

“What new happens to me:” Leone Modena, Herman Broder, and the  
Construction of Modern Jewish Identity

A talk for the conference/reunion, “Venice, the Jews, and Italian Culture,” June 17 – 19,  
Ca’ Foscari, University of Venice

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Monday, June 11, 2007

In *Hayyei Yehuda*, the first modern Hebrew autobiography, Leone Modena (1571-1648) reveals the fault lines of his identity. In it he describes a wide range of familial experiences, as first his parental family and then his own travels throughout northern Italy in search of economic opportunity and communal stability. His description situates these experiences in the religious and social currents of Renaissance and (Counter-)Reformation Italian and Jewish culture.

His Jewish world sees no contradiction between the rationality of the Halakha and folk customs that border on magic: he will inscribe amulets and epitaphs, decide difficult legal cases and engage in the divination of dreams. When the Kabbalah, in which it has been claimed he was an adept, leads to the messianic mysticism of Sabbatai Sevi and his predecessors and followers which generate mass movements for return to the land of Israel, he will write rebuttals and, most probably, apologias.

Modena’s detailed narrative reveals and hides his accomplishments. Communal experience and personal life entwine in a dialectic, as if his life were played like an unwell tempered fugue. Thus as he recounts his effort to make a living as a religious scholar, who becomes of necessity and through his diverse talents and genius a jack of all religious trades, his narrative implies his continuing discontent with Jewish communal life. While he tells of his ambition and struggle to achieve rabbinic ordination in his wanderings from Ferrara to Ancona to Modena as an itinerant teacher, we also discover how much he feels at home only in Venice.

In the course of his narrative, Modena divulges his addiction to gambling. He dwells on the details of everyday life in the patchwork architecture of the Ghetto. He

describes the personal intricacies and familial intrigues of marital arrangements: and in a particularly revealing episode his narrative elicits as Marcus Moseley has noted his anger and even rage at the traditional interventions defining marriage.

This episode is part of Modena's self-description as a traditional Jew and an enlightened Jew, echoing the ways in which he is open to the cultural discoveries of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe simultaneous with his writing of amulets, casting of horoscopes, and dream-interpretation. We learn of the breadth of his interests and the range of his achievements: he introduces Italian habits into the synagogue by commissioning choral music from Salamone Rossi; he publishes the first book describing Jewish ritual practices addressed both to a Jewish and non-Jewish reading public. Yet from the beginning of his narrative he claims to be a failure, without merit. There is only a Job-like doggedness: he suffers as one son dies of inadvertent poisoning from alchemical experiments, he witnesses the murder of another son, and a third is disgraced and exiled from his native city. Venice has given Modena great opportunities and simultaneously accentuated his powerlessness. Modena's account expresses the contradictions in the self-identification of a representative and celebrated Venetian Jew.

### **Venice as Exile and Diaspora**

Modena's narrative is informed by the unspoken assumptions of Venetian life: it is an important document in the recovery of the latent meanings of Jewish life in Venice in the seventeenth century. He sounds the obligatto of tradition when he concludes his opening entry by comparing himself to Job — "Should my children or children's children or students or others who know me look at . . . [this narrative] they will see the woes that befell me. From the moment I entered the world I had neither tranquility nor quiet nor rest, and then disquietude came upon me, namely disquietude over my son Mordecai of blessed memory. I await death, which does not come" (p. 76) His phrasing recalls him and his readers to the understanding that the Jews of Venice live in exile. In fact, Venice, with its ghetto, the required marker of Jewishness in the form of a badge or hat, along with many other restrictions, functions then and later as an emblem of the meanings of exile. That is part of the attraction of Venice to three generations of Israeli poets who have come to visit the city and write about it in contradistinction to their own rootedness in Zion.

Yet *La Serenissima* is also a city of refuge for the Jews summarily expelled in the middle ages from England and France, and then beginning in the 1490s from the Iberian Peninsula in what became a visible and acknowledged national trauma that echoed the destruction of the Jewish Commonwealth by Rome in the second century c.e. It is also the city in which they articulate themselves as the first modern Jewish community, as David Ruderman has so thoughtfully argued.

For Modena as for his compatriots, Venice straddles the terrors of exile and the difficult possibilities of a diasporic home. For to cope with the physical and psychological experience of enclosure, the Jews of Venice devised strategies for cultural resistance and accommodation. They lived under the restrictions of curfew; in Venice they had to pay their jailors for locking them up at night; and they were required to be moneylenders, living off the proceeds of grinding transactions with the lower classes.

