff. You always wanting to have it all clear out in words always, what everybody is always feeling" (101). Stein's characteristic use of adverbs such as "ever" and "always," categorical language that sweeps a particular moment onto an infinite plane, contributes to my allegorical reading of this story as two discrete philosophies vying rather than integrating with one another. As Charles, Englander's protagonist in "The Gilgul of Park Avenue" experiences, and which I will discuss in chapter 3, it is a process of totalization or homogenization that takes us from the particular to the universal. To speak universally leaves little room for negotiation. Melanctha implies that Jefferson's 'always thinking' is irrevocably rooted in scientific methods. "He thought and thought, and always he did not seem to know any better what he wanted. At last he gave up this thinking. He felt sure it was only play with Melanctha.

. . . Jefferson took out his book from his pocket, and drew near to the lamp, and began with some hard scientific reading" (74-5). Her reference to his 'ever knowing,' on the other hand, intends less a way of knowing qua reasoning and more an expression of new feeling or being.

Competing epistemologies contribute to the failure of the relationship between Melanctha and Jefferson. Jefferson values objective truth over subjective experience: "I certainly do very badly want to be right, Melanctha, the only way I know is right Melanctha really, and I don't know any way, Melanctha, to find out really, whether my old way, the way I always used to be thinking, or the new way, you make so like a real religion to me sometimes, Melanctha, which way certainly is the real right way for me to be always thinking..." (93). Melanctha, by contrast, dismisses objectivity in favor of subjective experience as witnessed in her willingness to give herself to the experience (62).[31] Melanctha scolds Jefferson for his failure to trust his experience of her love expressed in any given moment. "All I can do now, Jeff, is to just keep certainly with my believing you are good always, Jeff, and though you certainly do hurt me bad, I always got strong faith in you, Jeff, more in you certainly, than you seem to be having in your acting to me, always so bad, Jeff" (94). Partly because Jefferson's belief system leaves no room for irony, uncertainty, mystery or self-indulgence, he lacks the will to believe in the knowledge Melanctha has to offer.

Jefferson questions whether the language they each speak could possibly share the same meaning. "'I certainly do wonder, if we know very right, you and me, what each other is really thinking. I certainly do wonder, Miss Melanctha, if we know at all really what each other means by what we are always saying,' says Jeff. . . . 'I certainly don't

know for sure I know just all what you mean by what you are always saying to me.' . . .He did not know very well just what Melanctha meant by what she was always saying to him" (67). Later he repeats the same frustration, "'I certainly do wonder, Miss Melanctha,' at last began Jeff Campbell, 'I certainly do wonder, if we know very right, you and me, what each other is really thinking. I certainly do wonder, Miss Melanctha, if we know at all really what each other means by what we are always saying'" (74). Melanctha's world is so different from his that Jefferson does not trust that the same words mean the same things to each of them. Melanctha interprets Jeff's relentless uncertainty as a personal attack. "'That certainly do mean, by what you say, that you think I am a bad one, Jeff Campbell,' flashed out Melanctha" (74). The perceived misunderstanding, however, is mutual. Earlier he responds to a similar charge, "'Yes,' he began, 'it certainly does sound a little like I didn't know very well what I do mean, when you put it like that to me, Miss Melanctha, but that's just because you don't understand enough about what I meant, by what I was just saying to you. . . . No I know you don't believe what I say, Miss Melanctha, but I mean it, and it's all just because you don't understand it when I say it'" (68).

Their ways of knowing are embedded inextricably in competing sets of ethics and social conventions that inform both Jefferson's and Melanctha's tolerance of experience. Unlike Agnon's *A Simple Story* where the morality of a society's social conventions is an overt subject of the author's critique, "Melanctha" questions the morality of passion as a subtext underlying much of Jefferson's and Melanctha's discussions. "Melanctha did not feel the same as he did about being good and regular in life, and not having excitements all the time, which was the way that Jefferson Campbell wanted that everybody should

be, so that everybody would be wise and yet be happy. Melanctha always had strong the sense for real experience. Melanctha Herbert did not think much of this way of coming to real wisdom" (67). Jefferson associates moderation with wisdom and excitement with depravity. "What I mean Miss Melanctha by what I am always saying is, you shouldn't try to know everybody just to run around and get excited. It's that kind of way of doing that I hate so always Miss Melanctha, and that is so bad for all us colored people. I don't know as you understand now any better what I mean by what I was just saying to you" (70). Jefferson depends on exact correspondences between Judeo-Christian morality and behavior, between knowledge and reality, language and meaning. His is the religion of correspondences. "[Jefferson Campbell] believed you ought to love your father and your mother and to be regular in all your life, and not to be always wanting new things and excitements, and to always know where you were, and what you wanted, and to always tell everything just as you meant it" (67).[32] For Jefferson, a healthy reason irons out all the contradictions. Furthermore, reason paves the road to self-discipline and self-discipline frees one from one's passions. Reason, discipline and moderation are the true virtues.

Melanctha points out inconsistencies in Jefferson's perception of what is true and real. "I am always trying to believe you, but I can't say as I see just what you mean when you say you want to be good and real pious, because I am very certain Dr. Campbell that you ain't that kind of a man at all. . . and you seem to be thinking what you are doing is just like what you are saying. . . . " (69). She concludes his condemnation of excitement is really a fear of truly loving someone. "Yes I certainly do understand you when you talk so Dr. Campbell. . . I certainly do understand Dr. Campbell that you mean you don't

believe it's right to love anybody. . . . I mean real, strong, hot love Dr. Campbell, that makes you do anything for somebody that loves you. . . . You certainly are just too scared Dr. Campbell to really feel things way down in you. All you are always wanting Dr. Campbell, is just to talk about being good. . ." (70-1). Melanctha offers a competing set of values and behaviors that would trump Jefferson's in their piety and real goodness. Jefferson is tempted but not convinced.

In their clash between reason and experience, thinking and feeling, the relationship between Melanctha and Jefferson anticipates from a literary vantage point the historical development of hermeneutics inaugurated by Heidegger and taking place in the years following publication of *Three Lives* in 1909.[33] The circumstances in which Stein wrote and published *Three Lives*: her editor's plea that Stein change the title from *Three Histories* to *Three Lives*, publishers' criticisms that the language is too ungrammatical and the subject matter too mundane, and Stein's preoccupation with the minutiae and meaning of inconsequential characters as they move towards death speaks to the phenomenological concerns later articulated by Heidegger: "the phenomena of coming to terms with life as a whole [and] being toward death."[34] *Three Lives* seems in its conception to be explained by Heidegger's lifelong preoccupation with "*das Sein ist das Seiende*" or "being is Being."[35] Heidegger argued that the nature of understanding was not to be grounded in the intellect that attempts to know the world through universal rational principles; but rather emerges in the very fact of existence which is itself defined by the knowledge or understanding of death. Accordingly, what is understood as epistemology can only follow an original understanding characteristic of a fundamental

ontology. In this historical shift, understanding is no longer conceived as a way of knowing the world but rather as a way of being in the world.[36]

Set against this historical backdrop, Stein's characters reflect through their personal drama the throes of a major paradigm shift taking place in the intellectual world and not just the working out of Stein's personal theory about human character and relationships.[37] This is not to say that Stein's work illustrates Heidegger's philosophy. In fact, the primary attitude of phenomenology, that phenomena can be other than what they appear in any given moment,[38] seems to fly in the face of Stein's pursuit of "characterology" or bottom natures: immutable essences of individual personalities that determine and therefore explain compatibilities and incompatibilities. In fact, Stein might argue that phenomena are never anything but what they are. In its immutability, Stein's notion of character might indeed reflect more the characteristically idealist pursuit of the eternal. On the other hand, phenomenology distinguishes between "the object *which* is apprehended and the object *as* it is apprehended. Only the latter is pertinent to a phenomenological investigation of contents."[39] And this by all accounts Stein did profess to achieve.

Stein's study of cubism and arguably her attempts to translate cubist techniques into narrative strategy would suggest that she is foremost concerned with objects, principally people, as they are apprehended. "This is then a beginning of the way of knowing everything in every one, of knowing the complete history of each one who ever is or was or will be living."[40] The incoherence found at various levels in "Melanctha" reflects Stein's transposition of a visual off-centeredness, embodied by the perspectivalism of cubism, into narrative.[41] It is the unmeasuredness of time in the

novella that yields the disjunctive composition, as if each character is divided and laid out across the entire narrative. Her invention of the continuous present succeeds in suspending time and effecting a sense of immediacy.[42] Indeed, by freezing the present so that history can barely melt into existence, Stein attempts to monitor the very process of apprehending—something phenomenological definitions of the subject would suggest is impossible.[43] Stein engages in the apprehension of apprehension.

Stein's project of apprehending apprehension occurs primarily on the level of syntax though we may note that it occurs thematically as well, most notably in the efforts the characters exert to understand one another and secondarily in the tension between memory and forgetfulness. For Jefferson, the ability to remember fully works in the service of objectivity. Jefferson insists that Melanctha create a history of good repute. He charges that no man can trust Melanctha because, despite good intentions, she is unable to recall fully who she was or what she did.

> Some men would learn a good deal about her in the talk, never altogether truly, for Melanctha all her life did not know how to tell a story wholly. She always, and yet not with intention, managed to leave out big pieces which make a story very different, for when it came to what happened and what she had said and what it was that she had really done, Melanctha never could remember right (57).

Memory, as Foucault explains, and specifically the memory of Beauty and Chastity, allows one to control one's physical desire or, in the case of the loss of self-control, to bring one back to one's senses. This is what constitutes the soul's relation to truth; it is

what constitutes Eros, or true love.[44] An intensely disciplined and reflective love is what Jefferson would deem trustworthy.

Compare Jeff's criticism with: "[Melanctha] asked him many questions and always listened very well to all he told her, and she always remembered everything she heard him say about doctoring, and she always remembered everything that she had learned from all the others" (65). Apparently Melanctha remembers fully others' stories but not her own. We might understand this difference according to Stein's own philosophy or aesthetics. "[A] portrait should reflect one as they are existing not as they are remembered to have existed."[45] Or we can understand this difference phenomenologically. Melanctha's character finds herself "always already thrown into a totality of involvements...always already involved in an implicit understanding of being before such explications can even begin. Being—or even the understanding of being—is not something one can step outside of in order to objectify and analyze it."[46] This lack of memory about her own story reflects the Heideggerian notion that the subject cannot capture the fullness of its own Being. Being cannot be fully articulated by language, and in fact, it was the tendency for Heidegger's conception to be "mastered" by language that led him ultimately to reject the entire notion of fundamental ontology.[47]

According to Heidegger, epistemology carried out through a radical separation between the intellect and the senses, initiates a history of the forgetfulness of being. Jefferson, accordingly, has forgotten how to be. He reflects rather than exists. Ironically, Jefferson attributes forgetfulness to Melanctha—the subject of being. Here, Stein makes her signature, for she is concerned precisely with the being here in the present to the extent that even memory is an obstacle. In her elaboration of the "continuous present,"

each present moment lingers as if forever until we and the characters encounter the subsequent moment by having forgotten the former one. Jefferson rationalizes his withdrawal from the relationship by insisting that Melanctha cannot be loyal ever to any single man for she persists in forgetting her commitments. Melanctha has already said her piece, "No, Jeff Campbell, its real feeling every moment when its needed, that certainly does seem to me like real remembering. . . . It's always me that certainly has had to suffer, while you go home to remember" (107). Whereas for Jefferson, remembering is the tool of knowledge and of truth, for Stein, and for Melanctha, forgetting is the tool of being and creating.

The more Jefferson knows through being, the less he trusts. He "still had a real trust in her. . . . but now they never any more were really trusting with each other. In the days when they used to be together, Jeff had felt he did not know much what was inside Melanctha but he knew very well, how very deep always was his trust in her; now he knew Melanctha Herbert better, but now he never felt a deep trust in her "(111). Jefferson has "a real trust" yet is never trusting; now he never feels a deep trust. What does this mean? How can one have trust but not trust? Is the internal contradiction replicating Jefferson's own emotional turbulence, affording us an experience of his confusion? Jeff is a quintessential rationalist. He accords his senses curiosity but no outright authority precisely because he cannot live safely with conflicting emotions.

Jefferson tries to make sense out of his feelings by grouping his sensations around the object, Melanctha, in order to know her. Yet, as an object, she continually escapes his mental grip and frustrates his need to know. "He was beginning to feel he could almost trust the goodness in her. But then, always, really, he was not very sure about her.

Melanctha always had ways that made him feel uncertain" (79). His subject, or object as the case may be, is not monolithic. "Sometimes you seem like one kind of a girl to me, and sometimes you are like a girl that is all different to me, and the two kinds of girls is certainly very different to each other, and I can't see any way they seem to have much to do, to be together in you. They certainly don't seem to be made much like as if they could have anything really to do with each other. Sometimes you are a girl to me I certainly never would be trusting. . . . And then certainly sometimes, Melanctha. . . there comes out in what is certainly a thing, like a real beauty" (80). Jefferson experiences two contradictory selves in Melanctha and he does not know how to reconcile them. One he trusts and the other he does not. Jefferson's idealistic, totalizing conception of truth does not permit him to tolerate contradictions. Contradictory feelings are untrustworthy. Jeff's trust depended on a dialectic that Jeff perceives is occurring within Melanctha that would lead logically to the resolution of a unified character within her. Yet Melanctha's character resists reduction and hence totalization.[48] Jeff's desired understanding, the harmonizing of details with their whole, is consistently defeated. Melanctha defeats Jefferson's hermeneutical process.

The give-and-take between Jeff and Melanctha exhibits an oscillating structure that is dialectical if not classically dialectic in that the two opposing partners do not change into one another and move to a more progressive synthesis. Jefferson confesses, "I got a new feeling now, you been teaching to me, just like I told you once, just like a new religion to me, and I see perhaps what really loving is like, like really having everything together, new things, little pieces all different, like I always before been thinking was bad to be having, all go together like, to make one good big feeling" (93). In

this "one good big feeling" Jefferson appears to reach the desired synthesis of a classically dialectical relationship. Yet the governing dialectic here sees Jefferson turning into his opposite only to return to his former distrust. Coltman's analysis of Hoderlin proves helpful, "And if a transition of some kind does occur here, it would seem not to be one in which the opposites pass over into each other (as they would for Hegel), but one in which they 'move' only toward a higher state of intensity."[49] Similarly, Jefferson cannot hold on to the synthesis, the "one good big feeling," for it describes an intensity and a mystery that he lacks the will and/or the resources to trust.

Gadamer's definition of an "epoch-making event" sheds more light on Jefferson's and Melanctha's romantic misfires. An epochal moment is "a discernible break in the historical sequence."[50] Thus in the case of a dialectic where "the dissolution and transition of the opposites, rather than perpetuating a developmental movement toward something like absolute spirit, establishes a 'ceasure,'. . . an 'epochal moment' is created." [51] The dialectic disrupts and dissipates itself. Moreover, in an epoch-making event, the dissolution of the dialectic is brought about by the fact that the characters come to embody the oppositions of their epoch such that their individual destinies are bound up with the fate of their era. The dissolution of the dialectic is understood to be the necessary end of an era.[52] The failure of the relationship between Jefferson and Melanctha resonates with this kind of epochal imprinting; theirs is a microcosm of the larger epistemological battle taking place at the time.

But something else happens within the dialectic between Jefferson and Melanctha. Like genetic material, the dialectic replicates itself within Jefferson such that the new feeling-Jeff is vying with the old thinking-Jeff. But Jeff's feelings cannot

persuade Jeff's thoughts. Jefferson consistently falls back into the oscillating torment of his trust and his mistrust. This perpetual return is occasioned by a sense of correctness that does not permit the truth to embrace contradiction. How could Jefferson have felt so right with his lifestyle and convictions prior to his love for Melanctha and also feel right about the change in his lifestyle that his love had brought? Jeff seeks apodeictic, universal truths. Melanctha's response is to continue to believe in Jeff's goodness even though he fails to reciprocate. She models loving behavior: believing in him despite the pain he causes her. Melanctha's proof of her love is her forbearance, yet Jefferson's doubt cannot be overruled.

Despite the apparent deadlock, Jefferson continues to hope for a dialectical partner. He wishes that Melanctha could master her own story and teach him on his own terms how he can trust her despite her mysteriously problematic history. "Perhaps she could teach him to really understand it better. Perhaps she could teach him how it could be all true, and yet how he could be right to believe in her and to trust her" (85). Jeff tries to move out of the epistemologically defined, self-contained subject towards the phenomenological subject that has intentional direction towards an object it seeks to apprehend. Jefferson tolerates some movement within the boundaries of the other, and as a result, he can love but not trust. Jeff's fear of being wrong, his imprisonment in an analytic philosophical orientation that places correctness over unconcealedness, precludes him from moving from knowing to trusting. And Melanctha, for her part, is incapable of indulging Jefferson's need for explanations. "It was a struggle that was sure always to be going on between them, as their minds and hearts always were to have different ways of working" (89).

Jefferson, like the Holderlinian hero described by Coltman, surrenders to his fate. "Jeff Campbell was hurt so that it almost killed him. Yes he certainly did know what it was to have real hot love in him, and yet Melanctha was right, he did not deserve she should ever give it to him "(121). This is the tragic moment in Jeff's life. Jeff realizes what it is he strives for at the same time that he realizes he cannot attain it. In this sense, Jefferson chooses his fate in what Coltman describes as a proof of the character's freedom. Because the character, in our case Jefferson, chooses his fate, we *interpret* the relationship in terms of an epochal dialectic.[53] And indeed the textual layers of negotiation—including the historical, the aesthetic and the thematic, where the latter operates simultaneously between the two characters and within them as well—justifies the epochal categorization.

The dialectical paralysis arising from the insuperable difference between knowing and feeling (being) that resists dialectical negation animates the tragic failure of Jefferson's and Melanctha's romance. Melanctha, for one, resists change. "Melanctha wanted and respected gentleness and goodness...and Melanctha felt such things very deeply, but she could never let them help her or affect her to change the ways that always made her keep herself in trouble" (56). And what did Jeff once trust but now no longer? What knowledge can so thwart trust? Infidelity? Same-sex desire? The wildness of his own passion? These questions remain unanswered, which has the effect of suspending the notions of knowledge and trust in the text. Concentrating on Stein's text, like Holderlin's text, leads to "an inevitable undecidability."[54] Readers are left with an uncertainty of meaning. The text remains as inscrutable to us as Melanctha is to Jefferson.

Coltman posits that freedom lies between the necessity of reading and the impossibility of complete understanding. He argues that there needs to be hermeneutic opacity in order for interpretation to be possible. For if everything were crystal clear, there would be no need for interpretation. It is in the face of interpretability that we understand the necessity of interpretation. Similarly, if there were no risks, if the others upon whom we depend for things large and small were wholly knowable and predictable, there would be neither the consciousness of trust nor the blessing of free will. It is in the impossibility of Jeff's and Melanctha's mutual knowability, in the face of their unsynchronized loving, that we realize the profound potential and necessity for trusting. It is in the failed attempts to trust that the existence, desirability and necessity of trust manifest themselves.

Melanctha's questionable behavior does not eliminate Jeff's free will to trust or not. By analogy, a modernist discourse that foregrounds doubt proves incommensurate with the existential need to trust. In an early modernist universe where truth is increasingly relative, the need to trust is linked to the need to interpret, and is similarly grounded in the opacity, doubt and multivocity that accompany meaning.[55] To actively trust, then, is first to know something or someone by way of interpretation. And what Jefferson's and Melanctha's failed relationship, understood as a confrontation of philosophies, reveals is that each hermeneutic implies a concomitant mode of trusting that is inaccessible to one outside its interpretative world.

Jefferson, in his quest to know Melanctha, consistently criticizes her, and in his interest to grow emotionally, consistently doubts himself. Melanctha, in turn, persists stoically with her affection even in the face of criticism. Melanctha's and Jefferson's

protracted engagement leads to an aporia to which whatever real love exists between them is surrendered. Jefferson returns to the comfort of his routine and Melanctha resumes her nomadic ways until consumed by tuberculosis, her quest for acceptance ultimately unfulfilled, and the value of her wisdom subject to question. The capricious, mysterious illness that kills Melanctha would seem to confirm Jefferson's perception and moral condemnation of Melanctha's essentially capricious and mysterious being thereby lending to the story as a whole the Victorian moral bias referred to in the opening pages of this chapter.

In the final analysis, Jefferson and Melanctha push at the boundaries of their selves and of truth, underscoring in the process the epistemological limits of trust. The resulting problem and challenge of trusting across hermeneutical worlds is to build the understanding that will lead one to cross the epochal divide. To this end, Gadamer advocates "the idea of remaining open to the possibility of being wrong, the idea of constantly putting one's ideas at risk."[56] He shares this insight as well. "From personal experience, I know how difficult it is to move from an analytical foundation to a comprehension and assimilation of continental philosophy. If I was ever able to make this shift... it was by dint of a deliberate decision... to *pretend* I knew no philosophy at all, and so begin all over again."[57] Gadamer's counsel promotes taking risks, allowing oneself to make mistakes, and even engaging in self-illusion if only to motivate one to begin. The text of "Melanctha" allows for the further realization that at a certain point in one's spiritual development one either grows by trusting or stagnates in one's comfort zone. The choice to be made is whether or not to continue growing towards transcendence of the self. In this respect, Gadamer's emphasis on beginning again

dovetails with Stein's motivations behind the continuous present and with a personal commitment to personal growth. Stein writes in order to begin again, to discover the source of constant renewal; to isolate the substrate of meaning in existence. Individuals who want to grow find themselves engaged in recurrent acts of beginning. These constant renewals like regular acts of *teshuva* (repentance), allow one to grow continually, and in this sense, to transcend the self. Trusting is the vehicle for this transcendence.

CHAPTER TWO

Resisting the Status Quo: A Case of Moral Trust in S. Y. Agnon's *A Simple Story*

To fall into habit is to begin to cease to be.

Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936)

In *A Simple Story* Agnon creates a world that makes trusting difficult and risk-taking a constant taunt. Built upon layers of ironic assumptions, statements, and juxtapositions, the story undermines the possibility of either a definitive reading or a monolithic authority. No one, it turns out, will escape the raised eyebrow of this narrator, not even the narrator himself. Thus the mere title begs the question, what is so simple about this story, when both readers and characters must venture interpretations of events and circumstances in a game of hide-and-go-seek with truth, risking the conclusion that on some level they and we are living dishonestly.

Wagering as to what in the story one trusts effectively keeps a reader off-balance much like the world keeps Hirshl. Through the throes of indecision arising from his conflict between a proscribed love and a conventional partnership, between a son's will and a mother's, Hirshl suffers a test of his maturity. As with Jefferson, Hirshl (and arguably Tsirl) fears that consummating his passion for his indigent cousin, Blume, would expose a radical new self-understanding, one that would overturn the logic of a predictable bourgeois existence, creating potentially regrettable effects as a result. Thus Hirshl's struggle to divorce himself from his ill-begotten longings and to settle into his conventional marriage with his social equal, Mina, is an individual's tumultuous attempt

to test whether a world of conventions proves itself to be a trustworthy guide toward a socially healthy and personally honest existence.

Whether or not a conventional lifestyle can ultimately provide the grounds for an honest and satisfying existence is one of the story's propositions. Assessing the power of convention to shape an individual is another. This power plays itself out in three ways. These include the battle of wills between Hirshl and his mother. It also finds voice in the theme of insanity. Madness haunts and intrigues Hirshl much as reason comforts and disciplines Jefferson. The real possibility of going insane flows throughout the narrative, repeatedly rumbling to the surface in the guise of a nonconformist uncle who goes mad, and eventually erupting in the nervous breakdown that Hirshl suffers as he comes to terms with his small-town ambitions. Thirdly, the power of the average is linked to the theme of narrative power; that is, the power of a story to break down worlds, to raise them up, or in Stein's pursuit of the continuous present, to hold them still. From amidst the waves of irony that wear away at our instinct to trust emerges a doctor's story about small-town life that, despite its own tragedies, moves Hirshl, and perhaps us, to a place of conciliation with his limitations. The power of the average and the conventional to legislate the parameters of acceptable behavior, to narrate what is laudable and what is laughable, what is sane and insane, to coerce conformity from would-be iconoclasts or to drive them over the edge is thus also at stake.