Yet their resistance to the conditions of exile, their resilience is seen, for example, in the creation of five extraordinary synagogue buildings in the Venice ghetto corresponding historically to the great flourishing of church construction throughout Venice and northern Italy. These magnificent edifices attest to the tenacity of Venetian Jewry, and their insistence on making in the words of Richard Sennett an “accursed place into a sacred” space. Modena’s writing like the poetry of Sara Coppio Sullam (1592-1614) is a witness to this tension between exile and diaspora—to the fault-lines of identity-creation in a world that at one and the same time offers the opportunities and attractions of individualism and renaissance, while defining powerlessness through the imposition of physical barriers and social restriction.

Modena’s narrative shuttles between individualism and powerlessness: he begins with the statement that “for more than twenty-four years I have desired in the depths of my soul to set down in writing all the incidents that happened to me from my beginnings until the end of my life, so that I shall not die, but live. I thought that it would be of value to my sons, the fruit of my loins, and to their descendants, and to my students, who are called sons, just as it is a great pleasure to me to be able to know the lives of my ancestors, forebears, teachers, and all other important and beloved people” (p. 75). Note the pleasure Modena takes in knowing “the lives” not only of his “ancestors, forebears, teachers,” but also “all other important and beloved people.”

These are the comments of a wide-ranging intellectual and a man rooted in his community.

Yet he could not begin the task of writing until the death of his son, “the apple of my eye, the root of my heart, whose bright countenance was similar to mine, a man of wisdom, Mordecai of blessed memory, who was known as Angelo. All my thoughts were of him. I was proud of him, and he was the source of all my joy. But for those twenty-four years up to the present I did not succeed in writing this down as a memoir in a book.” (p. 75) It is only now that “God has taken away my joy, — it being two months since God took him away, leaving me desolate and faint all day long — my soul has refused to be comforted, for I will go to my grave mourning for my son, waiting for death as for a solemnly appointed time.” (pp. 75 -6) The release of his despair comes with his writing. “Subsequently, from year to year, at six-month intervals, I shall add to this account what new happens to me. After that will come my will concerning my body, soul, and literary remains — and God will do what is proper in his eyes.” (76) In the phrase “what new happens to me” Modena sounds the note that informs modern writing, and functions as the engine both of autobiography and the novel: it is the moment of the modern, in which life is no longer imagined as repetition and sameness but as difference and uniqueness. Yet the phrase “what new happens to me” while it emphasizes novelty yet implies the passivity of the receiver. We are not yet at the Faustian moment of making the new. Modena’s is both the world of exile and perhaps if just barely the possibility of diaspora and modern Jewish agency.

### **Ghetto Jews and the Secret Life of Writing**

It is worth noting that the ghetto had been devised and defined for the Jews, in Venice, in 1516. Rome made its Jewish ghetto in 1555, Florence in 1577. The process of ghettoization continued until 1779—on the eve of the French Revolution. The name, with its origin, though debated, rooted in the Italian *getto*, “casting,” or *geto*, “foundry”— comes from the Venetian location that was designated as their place of residence. We know that by the beginning of the sixteenth century this island of the *geto* — the only campo in Venice without a Church — was no longer in use for the casting of cannons but had become a neighborhood of haphazard, jerry-built buildings that housed the Venetian poor and miserable.

Very soon after the Jews were collected and forced to make the ghetto their domicile, at rents a third higher than the market value preceding their sequestration, the word entered Italian and then European as well as other languages as a generic term, as Benjamin Ravid has demonstrated. It is one of three Venetian words that has entered the languages and consciousness of world literature, film, and experience, the other two being *Ciao* and *Casino*. And to this day the word ghetto has currency for such enclosures for the poor and miserable of a wide range of ethnicities.

I propose that we explore Modena's narrative of his life in order to examine the terms and meanings through which he articulates his complex and contradictory identity. It may also be useful to compare that process to the ways in which an equally complicated figure – Herman Broder in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Enemies, A Love Story*, for example —expresses his identity more than three centuries later. Despite the differences in genre between novel and autobiography, it may be that this comparison of then and now, of fiction and autobiography will shed light on the psychosociology of Jewish persona and character caught between the homelessness of exile and the possibility of diasporic home.

As Singer's novel chronicles the secret life of Herman Broder it also recounts the "social history" of the memory of a tormented community of Jews: they were the heirs to the rights of citizenship offered by modern European experience beginning with the French Revolution, yet were murdered by the Nazis out of the fantasy that they could thereby crush modernity. From the beginning when Herman Broder awakens in Brooklyn to the thought that he is still in the barn hidden from the Nazis, Singer's novel reclaims the torment of that generation and that era. This fiction invents the record of the life-histories of these people, as if they were autobiographies, yet situates them in their communal contexts. The impulses generating both forms are the same; both fiction and autobiography we have come to recognize construct identities through writing.