From the very first line of the story, we suspect that Agnon's narrator, who is simultaneously apart from and complicit in the presentation of truth, knows that life as lived in the town of Szybusz is not as simple as some of the inhabitants seem to live it. "The widow Mirl lay ill for many years. The doctors consumed her savings with their

cures and failed to cure her" (3). The tale thus begins with a portrait of an ailing person who is also a widow, two categories of personal status that within Jewish tradition explicitly warrant moral treatment by the society at large. We might even say that the health of the society is attested to by the way the society tends to its infirm and its widows. Ironically the health of the "healthcare establishment" is what is first put into question. The mishnah instructs us to treat everyone with *caf z 'chut* (a measure of merit), to give others the benefit of the doubt.[58] Yet the first line imagines doctors preying on the weak and our suspicions are immediately alerted as to the motivations behind both the narrator and the medical establishment.

Reaffirming a sense of suspicion that pervades not only the relationship between narrator and reader but also that between parents and children, the dying mother anticipates that her soon to be orphaned daughter might question the causes for their poverty. "If you're angry with me for not leaving you anything, don't be. God in heaven knows I never spent a cent on myself" (3). Mirl suspects that Blume might entertain the notion that she was a negligent mother, squandering what little livelihood they had on self-indulgent pursuits rather than investing in her daughter's best interest. We later learn, however, that the Jewish emphasis on studying traditional texts is the culprit. Mirl's husband studies texts at his family's expense. This is confirmed when Tsirl, Blume's aunt, greets her orphaned niece. "Your father too was taken before his time. What a pity that was, because there was no better Jew than he. I've been told that he spent his whole life studying" (4). Belying such a compliment, Hayyim Nacht would often condemn himself, "I know, my darling, that a man like me, a husband and a father who can't provide for his own wife and daughter, should be sent to Siberia" (21).

Agnon was well-versed in rabbinic texts, which he held in high esteem. Thus the narrative's equation of studying rabbinic texts with negligence represents a meta-irony, an author's slightly bitter nostalgia turned towards his own literary endeavor. "True, there was not another tutor in town who could pen as fine a letter as he [Nacht], but what good did his fine style do him if it was impossible to understand a word of his flowery phrases?" (21). The decline of Jewish text study as embodied in Hayyim Nacht's languishing character is played out in Hirshl's modern one. "As long as [Hirshl] had attended the old study house in the Little Synagogue his parents had hoped he would become a rabbi, yet in the end he had disappointed them by losing interest in such a career" (14). And it is matched by the rise of a mother's ambitions for her son. "And since Tsirl saw that Hirshl would never be what she desired of him, she decided that he might as well be what she could make of him" (16). "Not that she respected religion and its scholars any less than the average woman did; still, like any occupation whose practical value was doubtful, it seemed to her less than ideal. . . . And since Hirshl had given up his religious studies anyhow, what better future for him than the store" (15-6)?

Agnon tells his modern story using the archaic idioms characteristic of classical Jewish texts. Thus the demise of Talmud study predicted by the story yet conveyed through talmudic language underscores the power of narrative, by an author's stylistic choices, to unsettle the status quo. On a thematic level, the traditional language infuses the story's modern sensibility with a layer of legend that heightens the oracular implications of the language, more in the Hebrew than in the English translation.[59] It does this by distancing the story further from the gray malaise that pervades *A Simple Story* owing to the eclipse of divinely inspired communal practices by personal ambition.

The oracular language transcends history and in flashes we understand that Hirshl's struggle reflects deeply on the human condition of mortality.

Taken together, the suspicion of exploitation broached in the first lines of the story and suggested throughout comes to form the seamy backdrop to the romantic drama that soon develops. This atmosphere of suspicion contributes to the dramatic irony that directs the reader to question the health and uprightness of the society. As readers looking to sympathize with the characters, we can't be sure whether to be on our guard and to resist, or to go with the flow and succumb. This confusion parallels the crisis Hirshl suffers as he tries to identify and exercise his own will from out of a world that seeks to pull him in a single direction. "[Hirshl] did have the virtue of doing whatever he was told" (14). Obedience is hardly the road to self-determination.

To establish the hegemony of normative behavior, the text seeks the middle ground on a number of levels. The narrator's rhetoric is a rhetoric of the middle position: "Tsirl neither pampered nor picked on [Blume]" (8); "Not that she [Mina] was ashamed of [her parents]—it just could not be said that she was particularly proud of them either" (41); or, "Hirshl was neither for or against it [taking walks]" (137). We might call this the Goldilocks phenomenon for by stating and rejecting two opposing possibilities the language calls for the middle position that is "neither too hot nor too cold but just right." On the level of character development, the main characters are stalwarts of the middle class: store proprietors, merchants and bureaucrats mostly. Hirshl's father, Baruch Meir, is middle of the road: easy-going, willing to take advice, and not overly self-reliant (11). He is generous but not especially so. He has a penchant for waxing philosophical expressing a perspective that seeks stasis: 'The world is not going to change if a single

do-nothing does something, and I am not going to lose my shirt if I give him a penny" (11). Hirshl's mother, Tsirl, is said to respect religion and its scholars as the average woman does. The status of Zionism and socialism is lukewarm. And positions that do not conform are inscrutable. In its drive towards normalcy, the world of Szybusz is subjected to an ongoing, David Lynch-ish scrutiny.

The main subject of the town's prevailing mediocrity is Hirshl, who, the narrator suggests, has a unique perspective on truth; a perspective that is more empathetic, discerning, and potentially outraged. "Hirshl was young and still had to learn that a twinkle or a kind word could be turned to one's advantage. . . . Perhaps he had eyes to see that the same people who were so good to him were not always as good to others, which grieved him" (10). Throughout his struggle to command his own destiny, Hirshl's naivete acts as a foil to the pervading irony and holds out the promise of a path towards the simple meaning of this story, his story.

On one side of Hirshl's struggle is Blume. Blume is Hirshl's distant cousin who arrives in his household as a young woman, orphaned and without economic means. A night blossom, as her name connotes, Blume, comes to represent for Hirshl the dark, forbidden side of desire; forbidden because though described as his twin in age and interest, she is not his social equal. Blume, the night blossom, also represents the self-actualization that Hirshl craves but which will wilt in the light of day.

During her first night in the Hurwitz household, Blume suffers a nightmare that portends the beginning and end of her love affair with Hirshl. She dreams she awakens exposed in an unfamiliar horsedrawn carriage. She immediately scrambles out and to the ground after which the horse, now lacking a driver, gallops away uncontrollably. Blume

fears that the runaway horse and carriage will cause a terrible accident. This disturbing prospect jars Blume awake and keeps her awake for the good part of the night. Arguably, the horse represents the forces of attraction regulated by society. The mutual attraction held by the cousins for one another keeps the horse at a standstill yet leaves Blume feeling vulnerable. Whereas their mutual attraction would suggest Blume and Hirshl take the reigns of their relationship, those social actors engaged in regulating desire will prove to be in the driver's seat. Arguably then, the accident that Blume's nightmare portends is Hirshl's and Mina's wedding engagement, a comedy of missteps by some accounts and a highly orchestrated encounter by others. Hirshl and Mina will drive a love saddled by convention, with the full blessings of family and community in tow. Blume's difficulty sleeping introduces a number of themes that develop over the course of the story. That Blume cannot sleep suggests a correlative relationship with Hirshl's desire that will not rest. Furthermore her sleeplessness foreshadows the insomnia that signals the first stages of Hirshl's breakdown. And finally, Blume's nightmare summarizes the story's central contest between raw passion and refined taste.

The principle regulator of social norms is Hirshl's mother. Tsirl's resentment towards Blume is first witnessed in her rejection of Blume's cakes. Tsirl's rejection of the pastries suggests that the experience of a distant family relation appearing on her doorstep, making her way around her kitchen and producing a breakfast that instantly wins over her husband and son, feels disrespectful if not outright threatening. We can imagine that Tsirl feels that her prerogative to regulate all the relationships in her household has been challenged. Ben-Dov sees in this interaction around the breakfast cakes an announcement of the "interpersonal relationships that impel this novel: Tsirl's

ambivalence toward Blume, the rivalry of these two women for Hirshl's affection, and the latent friction between Hirshl and his mother over Blume."[60] There may be the makings for a rivalry, but as Blume's nightmare anticipates, Blume will absent herself from this competition rather than participate in it.

Despite the tension between the women, Blume goes to work in Tsirl's home. Because of the tension, the situation is prone to behaviors whose motivations are suspect. For instance, because Blume is family, Tsirl feels justified in not paying her any wages. "'After all,' said Tsirl to her husband, 'she is one of us, isn't she? He who rewards us will reward her too'" (7). The narrator anticipates the reader's objection to this apparent injustice. "It might have seemed that Blume was being taken advantage of; yet anyone considering the matter closely would have concluded that Tsirl was right" (7). The narrator's explicit awareness of an audience heightens the irony of this statement and points to another of the text's qualities: the unevenness of its overarching irony. In some places the narrator provokes our expectations with instances that are more or less extreme, adding to the story's sense of risk. In this case, the narrator is openly complicit in concealing Tsirl's parsimony and resentment which is masked elsewhere in the story as well: "And just as [Tsirl] was considerate toward everyone, so she was with Blume. If, for instance, she came across an old dress that did not fit her, or a shoe that had seen better days, she was sure to give it to her cousin" (9). Is this generous or stingy? Why, if they're so well off and if Blume is one of them, does she not purchase something new for Blume? The narrator tells us one thing but shows us something else.

In fact, the tension that is associated with Blume may stem from her in-between status. She is neither "a housemaid" nor a "better-off girl" (8). Blume's subject position

does not fit squarely into a prescribed social role and this may very well be the source of irritation for Tsirl and the source of attraction for Hirshl. Were she explicitly a rabbinic figure, the sages would be fretting about her unclear personal status. No doubt sensitive to this tradition, Agnon articulates social anxieties around issues of desire and independence through the impact that Blume's unclassifiable position effects on the Hurwitz's conventional household.

Blume's father, Hayyim Nacht, a man who did nothing but study, bequeathed his daughter his love of reading and study. Blume loved to read. Yet, unlike her father, Blume is not sentimental. Father and daughter disagreed over the role of destiny or free will in a person's life (22). Blume explains tragedy as a consequence of individual behavior and, according to our narrator, comes up short on compassion or empathy as a result. This tidbit of personal history gives us something with which to interpret Blume's eventual retreat from her attachment to Hirshl. But until that time, Blume's interest in reading is one source of connection with Hirshl, for he, too, likes to read. He would check out three books from the library every week, keep two for himself and lend one to Blume. This ritual alone however displays both the compatibility, on the one hand, and the imbalance, on the other, that describes Blume's and Hirshl's attraction.

Hirshl begins to obsess over Blume. He aches to embrace "the wondrous mystery of her" (27). He is consumed by his obsession and also with the idea of his obsession. He is noticing the author's power to create and destroy. Just as a character ceases to exist if left out of the story, "What you don't think of can't attract you; if she is not in my thoughts, she does not exist for me" (32). Of course, like a seasoned critical thinker, Hirshl realizes that "thinking of how Blume was not in his thoughts, he thought of Blume

herself" (32). As in the narrative of "Melanctha," absence proves to be its own presence. "Hirshl had eyes for her alone. He saw her even when she was elsewhere" (27).

Yet Blume is not absent at all. She is, rather, overlooked. In contrast to Hirshl's intellectual titillation, Blume is "feeling irritable and low" (32). This might come as a surprise given the narrator's repeated testaments to Blume's good health and good luck. But we are reminded that Blume's ambiguous status brings with it ambiguous treatment. "She did everything in the household except for such drudgery as scrubbing the floors, which couldn't be expected of a cousin. In a word, she was one of the family" (34). Though we are told how lucky Blume is, there is enough evidence to conclude that Blume's situation is clearly miserable: her past weighty, her present lonely, and her future bleak. "[T]hough many a young girl would gladly have traded places with her, [Blume] seemed to have no idea how lucky she was. Never once did she smile, while her mouth hung slightly open as if it . . . were about to scream" (34). A clue that Blume will not blossom in a world ruled by convention, "Blume could not force herself to look happy when she was not" (33). Unaccustomed to the game of appearances, her feelings "are there to be seen."