It is not an accident then, and certainly one of the important similarities characterizing the careers of Herman Broder and Leone Modena, that both are writers. Both use their writing to fulfill communal functions. Modena writes major works of continuing interest today; Herman ghost-writes the sermons, speeches, and books of an American rabbi, which gain the rabbi fame and fortune. While Modena's account details

his personal experience, Singer's writing informs us of Herman's character and life-experience. Both texts map the "fine-meshed" psychological and "psychoanalytical network of concepts like neurosis, repression, resistance, transference" onto the representation of character and persona. Both play psychic success narratives — of moving through experience as a crescendo from "the unknown to the known, from the unconscious to the conscious, from pleasure to reality, from chaos to order, from conflict to dissolution, from undominated nature to civilized culture, rationality, and enlightenment." (Jens Brockmeier, p. 11) And at the same time both experience the despair of exile, and the fragmentation of failure, as both Modena and Broder discover they cannot construct a sustained narrative of overarching meaning.

For the narratives of both change as their lives change, as both fluctuate between the sociopsychology of exile and diaspora. Both waver between despair and exhilaration, shuttling between homelessness and home: that is, they alternately gain the possibility of understanding — the condition of being at home, as Isaiah Berlin has noted, and of being understood — and the impossibility of comprehension or of being understood as they live the experience of wanderers.

Both narratives play the trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* with its modernist expectation against the repeated failures of personal hope of improvement inscribed in traditional communal trajectories. Both narratives frustrate our *Bildungsroman* expectations, and make us place it in play against other narrative expectations.

Their accounts shock us into acknowledging that narrative structures describing life-experience are not monochromatic or, better, algorithms or equations yielding singular correct answers. The moment of reflection informs us that autobiographical and fictional structures are always embedded in thick, complex, multivalent experiential palimpsests. The *Bildungsroman* subject is "the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied, mostly deluding experiences, through trials and tribulations (and often through a spiritual crisis) into a recognition of the own true self." (Brockmeier,, p. 14) But this developmental project of a dominant literary genre, the bourgeois genre par excellence, is countered in these writers by the bitter narrative of despair and exile enshrined in the words of the Psalmist, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations.

It is the incoherences of the narrative of Modena and Singer/Broder that lead the reader to recalibrate and reconceptualize the stories of individualism into the accounts of communal life-histories, life-failures. Both these works function as bricolage, a narrative fusion that deals with heterogeneity and multiple codes. Instead of the forward-looking time dimension of the Bildungsroman, the “‘true’ meaning” of this “life time is only to be understood in retrospect, in the time of remembrance, that is in circular time.” Here life is seen not as progressive but “as a journey that eventually turns full circle, as we know it from Odysseus and Jesus to Faust and Leopold Bloom.” (Brockmeier p. 24)

### **Travel and the Gamble of the Picaresque**

Herman Broder's is a picaresque life. Rather than progressing to maturity and success, he careens through a dialectic series of episodes that shuttle him between his past and present loves. At the end of the novel he disappears: for him life is a repetitive series of despairing and meaning-choking experiences. Singer's novelistic genius is to reveal in this account how some of the women Herman encounters are changed by the experience, notably Yadwiga, his family's servant who hid him from the Nazis and, in the new world, supports and comforts him. While Herman and his mistress Tamara dream of their murdered spouses and children, Yadwiga and Masha, Herman's first wife who returns as if from the dead of Poland to new life in Coney Island, join at the end of the novel to care for Yadwiga's child. Herman does not stay to raise his child but runs off, perhaps like Huck Finn, that American picaresque hero, to the wilderness in the hope that in changing his place he will change his luck.

Picaresque fiction was invented in Spain by conversos, and we now know signaled the secrets of their hidden lives. (Joseph H. Silverman, See Lazarillo essay) These conversos when they arrived in Venice lived as Jews in the Ghetto, undisturbed by the Inquisition, which elsewhere hunted them down. One of the synagogues built in Venice was for the Ponentine community, a group named for the conversos returning to the faith of their ancestors.

Leone Modena surely knew of them, perhaps even reading some of the great picaresque tales like the Lazarillo de Tormes which they might have brought with them from Christian Spain en route to trading with the heathen Turks, though we have no

record of it. In fact Modena says next to nothing about the non-Jewish texts he read; yet he was sufficiently adept at Italian that at a young age his first composition was a poem that read in both Hebrew and Italian.