Hirshl, caught up in his own emerging sexuality, neither intuits nor supposes any of this. He begins to misinterpret Blume's silence. "I see you're keeping accounts, thought Hirshl. If you mean to give me the silent treatment, believe me, two can play at that game: I can be as silent as you. And yet the fact was that it was Hirshl, the son and grandson of storekeepers who were used to weighing and measuring all things, who was keeping accounts" (33). Trusting calls for conversation not speculation, and Hirshl's distortion of Blume's motives undermines any trust that the two young people may have

achieved.[61] Yet, even if the silent treatment were Blume's game, Hirshl is compelled to break it, "What's wrong, Blume" (33)? While waiting for her answer, Hirshl feels just "[h]ow near he was to her and how far she was to him. And yet not so far as all that" (33). The distance to be traversed here is multiple and incongruous—physical, for one, emotional for another, and socio-political for a third. "In the end, he . . . extended a hand, and conciliatingly sought to take hers. Before he could do so, however, she was gone from the room" (33). Hirshl fails to register this rejection. Instead, he is mesmerized by the fact of being in Blume's space, sensing her presence even in her absence, and takes the liberty of lying down on her bed. A dreamlike experience ensues. Hirshl slips into a fantasy whereby he is awakened by Blume's hand stroking his temple. "A thousand years might well have passed, for the world had ceased to exist for him. . . . Never had his body felt so fully alive. God in heaven knew how long it lasted. Then a woman's hand touched his head and stroked his hair. Who of you has not already guessed that it was Blume's? He came to his senses, rose, and left the room" (34). Though perhaps uncertain at first, we ultimately conclude that Hirshl is awakened by his longing for Blume and not by Blume herself.

Trust in one's awakened longing is here overruled by social convention. Hirshl responds to his feelings by masking them either with indifference or with idle conversation. "[B]eing a good Jewish boy, the more honorable his conduct with a good Jewish girl was, the more Hirshl felt called upon to conceal it" (35). On the one hand, he would not speak to Blume and was embarrassed to be with her. "Even though he longed for her, he hid from her" lest the intensity of his feelings condemn them (34). Hirshl's surreptitiousness stems from his intuitive sense that sexual desire destabilizes the normal

regime over which his mother keeps strict control. Tsirl's influence succeeds in trivializing the extraordinary. His passion forced into the narrow confines of convention, Hirshl initiates harmless conversations about commonplaces. We are able to see how the hierarchical relationship between Hirshl and Tsirl externalizes Jefferson's internal conflict between his passion and his discipline.[62] As in the case of "Melanctha," the question of trust emerges as a function of erotic desire. The young lovers are forced to negotiate the conflicting forces of desire and suppression.

But once Blume detects the scaffolding of a marriage between Hirshl and Mina, she finds another job. Manifesting the ways that the conventional marriage script has already been inculcated, Blume thinks she understands the power she is up against and concedes from the start. "If one was looking for Blume, she was to be found only in Hirshl's thoughts, for she was gone from the house" (48). Perhaps she does not give herself enough credit or cannot fight adequately on her own behalf. We might also question the narrator's perspective stated in the above quote. How is it that Blume comes to be only a figment of Hirshl's imagination when in fact she is to be found in the new employers' home? Might this not be the point in the story where the distinction between Blume the character and Blume the symbol take effect? We see the narrator narrow the focus to the Hurvitz household and still further to Hirshl alone. The rest of Szybusz fades in the light of this clear curtailment of Blume's and Hirshl's flirtation.

In the other corner of Hirshl's world is Mina. Hirshl meets Mina through his dad's business connections. Mina would lodge at the Hurvitzes when in town to visit her best friend. She would arrive there in a horse and buggy similar to the one described in Blume's dream (40). Unlike Blume who receives her education from her father, Mina is

sent to a boarding school. The didactic intent is more to educate her Jewish provincialism out of her than to educate Mina in anything. "Even though she had grown up in a village. . . having gone to a boarding school in Stanislaw. . . nothing about her so much as hinted that she was the daughter of country Jews" (40-1).

But some conventions Mina is to remain schooled in. Marriage for example. Tradition and convention prescribe marriage as the inevitable context for romantic love; the inveterate "next" stage in a woman's life. Being matched with some young man fits into Mina's expectations and as such her attitude towards marriage is complacently pragmatic. This said, her interest in Hirshl is not so much a vote for Hirshl as it is not a vote against. "She [Mina] had nothing against young Hirshl Hurvitz" (41). This sentiment is later reiterated after the two marry. "Mina sat by Hirshl's side wondering why such a great to-do was made about love. Not that she had anything against Hirshl. Far from it. But she had been content with her life before he came along too" (106). Mina is too inexperienced to be very discriminating. Furthermore, Mina is not one to challenge the norm and whether she is matched earlier rather than later does not matter to her. In any case, the narrator describes the attraction that Mina does feel towards Hirshl as "the power of the inarticulate love that she felt for him whose heart was already pledged to another" (42). Thematically aligned with Tsirl's vision, Mina represents the power of the norm to seduce a wayward son.

The forces of persuasion thus come to complicate the struggle of wills transpiring in the text. At times, the narrator attributes Hirshl's and Blume's romance to the will and inspiration of a divine being. Indeed the frequent references to God suggest a parody on a grandiose scale. The familiarly cosmic battle between man's will and the will of God

takes shape as a mother sets about to dismantle her son's divinely-inspired yet socially-unacceptable love. "Had Hirshl not tried hiding his love, she [Tsirl] would never have noticed it. But He who put the love of his cousin in his heart had not put the wits of his mother in his head" (35). Tsirl is poised to sacrifice her son's desire, and his independence, on the altar of social convention. Even the heavens are in Tsirl's court. "God in heaven knew why [Blume] was not Hirshl's wife" (152). And much earlier, "Indeed, when Hirshl was still a twinkle in his mother's eye an angel in heaven had proclaimed, 'Hirshl the son of Boruch Meir to Mina the daughter of Gedalia'" (59).[63] As if divinely commanded, Tsirl steps forward as soon as Blume withdraws. She begins "seeking to put [Hirshl] in the proper frame of mind" (47); that is, to consider Mina as his wife. She leads her son in the direction she wants him to head. And she knows she has to make Hirshl believe he is acting on his own will (51). This scene plays ironically against the biblical episode where Rebecca hears God's pronouncement about the twins she nurtures in her womb.[64] And just as Rebecca finagles God's plan for Jacob, so Tsirl works her plan that the narrator ascribes to God for Hirshl. Rather than antagonize him, Tsirl plays on Hirshl's disappointments. "No one chooses his own fate," counsels Tsirl. "Better to marry a woman who respects you than to run after one who doesn't care" (51). Hirshl's response is to return to childhood patterns. "Once, when he had been a small boy, a friend had jilted him; seeing how hurt he was Tsirl took him in her arms, where her kisses and caresses soon put the friend out of his mind. And although Hirshl was now a young man, the same thing had happened again" (52).

Romance thus emerges in the light of a tragi-parody, the result of divine decree and maternal meddling. Yet what is ultimately being contested is the right to sanction or

veto love. The ironic figure of the matchmaker, Yona Toyber, stands out as a testament to the way the authority governing love has shifted. "Though on the face of it he had never made a match in his life, no one in Szybusz married anyone in Szybusz without his help" (36). An inspired intellectual with wanderlust and a thirst for knowledge, Yona Toyber found entry into the matchmaking business because of his scholarship, and stayed there ever since. Is this an indictment of the intellect or a reward? The narrative's double-edged messages consistently upend whatever one might naturally assume. In any case, as a rumpled figurehead to whom homage is paid, Yona Toyber stands at the token center of a bygone era.

Tsirl's interference, on the other hand, points to the other battle occurring on an equally cosmic level. This is Hirshl's desire to mature into a self-realized, autonomous individual. Hirshl's obsession with the desire for independence drives his passion for Blume, which in turn is frustrated by the reality of his dependence on his family. This negative loop becomes apparent as the relationship with Blume dwindles and as the statements that relate this loss to Hirshl's dependence on his family become more frequent. The power of discourse to form—or dismantle—a self, the subject of Foucault's fascination, is attested to by the impending dissolution of Hirshl's independent will.

In the contest between Hirshl and his mother, Hirshl's initial obsession with Blume gradually transforms Blume into an abstraction. "The more Hirshl thought about Blume, the less he could say what made her special. Was it simply her being gone? . . . She had always been special for him. He had been drawn to her from the day he ceased being a boy. He felt about her as one might feel about a twin who has suddenly been

abducted" (50). The notion of twins suggests the intimate nature of their union. This reference also invokes the biblical origins of man and woman where, in one account, Eve and Adam are created at once, and in a second account, Eve emerges from the body of Adam.[65] Similarly, Hirshl's attachment is as to a twin all the while his behavior reflects his sense that in fact Blume is merely an extension of himself. In fact, he lives so solidly in his mind that he begins to accuse her for not behaving as he imagines she should. "Hirshl imagined a conversation between the two women in which, Tirza Mazal having told Blume about her love affair. . . and Blume having told Tirza about Hirshl, Blume would realize that a woman had to take the first step. In fact, he was sure that she would take it. When at first she did not he felt surprised; then he began to hold it against her. If she did not do something soon, it would be too late" (50). What is it that made Hirshl so certainly wrong in his calculation? Is it a deep-seated shame that compels Hirshl to negate Blume's real existence, voicing instead a projection of his own fears? Perhaps it is fear of rejection. Hirshl wonders "why he put up with so much in silence. Perhaps it was because he felt sure that nothing would come of it anyway" (51). Perhaps what he is most certain about is his own lack of initiative. Hirshl avoids his role in the battle of wills between himself and his mother, hiding from Tsirl and denying to himself that he will submit to her. Hirshl expends his energy willing Blume to save him from his parents, and then blaming her for not doing so. "It's all because she walked out on me and left me with my father and mother and everyone else who wants to run my life" (51).

It will seem to Hirshl that only the power of sexual passion can compete with his parent's influence for the authority over his identity. For Hirshl to wed himself to Blume would mean to divorce himself from his parents. And though Hirshl will want Blume to

rescue him from his parents and from his own weakness, Blume will not try to free Hirshl. "The fact is. . . Blume wanted no more mother's or father's boys" (152). Indeed, we are to understand Hirshl's love for Blume to be bound up with his inability to break free from his parents.

Anger and insult open a space for Mina. "Dimly he felt that not [Mina] but Blume was to blame, since if Blume had been nicer to him, there would have been no question of Mina" (51). Like Jefferson of "Melanctha" whose mind kept wavering, so too Hirshl. "Hirshl's mind kept changing. If one day it surprised him that he was not angrier with Mina, the next day his anger at Blume did not surprise him at all" (51). Hirshl continues to deny responsibility for his own well-being.

Hirshl even shirks responsibility for his own wedding engagement. The Hurvitz's are invited to a cocktail party to which unbeknownst to Hirshl, Mina's family is too. Orchestrating their encounter, the two sets of parental units order their respective children on ahead without them. Uneasy at social gatherings, Hirshl feels anxious almost as soon as he arrives. Once he spots Mina, he latches onto her. He keeps her engaged by talking, feeling encouraged by her willingness to listen. "He spoke in a well-modulated voice, nor did he stammer, as when talking to Blume. In this he was aided by Mina's eyes, which did not regard him suspiciously like Blume's" (58). This interaction provokes some other guests to jump to conclusions. "Just look at the two lovebirds cooing to each other!" (59).[66] These words will prove prophetic, illustrating however, the power of nothing less than one's society to confer meaning on an encounter that stems from a different intention altogether. In some ways, the group projects their assumptions on Hirshl and Mina just as Hirshl projects his onto Blume. The difference is that Hirshl will

succumb to them. The force of misunderstanding reaches an absurd climax culminating in the public perception of Hirshl's and Mina's engagement. "Szybusz had nothing bad to say about the match between Hirshl and Mina" (84). Like Israel accepting the ten commandments with a communal assent, the town speaks as one voice in support of their covenant and the moderate values it embodies.

A disquisition on true love further attests to the social acceptance of Hirshl's and Mina's engagement. "There were people in Szybusz who swore that the apogee of true love was a certain rich lady in town who had run off with her butler and refused to return to her imploring husband even though her new lover beat her. There were others who told you to look for it in the person of the unrepentant Mottshi Shaynbart, who had lost his leg chasing after a woman and now had a wooden one in its place. Still others insisted that only the man driven out of his senses by passion could claim to be love's acolyte. In each of these cases, the passion for love misled them about love itself" (43). If true love does not put one at risk, what is it? "Could there be a greater pleasure in life than sitting at night in one's store with one's profits laid out before one?" (43). Like the tempering effects of Beauty and Chastity mentioned with regard to Jefferson, the self-satisfaction of a day's profits are meant to compare favorably with a passion that proves self-destructive. Or does it? Again we question whether the narrative is leading us to the truth.

Tsirl's victory with the wedding engagement is ultimately matched only by its absurdity. Ironically, the engagement is quite unconventional. "Hirshl was told that one went down on one's knees and kissed one's true love's hand. . . the description had stuck with him, so that, it having been otherwise with Mina, their betrothal did not seem quite

real to him" (69). Hirshl has a sense that reality depends on initiative and he feels that his own is lacking.

Hirshl deals with the folly of his wedding engagement like one who is relieved to have something painful end. Hirshl shrugs his shoulders and then wavers between his life's normalcy and its insanity. Amidst the drunken, senseless chatter of the party, Hirshl concludes, "There is nothing to be done. I'll just have to sit it out to the end. Maybe my mother's brother wasn't crazy after all when he ran away to the woods. Maybe he knew what he was doing" (64). In other words, maybe nonconformists are not crazy. And while the inverse is not necessarily true either, the pressure to conform will drive Hirshl out of his mind. Yet out of his mind, out of his relentless ennui and obedient thoughts about Mina, is exactly where Hirshl wants to be. "What's done is done, he thought, recalling what had happened. I'll just have to forget about Blume and start thinking about Mina" (68). The narrator attributes this attitude to Hirshl's sense of responsibility. "Hirshl was a responsible young man and knew that there was no turning back" (69). We are thus warned of the ineluctable force of convention where, once in its path, there is no alternative but to follow. "Nothing ever turns out the way we'd like it to. Our lives aren't our own, Mina, and others do what they please with them. . . . The fact is that nobody cares who you really are. One day you're told to do this and the next day that, and in the end you just do whatever it is and lose all respect for yourself, which everyone else has already done long ago" (127-8). Hirshl subsequently wavers between resenting Mina and longing for Blume, and blaming Mina along with Blume. Contrary to responsible, this is an individual who refuses, is reluctant or is incapable of making decisions for himself; a

frustrated young man coming of age amidst a growing movement of organized labor and of people seeking greater rights and freedoms that accentuate his paralysis (42).

Dissatisfied with himself, Hirshl most wants to escape the daily exigencies of married life. Hirshl feels cooped up and resents Mina's company. Even looking at Mina annoyed Hirshl (131). Like Jefferson who believes one should be upright and habitual with a regularity that grows tiresome for both Melanctha and the reader, "Hirshl's routine was unchanging. . . . His mother had raised him to be regular in his habits" (110). Are we to understand that his mother is responsible? And though Mina agreed that the pattern of their lives was stagnating, "the power of regularity proved stronger than the power of thought" (110). Tedium continues unabated and the sensibilities this engenders in Hirshl swing from one extreme to another. First we are told that Hirshl is peaceful though still wondering what Mina is doing in his life. Then we learn that Mina's moods are unpredictable (124) and that she gives Hirshl no peace. She bores Hirshl with her stories of her past and her dreams and Hirshl feels weighted down. "It's like having to wear a coat all the time that never keeps you warm" (123). On the other hand, the weight offers some comfort. "They may not have been all that happy, yet they were far from the opposite too, and they lived in comfort and lacked nothing" (118).

More often than not, however, Hirshl imagines escape scenarios such as losing the family fortune or running to America. But Hirshl realizes that neither is likely. Tsirl and Baruch spend evenings counting their profits, and surviving in a completely new world is beyond his imagination. "Just how one managed to live it up there [America], however, was a subject they [those who returned] were a bit vague about" (70). Increasingly, thoughts of his mad uncle intrigue Hirshl. We are to understand both that "Tsirl had had

a brother who, instead of turning out normal, had been driven mad by his academic studies" (15) and that this uncle was banished by his parents for disobedience (157). The conflicting stories are themselves of interest but in either case, the reality of a close relation's insanity makes Hirshl's reality more fragile than it might be otherwise. Yet Hirshl speculates that his uncle was in all probability perfectly sane precisely because he succeeded in avoiding a conventional life with the boredom of a conventional marriage. "There may be nothing wrong with all that, but I tell you, it would have left him an empty shell of a man" (127). Going crazy seems increasingly attractive. It offers an escape from the timeworn regimen in which Hirshl finds himself. He would imagine his uncle "happy to be alone and unbothered. . . . Not for him the houses, shops, customers, and women of mortal men" (157). The desire to escape is strengthened by Hirshl's awareness of his dependency on his parents. "Being hungry has made me realize that it's time I made something of myself. Only how can I make anything of myself when I'm still so dependent on my parents?" (81). Hirshl repeats this lament. "But as long as I'm living with my parents, not even my habits are my own" (83). Emptiness and hunger fuel his impotence.

Hirshl's break with reality follows upon his increasing isolation from friends and family and a definitive rejection by Blume. Even in the face of past defeat, Hirshl resumes the flexing of his will. "Hirshl believed that if he thought very hard of someone, concentrating his utmost, that person would be bound to come" (132). And when Blume wouldn't come, he would think harder. "It reached the point that he could not abide having his mind taken off her by anything" (132). "He still believed that will power could bring two people together. If I keep thinking of Blume, he told himself, she

will have to appear. Of course, this method had failed him so far, yet it had done so, Hirshl was convinced because the customers . . . kept distracting him" (141). Blindly committed to the power of his thought to bring about Blume's action, Hirshl effectively fortifies his own isolation. "[H]irshl's world had shrunk so that almost nothing was left of it but the street on which Blume lived" (147). A turning point is signaled when Blume puts an end to Hirshl's obsession. Startled by Hirshl's lurking figure as she opens the gate to exit her home she asks, "Who's there?" When Hirshl identifies himself, "Blume recoiled and retreated into the house" leaving Hirshl "utterly crushed, utterly mortified" (148).

Erotic desire is surely a power to contend with. It demands a certain faith or trust that can overpower inhibitions and fears. Thus acting on one's lust can be the first step toward establishing one's individual identity, a step Hirshl only slinks towards and that much only after he is married and unavailable. Perhaps Hirshl's stumbling block is his persistent recourse to a practice of willing rather than to a practice of trusting. Yet insanity trumps even sexual passion in its "unharnassed quality".[67] Losing one's sanity implies the surrender of all reason, not simply the logic of habits and conventions. It negates the very foundations in which truth, legitimacy and trust are rooted in modern societies. Breaking down is thus Hirshl's best attempt at bucking the status quo and breaking free of his parents.

As if to signal the realization of Blume's prophetic nightmare, Hirshl's breakdown begins as an acute case of insomnia. Doctors prescribe conflicting remedies and his sleeplessness continues, punctuated by rantings and wild dreams. Hirshl becomes bitter and enraged at Mina's presence in his life (166-8). He acts strangely and aimlessly

wanders. One morning in *shul* he feels two consecutive blows to his head and then a numbness in his fingers. He wonders if he is dead but his head is killing him, which he takes as a sign that he is alive. "I'm glad I'm not screaming, because if I was I might crow like a rooster and seem crazy" (171). He leaves the study house and breaks his daily routine to enter the forest, babbling about whether he is crazy or not. Adding to his disorientation, his watch stopped working that morning. The narrator makes a futile attempt to distinguish Hirshl from his whacky ancestors. "As bizarrely as he was acting, Hirshl had his wits about him. He knew that, unlike his mother's grandfather who wore a chamberpot on his head, he could not make a hat of a shoe, and that, unlike his maternal uncle who ran off to the forest for good, he would have to go home in the end. Why didn't he then? Because he had lost his hat, and one did not go hatless in the hot sun" (173). When Hirshl is discovered, he is wearing one shoe on his forehead. He only calls Blume's name and insists he's not a rooster (174). Once Hirshl's absence is known, the speculations begin. "Even those who had seen him disagreed among themselves, some saying that he had been behaving strangely and some that he had not."[68] Though Baruch Meir senses that "the matter was far from simple," most of the townspeople believe Hirshl is feigning madness to get out of the Czar's draft (173-4). Hirshl is admitted to the care of Dr. Langsam, an elderly neurologist, who runs a sanatorium in the town of Lemberg.

Dr. Langsam sees in Hirshl meekness, resignation and sadness (178). He prescribes that Hirshl keep away both from the insane asylum and from his hometown, as if the two might be equated. The Doctor would provide both: recollections of his hometown, and the acknowledgment of the madness that perhaps existed there. "Every

day he [Dr. Langsam] came into Hirshl's room and sat down by his bed to chat with him, and each of these conversations began and ended with Dr. Langsam's hometown" (182). "In fact, though he had spent only the first twenty years of his life in his native town, a thousand years seemed not long enough to tell about them" (189). Dr. Langsam captivates Hirshl with his voice and literally narrates a bridge for Hirshl back into his own story. The Doctor reminisces about the market street and the study house and the rabbi, and Hirshl can relate. "Had anyone asked Hirshl how Dr. Langsam was treating him, he might have replied in surprise: What? Is he a doctor? Still, he could feel that he was being healed" (183). While Stein might challenge the healing qualities of remembering—for in remembering, one forgets how to be—she would likely sympathize with Hirshl's inability to capture his story on his own. Hirshl must hear his story told to him from an existential position outside his reality that garners him a measure of objectivity not available to him from within his daily existence. "[B]eing away from a place made a man think of it" (195). Given the ways that the narrator makes *A Simple Story* difficult to trust, it is ironic that Hirshl's recovery depends on his trusting the doctor's narrative. For if the doctor's story is like Hirshl's story, and if the doctor is sane, the transitive theory of logic states that Hirshl too would be sane.

Hirshl unwittingly risks insanity in one of the few escapes that present themselves to him. The other ways included the failure of the family business which was out of his control, being drafted into the Czar's army, which would have usurped all of his freedom, and traveling abroad, which from Hirshl's response to those who went and came back, would have proved beyond his level of endurance. Moreover, his temporary breakdown puts him in a mental and emotional status that approximates the pre-conditions of being

and understanding; a state which necessitate his rebirth or, in this case, recovery. "And though the doctor's voice was that of an old man, Hirshl was as entranced by the sweet, gruff sadness of it as he might have been by a lullaby, had he ever heard one when he was a child" (190). In order to regain his sanity, Hirshl must risk trusting in the status quo. The ability of the doctor to cure him depends on the doctor's ability to convince him of the sanity of small town life. And because the doctor's story mimics Hirshl's own in much of its routine charm, even while his wife's suicide "in a moment of madness" (190) bespeaks life's menace, Hirshl can imagine himself to be functionally content like the doctor, who he trusts is sane.

Hirshl has what I think we can call a moral trust in the system in which his family and small town are invested. This moral trust is defined against empirical trust as set out by Dershowitz in *The Genesis of Justice*. In the *akedah*, the binding of Isaac, Abraham is praised for his "complete trust" in God.[69] What does this mean? It can mean that loyalty to God, where loyalty is understood as obedience, is of greater moral weight than loyalty to one's son. Moral trust requires no interpretation of either motives or results. It forecloses independent action. It is dogmatic. In other words, moral action might well bring about what in political parlance is called, collateral damage. This is moral trust. Or Abraham's compliance can mean that Abraham trusts that God would never actually permit a father to murder his son. Based on Abraham's personal knowledge of God's ways, Abraham trusts that God will not allow the execution of Isaac to go through. This is empirical trust. To better distinguish these two forms of trusting, Dershowitz describes the game called "Trust," in which you are challenged to fall backward into the arms of a loved one.[70] Moral trust is the willingness to fall backward even if you think it is not in

your best interest, because trusting a loved one is a higher value than avoiding a broken back. Empirical trust is falling backward only if you trust someone to catch you. Safeguarding one's welfare, in this case, is a greater moral value than trusting a loved one. Hirshl's fall into insanity is akin to falling into the arms of a loved one, such as his mother, and breaking his back. His mother's arms supported by the moderate values of a budding middle class are not only not strong enough to bolster Hirshl, they are instrumental in throwing him to the ground.

The social system of Szybusz breaks Hirshl's will like the community of Bridgepoint abandons Melanctha. Yet, Hirshl's moral trust is not without justification. Whereas Melanctha's community ultimately fails to nurture her, Hirshl's society restores what it broke. Indeed, Hirshl's nervous breakdown, his falling outside of reason, affords him the opportunity to allow a version of small time life that destroyed him, to nurse him back to health; or, in other words, to prove itself a fundamentally moral system, worthy of Hirshl's trust. "Before long he was hugging and kissing the same infant he had been certain he could never love. . . . All that a man really needs, Hirshl thought, is a little joy in his life" (203). Compare Hirshl's recovery with Melanctha's decay, "Melanctha went back to the hospital, and there the Doctor told her she had the consumption, and before long she would surely die. They sent her where she would be taken care of, a home for poor consumptives, and there Melanctha stayed until she died."[71] Joyful experiences born despite the bitterness of marriage confirm that Hirshl's world passes muster.

Nonetheless, that Hirshl later decides to orphan his child by allowing him to grow up in Malikrowik under the care of Mina's parents, makes it difficult for the reader to concur with such a sanguine view of Hirshl's world. Hirshl's need to sacrifice his first

son on behalf of the second one reflects the degree to which Hirshl remains wounded, disillusioned, and enslaved by the torment of having repeatedly said good bye to his first, unconsummated love. "'I thought,' said Mina, 'that it is the nature of love to always have room for one more.' Hirshl looked down and said, 'No, that's not so. Love comes to us only when no one stands between it and us.' God in heaven knew that he was thinking only of the baby" (229). In a decision that resonates with the competing moral claims of the *akedah*, Hirshl sacrifices his first born to the laws of romantic love as he understands them. Whether his ability to love only one child is true or not, Hirshl's abandonment is cruel. We can only imagine the pain of the loss he has bequeathed his son. While Hirshl's struggle to reject a conventional lifestyle reveals an underlying moral trust in the status quo he protests, he appears himself to be less than trustworthy. He does not prove to be a reliable interpreter of his own experience. Though discerning when unsophisticated, Hirshl is inexcusably cruel once he has suffered and lost.

Hirshl is seduced by the prospect of a life that is passionate yet he surrenders to a life that is regular. Though for some, the story's blatant critique dismisses the value of the status quo, rendering it nightmarish and unnerving, I perceive that *A Simple Story* allows one to conclude that a conventional lifestyle is no more ludicrous or less trustworthy than an unconventional one. In fact, the play between the norm and the extremes, the uniform and the singular, reveals how the nature of trust changes depending on which lifestyle one lives. The relentless irony of this text points in any case to the inescapable uncertainty of our very existence. Understanding life's endless interpretability lends to all decisions a degree of absurdity and even cruelty. This neoromantic, proto-postmodern consciousness may appear like a terrible dream, where words and symbols have one

meaning to us, but have a foreboding meaning to those, like God, who may understand the situation better. This tragic irony challenges us to trust despite our fearfulness, for we may never overcome just what precisely haunts us. Forced by our predicament into risking meaning we must choose our limits and establish our principles. If we are to take *A Simple Story* as a guide, truth will reject a conformity that deadens the spirit and will treasure and laugh at the idiosyncracies that characterize us all.

CHAPTER THREE

Til Death Do Us Part: A Case for Trusting the Future in Nathan Englander's "The Gilgul of Park Avenue"

To equate Judaism with rationalism. . . is an error. . . .
[T]o regard the irrational as the ultimate principle
of all things. . . is totally alien to Judaism.

Abraham Joshua Heschel[72]

"The Gilgul of Park Avenue" spotlights the mystical encounter in Englander's sympathetically rollicking sketch of a mature man's newfound identity. Charles's spontaneous conversion in the back seat of a taxicab from a secular citizen of WASP stock to an orthodox Jew catapults a routine ride home out of its mundaneness and into an ironic measure of holiness that begins to settle over Charles's entire personal landscape. Through its momentary association as the revered site of Jewish revelation, the taxicab becomes a gateway to a particular history and legend. Scenes of an ancient desert people traipsing through centuries of conquests, cultures and continents mingle like a mirage with the steaming sewers and bustling cityscapes of New York City. Though we might wonder whether a pastrami sandwich is behind it all, Charles's regular, secular existence seems profoundly transformed. His challenge will be to persuade Sue, his wife of twenty-seven years, first to trust his conversion, and second, to allow herself to be inspired alongside him. With this glib and artful slice of late twentieth century bourgeois life, Englander makes us both laugh and sigh at the ways that, whether religious or secular, our lives remain fundamentally self-satisfied.

Like Agnon in *A Simple Story*, Englander exploits every created opportunity for irony. The effectiveness of the irony will benefit both from a reader's familiarity with the

everyday life of a successful, nonreligious professional couple, and with the ways that Charles's transformation parodies the historical understanding of the mystical experience. Charles's conversion, for example, speaks to his modernity. "From a historical point of view, the mystical quest for the divine takes place almost exclusively within a prescribed tradition—the exceptions seem to be limited to modern times, with their dissolution of all traditional ties."[73] Thus it can be that Charles, with a Protestant pedigree, can emerge from a mystical moment having crossed over into a Jewish self. Charles's conversion is like "those striking instantaneous instances. . . in which, a complete division is established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new. . . . Conversion of this type is an important phase of religious experience, owing to the part which it has played in Protestant theology."[74] That a Protestant man discovers his Jewish identity through a conversion process that is characteristic of Protestant theology sets the stage for the overstated and ironic repercussions that follow. That a Protestant living in New York City experiences a conversion that leaves him a Jew further reflects back on the Jewish character of New York City. "In general . . . the mystic's experience tends to confirm the religious authority under which he lives. . . . For the conservative character is largely due to the framework in which the mystic lives and is educated."[75] Could it be that a Jewish influence is so pervasive that it transforms even a non-Jew from within? In each of these examples, Charles's mystical experience undoes some aspect of the historical record of like encounters.

Unlike *A Simple Story*, however, where the mundane is pervasive and the narrator's irony effectively keeps the reader off-balance and the status quo in power, *Gilgul* uses irony largely for its entertaining quality as the story explores the capacity of

the irrational to infuse and the unconventional to transform the status quo; a challenge also taken up by and utterly defeated in "Melanctha" where the inability to communicate across wholly different ways of knowing proves to be Jeff's and Melanctha's nemesis. But whereas Hirshl suffers an emotional breakdown which his *landsmen* interpret as a feigned lunacy designed to exempt him from the military draft, Charles experiences a spiritual transformation that some, notably his wife, interpret to be a breakdown, but which he feels certain is as authentic and as reasonable as any psychoanalytically-motivated personality development. Moreover, the pond in which Charles's transformation ripples is not the world of an entire village like that of Szybusz, but the world of Charles's twenty-seven year marriage. Charles and his wife, Sue, find themselves in a predicament where an unforeseen blessing or curse, depending on one's perspective, forces their world to move irrevocably in a new direction.

The drama in *Gilgul* presents a condensed and comically explosive version of the protracted standoff between reason and faith that torturously runs its course in "Melanctha." The similarity ends and begins in the self-confident stance Charles adopts toward his sudden and miraculous conversion. On the one hand, Charles's embrace of his new identity embodies the leap of faith that Jefferson cannot take.[76] Charles's self-confident engagement with the Jewish rules and rituals that henceforth would govern his newly traditional life delivers an offhanded critique of the rationalist and self-centered assumptions that heretofore ordered his existence and which are now represented through the naysaying figure of his wife. Consequently and on the other hand, Charles's conversion imposes a self-indulgent demand on a prior and longstanding commitment and gives rise to the conflict unprecedented in his relationship with Sue. Spiritual

knowledge thus confronts scientific, psychoanalytic knowledge in a funny but potentially tragic turn of events.

Quietly mediating between the spiritual and scientific spheres is the concept of sacred and profane time, respectively. The narration begins with an introduction to the Jewish day and why its onset at "the calm of evening" is particularly suited to coping with startling revelations, especially of the Jewish kind. "The Jewish day begins in the calm of evening, when it won't shock the system with its arrival" (109). Implicitly the idiosyncratic boundaries of the Jewish day invoke the common understanding of when the secular day begins and ends and plays against this norm to insert a degree of heterogeneity into the story's sense of time. This heterogeneity is a sign of the sacred.[77] Through this casual nod to a sacred rhythm, the narrator allots to the Jewish way a rightful place in the daily jostling of cosmologies as people of all stripes make their way across the city streets and subways. The theme of sacred time is again manifest in Charles's conversion. "All time of whatever kind 'opens' on to sacred time—in other words, is capable of revealing what we may for convenience call the *absolute*, the supernatural, the superhuman, the superhistoric."[78] The expectation that a Jewish day is shocking may itself be due to an historical list of shocks incurred by Jews over the ages or because any new day can bring shocking revelations such as the unlikely realization to a heretofore non-Jew that he is actually Jewish.

Charles interprets his experience as a reincarnation or *gilgul*, where the integrity of a Jewish soul remains intact over time and can be deposited and born again in non-Jewish bodies (109, 112). Within the tradition, the concept of *gilgul* is rejected by medieval Jewish philosophers but by the fourteenth century develops independently into

a major doctrine within the mystical tradition of Kabbalah. Whether intentionally or not, Charles's *gilgul* invokes the teaching of a lesser known pseudepigraphic Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer Peli'ah*, in which it is stated that converts are "Jewish souls which had passed into the bodies of gentiles, and returned to their former state."[79] In Charles's experience, his reincarnated Jewish soul endows him with an irrefutable knowledge that authorizes his conversion. "Charles Luger knew, as he knew anything at all, that there was a *Yiddishe neshama* functioning inside" (109). Charles is talking about the way he knows truth. His knowledge re-aligns his spiritual compass: "big things, are finally right" (117). This insight reflects documented mystical experiences. "[T]he sense of renovation, safety, cleanness, rightness, can be so marvelous and jubilant as well to warrant one's belief in a radically new substantial nature."[80] It also speaks to the authority of the mystical experience. "Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime."[81]

In contrast to the true depth of the mystical experience, Charles's changed consciousness is paired with superficial images to create an effect that is slightly wondrous, slightly mocking. For starters, his spiritual rebirth takes place in a quintessentially New York locale, the taxicab. "So he [Charles] leaned forward in his seat, raised his fist, and knocked on the Plexiglas divider . . . . 'Oddly, it seems that I'm Jewish. Jewish in your cab'" (109). Not even revelation is spared the demands of rush hour traffic. The driver's response, "No problem here. Meter ticks the same for all

creeds," empties Charles's intensely personal experience into the wider sea of diversity that in New York is a commonplace. The transformative experience is itself described lightheartedly. "*Ping!* Like that it came. Like a knife against a glass" (109). "Like a knife against a glass" sounds like the whimsy of a dinner host, sleeves rolled up and wine glass raised, partly reclining before her guests in a kitchen cleaned just for this occasion or of a person in stuffed shirt about to deliver a prepared toast in a banquet hall. In neither case, whether cozy or catered, does the sound of "ping" seem cosmic. "And then it was back. *Ping!* Once again, understanding" (112). The sacred pierces the mundane to effect a total transformation, but here revelation hits like a fragile ricochet. The *hekesh*, the juxtaposition, of cosmic truth with mundane reality makes light of the profundity of the moment and is at once able to affirm the possibility and appreciate the absurdity of this mystical event.

Despite his certainty and because of the absurdity, Charles looks out the window for "a landsman who might look his way, wink, confirm what he already knew" (110). Charles's need for objective confirmation of his new identity, for recognition by another to authenticate his own personal truth speaks generally to the way most people receive validation. It also points specifically to the way Jewish identity, as depicted at Mt. Sinai, is consummated in community.[82] We are reminded of Hirshl's struggle with and against convention, and we can reflect sympathetically on Hirshl's return to society. For Charles, the profoundly personal experience eventually confronts the public dimension of identity. Charles has some sense of the oddness of his situation. "The whole thing's ludicrous. I was one thing and now I'm another" (119). Even Charles must trouble himself to trust the experience.

Seeking counsel as well as community, Charles thinks to call his psychologist, and on second thought to consult a rabbi. "Who better to guide him in such matters?" (111). The authority that psychology has played in Charles's life begins to recede as the authority of religion makes increasingly more sense to him. "Of course, rabbis. Who else gives advice to a Jew?" (118). Whereas most epiphanies describe a knowledge of God, exclusively, Charles experiences a knowledge of himself as a Jew (119).[83] Thus when he locates in the phonebook the Mystical Jewish Reclamation Center: a clearinghouse for the Judeo-supernatural, he knows instinctively that this is the place to turn to. On the one hand, then, his Jewish soul is deeply personal and individual. On the other hand, his Jewishness is not totally his own; it's the claim of a people on his soul. Just as Hirshl surrenders his own will to that of his family and community, Charles understands his fate to be subordinate to the existential demands of a people. Of course, for Hirshl this realization amounts to a Pyrrhic victory reflecting the ambivalence of a community in the early stages of modernization, while for Charles, it represents a step towards freedom, a striving for meaning, at a time in history when meaning is often viewed as just another commodity. And lest we confuse Charles with an original mystic, it is precisely his instinct that situates Charles in the late twentieth century. Referring to the chariot mystics of second century Palestine, Lawrence Hoffman in *The Act of Public Prayer* asks rhetorically, "But do you think *they* knew that they were mystics? Did they belong to a National Association of Mystical Worshipers, pay dues to a mystics' guild, or go to mystics' conventions? Just to ask these silly questions is to answer them."[84] Surely there was no Mystical Jewish Reclamation Center to appeal to back then.

Though Charles sets out to embrace lock, stock and barrel the orthodox tradition as it has developed over the ages, never far from the surface is the notably unorthodox nature of both Charles's conversion and that of his mentor, Rabbi Zalman Meintz who hails from Bolinas, CA, an origin that is intended to invoke a generation of radicals and dropouts who have in one way or another come back into the fold. The sandal-clad rabbi from Bolinas combines American counterculture with American kitsch, bringing both lenses to the reader's understanding of Charles's spiritual awakening. Here Englander plays to the prejudices within a bourgeois establishment, represented by Sue and the psychologist, that look askance at a tie dyed lineage, and fuel their claims of Charles's inauthenticity. The rabbi, however, is immediately sympathetic to Charles, for he came to Judaism in the same way. He went so far as to eschew formal conversion claiming that "such rituals are not needed for those who are called by their souls" (116). The rabbi grounds his authority in his predisposition "to letting take form that which is truly inside" (ibid).

This notion that Truth, with a capital "T" has its own genetic map provokes the longstanding debate between those who would believe truth is essential and those who counter that truth is socially constructed. In this case, Truth is essentially miraculous. "A Jew sits in front of me and tells me he's Jewish. This is no surprise. To see a man, so Jewish, a person who could be my brother, who *is* my brother, tell me he has only now discovered he's Jewish—that, my friend, that is truly miraculous" (114). But the text walks a fine line between the miraculous and the ridiculous. "I see cases of this all the time," the rabbi reassures Charles like a doctor delivers a diagnosis. Henceforward the rabbi as consultant replaces the doctor, and Jewish texts replace Charles's personal story

as the subject for study. We conclude that it must take a miracle if a book on ritual purity—the laws governing sexual relations among other things—can compel Charles more than a therapy session about what we might imagine to be the very same. In any case, Charles's vulnerability is endearingly callow and the rabbi's genuine enthusiasm mitigates his huckster edge. The narrative's tendency to slightly impugn the rabbi's motives functions to keep the entire God business squarely in the realm of the human. We might wonder at the rabbi's credentials, but that only aligns us with the status quo. What Charles makes clear is that his transformation has radically changed his self-understanding and his worldview. "[T]he existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe."[85] Charles feels different in the world and the world looks different to him.

The impending confrontation between Charles's self-knowledge and Sue's disbelief drives the story to its climax. Upon entering his home, Charles and his wife kiss "more passionately than friendly, which was neither an everyday occurrence nor altogether rare" (110). This seeking the middle ground replicates Agnon's narration of the middle position. It sends a message of a balanced perspective without necessarily describing a balanced state given the news that Charles is about to spring. Charles asserts that Sue won't believe what happened to him. "He never told her anything she wouldn't believe"(110) owing to his predictable and relatively uninteresting life as a financial analyst. Sue thus lacks a context for believing in Charles's radical change.

The challenge Charles faces is consistent with that of mystics who attempt to incorporate their changed consciousness into their established lives. The ineffability of

the experience precludes language as a viable means to build trust, and the transformation itself threatens to overturn the routines of those whose lives are influenced by the one who had the sacred encounter. Charles recognizes that he needs to provide a context for Sue to understand him. "He knew there were dietary laws. . . but he. . . didn't dare ask Sue and chance a confrontation, not until he formulated a plan" (111). At the same time his newfound identity proceeds apace. "When they sat down to dinner Charles stared at his plate. Half an hour Jewish and already he felt obliged" (ibid). This same zealousness inspires Charles to steal a mezuzah from a neighbor who according to Charles doesn't "use it" (127). "[They] had me in to see their Christmas tree last year. Their daughter is dating a black man" (ibid). Charles's utilitarian interpretation of the ritual object is a naive blunder and his ethics are mildly deplorable. "Are you insane?" cries Sue (127). We too question how seriously we should take Charles.

Sue's root canal, which she has done after work on the day that Charles discovers his true roots, serves as a comic foil to Charles's sober conversion and provides a humble and wounded context in which to realize the unsettling implications of Charles's new self (116). Just as Sue's nerves are uprooted, so too is Charles's identity. The analogy is there to be made and in the making adds to the ambient absurdity. Charles does not suffer, however, while Sue suffers twice: first, from the pain of her dental work, and second, from the consequences of her husband's crisis. Her roots are literally and figuratively pulled out from under her. Charles chooses not to tease Sue about her drooping lip, still immobile from the anesthesia. Why? To show perhaps that he takes her roots seriously so that she should take his? Or, as the narrator proposes, for the irony of

the symmetry of surrealities? Sue's "surreal expression to receive in return for [Charles's] surreal news" (117).

Judaism seen as an ethnic, cultural, religious identity is usually viewed as something you grow up with, or test out gradually if thinking of converting, but not suddenly awakened to as is the Protestant conversion. Commenting perhaps on the rise of popular interest in the occult, including the Jewish mystical tradition, Englander tosses the mystics' conception of essences into the postmodern urban milieu of indeterminate selves. Englander has Charles not only discover God but also an orthodox essence of Jewishness, which is itself questionable given the unorthodoxy surrounding both the conversion and the rabbinical guru. One result is that sudden revelations of completely changed identity, such as that which Charles proposes, become grounds for charges of insanity.

Sue, sarcastic and incredulous, reinterprets Charles's disclosure, "What you're really trying to tell me is: Honey, I'm having a nervous breakdown. . . . If it's not a nervous breakdown, I want to know if you feel like you're clinically insane" (118). A few sentences later, Sue repeats the charge, "[W]hat you're telling me is, inherently, crazy" (118). Later, she compares Charles' behavior in the elevator on Shabbat where he refuses to push the buttons to that of a retarded child. "Do you know that on Friday night he rode the elevator up and down like an idiot waiting for someone to press our floor? Like a retarded child" (130-1). Beside herself with indignation Sue persists, "Is that insane, Doctor, or is it not" (131)? She concludes, "One need not be polite to the insane" (131). Spiritual awakenings and the mystical experience of rebirth are not to be trusted. This distrust too has historical precedent. "Religious mysticism is only one half of

mysticism. The other half is the mysticism associated with feebled or deluded states of mind."[86] The stage is set for the final battle between the rational and the irrational.

The forestalled confrontation actually takes place at the Shabbat dinner that Sue arranges for Charles, herself, and Dr. Birnbaum. In his own defense, Charles invites the rabbi. "A voice of reason will come in handy after the weekend" (124-5). Already the definition of reason is being redrawn. Yet it cannot be overlooked that Sue is instrumental in preparing Charles's first Shabbat dinner, and her efforts are at heart conciliatory. She could have absented herself from the situation and allowed Charles to fend for himself. She also could have arranged this meeting on a night other than Shabbat. Grumpy and begrudging, Sue nonetheless troubles herself to prepare a dinner befitting a halakhic Jew. Over their paper plates and kosher carry-out, the characters parry, exposing the dueling discourses of science and faith. The rabbi jabs at the Doctor's fees and Charles joins in to bully. "[Psychologists] don't control. They absolve. Like atheist priests. No responsibility for your actions, no one to answer to. Anarchists with advanced degrees" (132). Sue's strategy is to respond in kind. "You [Charles] have an epiphany and want everyone else to have the same one. Well, if we did, even if it was the best, greatest, holiest thing in the world. If every person had the same one, the most you would be left with is a bright idea" (134-5).

Notwithstanding the benefits the conversion promises for Charles, his newly assumed communal demands intrude upon his preexisting understanding with his wife. Her anger and resistance in large part express her resentment at having been left out of account. Charles reasons, "You're still my wife. This should make you happy for me. I've found God." Sue retorts, "Exactly the problem. You didn't find our God. I'd have

been good about it if you found our God—or even a less demanding one" (121). Finding God the way Charles does is akin to having a child without your partner's knowledge or consent. The fact that Charles consults a rabbi without Sue's prior knowledge resonates with the scene in *A Simple Story* between Tsirl and Meir regarding the role of the matchmaker in advancing Hirshl's and Mina's relationship. Tsirl disingenuously solicits her husband's consent having in effect already drafted Toyber into her services. Accustomed to his subordinate role and unaffected by such antics, Meir humors Tsirl's pretensions. But for Sue, Charle's new alliance smacks of betrayal. That Charles is absorbed in a book on ritual purity—the laws governing bodily emissions and menstruation in addition to sexual relations—seems yet another affront to Sue and their life together. Charles's early interest in these laws in particular points most directly to how his spiritual affirmations will demand a corresponding accommodation on Sue's part as well.

The story ends suspended between the threat of divorce and the hope for acceptance. "Charles was desperate with willingness. He struggled to stand without judgment, to be only for Sue, to be wholly seen, wanting her to love him changed" (137). Sue somehow must make Charles feel the loss he risks as a result of his new spiritual embrace. She wavers between revenge and reconciliation. But despite her arch resistance, one can't help thinking that she harbors at least a seed of awe for such a momentous transformation. We sense perhaps that her initial outrage stems more from private hurt than from philosophical conviction. The confrontation between faith and reason fizzles in that last para-mystical moment when Charles stands vulnerable and in supplication before Sue, hoping to have it all. The hostile distrust between mystical and

rational knowledge attenuates before twenty-seven years of a reasonably happy marriage, and the potential for coexistence seems possible if not likely.

Gilgul ends inconclusively but points to the inevitability of new daily rhythms, both sacred and profane, to hold the answer. By the very meaning of *gilgul*—revolving—the story promises to begin again. The future will hold other like revelations, irruptions of the eternal present. Stein dedicated herself to capturing the eternal present through the deconstruction of syntax and the use of repetition in what she called the continuous present. More intuitive and less technical in his approach, Englander too, in *Gilgul*, evokes an eternal present promised by the reincarnation of an eternal Jewish soul. Charles's acceptance of a religiously observant way of life, one steeped in centuries-old traditions, speaks to the deep-seated religious desire for immortality. "[I]t would seem that the ancient myths and rites connected with sacred time and space may be traceable back to so many nostalgic memories of an 'earthly paradise', and some sort of 'realizable' eternity to which man still thinks he may have access."[87] As Charles stands pleading for Sue's acceptance, we see a more than middle age man in crisis, the manifestation of which is the epiphany, reincarnating the age-old human longing for immortality and a return to paradise.

CONCLUSION

Sociologists link trust to order and morality. Common sense as well as experience would tell us that the practice of trusting others as well as institutions allows for the stable functioning of social systems. As each of these texts would confirm, trust is the essential ground for constructive behavior. Though intangible, trust is not indeterminate. When trust is irrevocably betrayed, relationships and institutions crumble. But highlighting the positive does not necessarily account for the acts of trust that persist in an era of social disintegration and skepticism or in personal relationships that are manifestly unstable. Nor does it account for misplaced trust that leads to much suffering. In planning for this project, I tended to assume that one naturally seeks an ethical order as a basis for trust. I have since concluded that while an ethical order is produced by and in turn facilitates the reproduction of trust, an amoral or even immoral system also generates acts of trusting. Throughout this thesis process, I have silently debated whether trusting was an ethics or a hermeneutics. Positing trust as an interpretive practice that imperfectly persists even in the absence of ethical behaviors responds to this dilemma by forcing the phenomenon of trust into the less overtly ethical category of hermeneutics. Trust is thus viewed less as a virtue or moral category and more, like gravity, as a fact of existence. This said a hermeneutics of trust strives to be ethical.

If a hermeneutics of suspicion conceives all interpretation as misleading and misreading,[88] a hermeneutics of trust orients interpretation towards the risk of an ethical encounter—be it with and within one's text or with one's neighbor. Whereas a hermeneutics of suspicion exiles the classical understanding of objectivity and proscribes interpretive conviction, a hermeneutics of trust operates with an implicit consciousness of

human mortality to risk engagement with meaning. I am asserting, therefore, that any quest for meaning must entail an a priori foundation and a hermeneutical horizon of trust.

From the three texts of this study, I learn that integrating a philosophical worldview with a theological one, trusting across epistemologies, requires an acceptance of the limitations of each. If one is to resist the temptation to compartmentalize conflicting priorities then one must go further with a personal commitment to inhabit boundaries, to constantly articulate their tensions, and to live with and live out the many contradictions that reside there. This is what it means to grow spiritually. Melanctha and Jefferson fail to consummate their trust in part because they pursue wisdom through sexual rather than spiritual knowledge. Trusting is the voluntary leap out of knowledge toward the future. It is ultimately motivated by the will to grow when there is nowhere else to grow but beyond. This will to grow beyond defines transcendence. Charles and Sue will be able to salvage their marriage if they can negotiate this leap. Trusting moreover is an existential action. Hirshl's trusting proves the antidote to existential despair.

I believe that the practice of trust is a discipline that can be learned. Becoming aware of the ordinary ways we trust on a daily basis trains and strengthens and familiarizes us with the experience of risk and wonder. I experience that everyday trust, a dialectic with the risks and wonders of small threats, prepares us for heightened trust, a dialectic with the greater risks and wonders of big threats. We become both more trusting and more grateful when we express the wonders and take the risks of ordinary life.

I set out in this work to have discovered some of the operations informing a successful or unsuccessful practice of trust. This practice is virtually indistinguishable from the interpretive approach I am also articulating. Though I feel I have glimpsed the back but not the face of it, I hope to emphasize that trusting is a choice: a choice of constructive interpretations and a choice to build bridges. My ultimate hope is that this project will in some way contribute to the overcoming of the suspicion and hostility that continues to plague our communities.

ENDNOTES

[1] Hoffman, Lawrence. *The Art of Public Prayer*, 125.

[2] Yezierska, Anzia. *Bread Givers*, 125.

[3] Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future*, 74.

[4] My understanding of Gadamer is based on Rod Coltman's study, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue*, 1998.

[5] Genesis: 32:26

[6] Adler, Rachel. *Engendering Judaism*, 160.

[7] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. II, 6.

[8] "Stein was preoccupied with questions of self-reference: How does one describe something accurately when one's own vantage point influences what one sees? And how does one describe something accurately when one's own language defines the parameters of what one is writing or speaking about?" (Shimek, Suzanne Elizabeth. *In Uncertain Terms: Poetry, Physics, and Representation in the Quantum Era.* UCLA Dissertation, 2001, 103). "Stein tries to enact, through a number of experimental techniques, the process of self-reference" (Shimek, 116). See also Adrianne Kalfopoulou, pp 94-5 and Mark Erwin, "Moral Attention and Narrative Attenuation in the Works of Gertrude Stein" in *The Ethics of Difficulty: Modernist Poetics and Moral Philosophy.*

[9] *History of Sexuality*, vol. II, 5.

[10] Gertrude Stein, "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," in *Writings and Lectures*, ed. Meyerowitz, 84. For the critical debate, see Cohen, Stimpson, Knight, and Blackmer. For Stein on characterology, see Maria Damon.

[11] Cited from A.S. Meroe's unpublished working paper in sociology on "The Elusive and the Erotic," 1.

[12] *History of Sexuality*, vol. I, 18.

[13] *Dialectic of Modernism*, 71.

[14] Catherine Stimpson discusses the literary and real life precursors to "Melanctha" including her use of racial stereotypes, 501. Corinne E. Blackmer discusses how the process of Othering allows Jews to become types of blacks, p. 239. "Literary artists from these groups who seek cultural legitimacy must stress their sameness with a highly suspicious dominant discourse, while they simultaneously endeavor to express their rapport with an often equally suspicious minority discourse," 240-1.

[15] Stimpson discusses Stein's privileges, challenges and anti-racist outlook, pp 493-501.

[16] Doane, 70. By contrast, Stein herself argued that it is through repetition that a person's essence becomes apparent. See "Portraits and Repetition" in Lectures in America, cited in the introduction, xii. Stein also distinguishes between necessary repetition, which she calls insistence, and unnecessary repetition, which is a result of not listening ("Portraits and Repetitions", 166 ff).

[17] Ibid.

[18] Blackmer, 243.

[19] Ibid, 242.

[20] Ibid, 233.

[21] On the function of the mask, see also North and Gates.

[22] Blackmer, 244.

[23] Ibid, 249.

[24] Ibid, 250.

[25] *Lectures in America,* 237, cited in Shimek, 116.

[26] In "Illness as Metaphor," Susan Sontag explains the way that consumption, i.e. tuberculosis, is turned into a metaphor for the capricious and incurable, the insidious and implacable (5). Specifically, "Any disease that is treated as a mystery and acutely enough feared will be felt to be morally, if not literally contagious" (6).

[27] "The real demonstration of the story is the dialogue between Melanctha and Jeff: the traditional incoherence between the inner and the outer life is replaced by an incoherence between two subjectivities conceived as a difference of tempo: slow Jefferson against quick Melanctha," Sutherland, 44.

[28] "Portraits and Repetition" cited in the Introduction to *Lectures in America*, xxv. Also, "And each of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing" (Ibid, 177).

[29] Robert B. Jones, Jr. *Symbolist Aesthetics in Modern American Fiction: Studies in Gertrude Stein and Jean Toomer*; doctoral dissertation (U Wisconsin: Madison) 1981, 4.

[30] Ricoeur, 43. See also Robert B. Jones above for fuller discussion of transcendental idealism and empiricism. Another way to conceive this allegory of ideas is to imagine a philosophy of reflection seeking relationship with a phenomenology of experience.

[31] According to Michael North, "'Melanctha' constitutes one of the three accepted landmarks of literary modernism" (*Dialect of Modernism*, preface). That is, "Melanctha"

not only constitutes a break with its literary antecedents but also heralds the postmodern literary currents that were to follow. The competition between objective and subjective truth characterized here illustrates the dynamics of the debate. See also the discussion of Stein's use of the continuous present.

[32] Jefferson's prescription for good and regular living for all colored people taps into the discourse of racial uplift of that day. To some extent then, Melanctha's repeated criticisms challenge a powerful movement within Black communities towards assimilation into the larger White culture. This process demanded that Black communities establish their inherent worth, their "goodness," in the eyes of White society once and for all. On another level, however, Melanctha's criticism may also mask her memory of and appreciation for her lesbian experiences, a way of being or of behaving that neither White nor Black society condoned.

[33] Stein completed the text of *Three Lives* between 1905-6; see Stimpson.

[34] Coltman, 13.

[35] Steiner, 25.

[36] Ricoeur, 20. Steiner interprets this shift slightly differently. "It is not 'understanding' that Heidegger's discourse solicits primarily. It is an 'experiencing,' an acceptance of felt strangeness" (George Steiner, 11).

[37] According to Stimpson, the resemblance between Stein's earlier novel *Q.E.D.* and "Melanctha" is well known. "In *Q.E.D.* the affair between Adele and Helen symbolizes a conflict between the person who believes in control, reason, and middle-class virtues and the person who believes in action, passion, and experience. . . . The affair ends because the lovers' physical and emotional appeals to each other are not synchronized. As one advances, the other resists or retreats. 'Melanctha' rewrites the affair between Helen and Adele in a racial context. Helen becomes Melanctha Herbert; Adele, Dr. Jefferson Campbell" (500). Blackmer relates "Melanctha" to Stein's own experience with unrequited love. "According to Stein, the failure of her relationship with [May] Bookstaver stemmed from an internal mechanism that governed their acts and responses and made their timing and rhythms mismatched, incompatible" (238).

[38] Coltman, 16.

[39] Macann, 11.

[40] "The Gradual Making of the Making of Americans," *Lectures in America* (Random House: NY) 1935, 144.

[41] Blackmer refers to Stein's style of repetition as distinctively "cubist," 232.

[42] "Conventional narrative produces a . . . temporal disjunction, with the reader drugged into a soothing state of memory. What one wants in art is not memories, associations, or

resemblances but perfect mergings of action and response, stimulus and affect. Stein calls this state talking and listening" (Steiner, Wendy. "Introduction" to *Lectures in America* by Gertrude Stein, xix).

[43] Macann, 11.

[44] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, Vol. II, 88-9.

[45] Stein, "Portraits and Repetition," 174 ff.

[46] Coltman, 69.

[47] Ibid, 72.

[48] Ibid, 79.

[49] Ibid, 81.

[50] Ibid, 84.

[51] Ibid, 84.

[52] Ibid, 84. Also footnote 50, p. 144.

[53] Ibid, 87.

[54] Ibid, 87.

[55] I.B. Singer's short story "Gimpel the Fool" in *The Collected Stories* (Noonday Press, 1982) makes this point by suggesting that one who trusts blindly indeed acts foolishly and against his own survival.

[56] Coltman, xii.

[57] Macann, x.

[58] Pirkei Avot 6:6. *Mishnayot: Order Nezikin* ed. Philip Blackman (Judaica Press: Gateshead) 1990, vol. iv, 544.

[59] According to William Cutter, Hillel Halkin's English translation emphasizes the narrative mode, at the slight expense of other literary tropes such as "the metaphoric, allusive, and analogical elements." One consequence is the partial eclipse of the narrator as parable maker. See Cutter's article, "Rendering Galicia for America," in *Prooftexts* 7 (1987), pp. 74, 78.

[60] Ben-Dov, 215.

[61] Suggested by my thesis advisor, Dr. Adriane Leveen.

[62] Ibid.

[63] This is an adaptation of a Talmudic dicta: *bat ploni l' ploni: the daughter of A is for B.* "Forty days before the creation of a child, a *Bath Kol* issues forth and proclaims, the daughter of A is for B" (*Soncino Talmud,* Tractate Sotah, 2b).

[64] Genesis 25:23.

[65] Genesis 1:27 and 2:23.

[66] For a fuller treatment of the bird imagery in the story, see Cutter's "Rendering Galicia for America," pp. 73-7.

[67] Cited from my thesis advisor, Dr. William Cutter.

[68] The competing accounts of Hirshl's whereabouts that here resonate humorously suggest the more serious postmodern engagement with proliferating subjectivities. A more recent work that embraces both the humor and the philosophical commitment occasioned by conflicting versions of truth is Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold, (Cronica de una muerte anunciada),* published in Spanish in 1981 and in English in 1982.

[69] Levenson, Jon D. "Abusing Abraham: Traditions, Religious Histories, and Modern Misinterpretations," *Judaism* 47 (Summer 1998), p. 268, cited in Dershowitz, 113.

[70] Dershowitz, 113.

[71] Stein, Gertrude. "Melanctha," in *Three Lives* (Dover Publications, Inc.: NY) 1994, 141.

[72] Heschel, 194.

[73] Scholem, 5.

[74] James, 192.

[75] Scholem, 9.

[76] A comment of my thesis advisor, Dr. Adriane Leveen.

[77] Eliade, 388-9.

[78] Ibid, 389.

[79] Encyclopedia Judaica-CD-ROM Edition (Judaica Multimedia Ltd: Israel) under the heading "*gilgul*".

[80] James, 200.

[81] Ibid, 319.

[82] Exodus 20:15

[83] Hoffman, 126 ff.

[84] Ibid, 128.

[85] James, 356.

[86] Ibid, 355.

[87] Eliade, 408.

[88] Bloom 1973; 1975; Handelman 1982, Coltman 1998.

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