Like Broder Modena was a traveller; both are gamblers, risking everything on chance. If they are lucky, they will seek and for a moment find the relative security of a diasporic home; if unlucky they will fall back into homelessness. Their life stories are episodic, fragmented. While they reach for the traditional master narrative of communal redemption through religious observance and piety — the *daled amot* of the Law — they yet fall into the ambiguities of modern experience. Both are urban types, representing the spirit of their respective cities, and Modena is explicit about his love and need for Venice. They lead secret lives like the picaresque heroes, like the conversos.

It is in their writing that they come most fully to glimpse who they might be. At the dawn of print culture Modena takes a mighty role as writer, proofreader, combatant in the lists of authors. Herman at the other end of print culture, with television hovering on the horizon, brings the treasures of Jewish religious culture into the American synagogue as the ghost-writer for his American rabbi. Herman writes for an assimilated Jewish community, whom he regards as barely Jewish; Modena writes for a Jewish community that is open to non-Jews and engaged with them in commerce and cultural production: he is proud of the gentile audiences he draws to his sermons. He writes his *Riti ebraici* at the request of and for Sir Henry Wotton, the English emissary sent by a British King who imagines the Jews will soon convert to Protestantism.

Neither Herman nor Modena lives “for myself alone,” as Marcus Moseley defines autobiography after Rousseau; rather both exemplify “being for/with the other’ rather than ‘for myself alone’” (p. 13). None of the efforts to find overarching meanings in their life trajectories are successful: the fascination/mystery of Modena’s first person account parallels Herman Broder’s enigmatic identity and the indirect free discourse of Singer’s fictional narrative. Neither figure is monologic; both exist in a multivoiced writing. Though their immediate experience is significantly different, the cultural situation out of which each attempts to construct an identity has many parallels. As each writes the self into history, each attempts to read his life, and thus construct its meaning. Both are caught between exile and diaspora and thus remain ambiguous.



## Enlightenment and Modern Jewish Character

Reading Hayyei Yehudah, signaled as the first Hebrew autobiography by its later readers like Shadal, we encounter a figure (like Herman Broder in *Enemies, A Love Story*) whose identity, caught between exilic despair and diasporic possibility, even perplexes himself. For Modena, as for Herman, exile generates psychic and social displacement and homelessness. Yet as he acknowledges the traditional reading of exile as punishment for communal misdeeds, an alternative view surfaces. Modena, in resisting the powerlessness of exile, discovers an independent life of intellectual achievement. To the gentiles who seek his company and advice, he appears the enlightened cosmopolitan Venetian Jewish intellectual. These polarities of identity exposed in Modena's writing and paralleled in the physical space of the Ghetto, are prescient: they come to define character in modern and urban Jewish writing and experience.

Putting the writers in dialogue with each other highlights the parameters of their struggle with Jewish identity-construction. They too wrestle with the angel, that originary and mythic experience of Jacob, the patriarch, that reveals their commonalities as it underlines their significant historical and cultural differences. Jacob wrestles to day-break, and in this sense prevails, but he cannot win. In that Biblical episode Jacob is renamed Israel; the terms of his renaming imply that the struggle will continue. The range of his possibilities does not include victory and independent agency: "what is new" happens to him, and he struggles to make it turn into a blessing.

As we read their life-histories, both Modena and Broder remind us that the modern city is the site of self-presentation, self-dramatization. In a recent poem occasioned by participation in an NEH Institute in Venice directed by Shaul Bassi and myself, Will Wells, translator and contemporary poet, provides a coda that underline the ways in which Modena and Broder voice the urban experience of modern Jewish character and persona.

As Vivaldi's children ply their bows, cases  
open for coins, the bronze Goldoni leans

on his cane above the commedia  
 of Rialto crowds, a city that passes  
 and passes. Masks smirk from every third  
 window, forged passports of the heart.

If Venice changes us, it's as a thirst  
 that can't be quenched, a thread that tangles  
 etymologies, where the sea insists  
 on the fundamental and the sottoportego  
 tunnels to new light. In one yellow campo  
 shaped like a badge, walling in and walling

out are balanced on wooden pilings  
 a thousand years old, allegedly  
 immune to decay. Green shutters are closed  
 to eyes and afternoon, and muffle what  
 the cantor invokes on the highest floor  
 where prayers rise like heat or are scrawled

and dropped, frail boats on the boundary canal.  
 Across the stone pavement, soccer balls spin  
 between boys careful to avoid the shrine  
 where Auschwitz is whispered  
 under a marble tally of deportees.  
 And still the hidden Jew defies all counts.

The rabbi burnt his list of congregants  
 and swallowed poison, allowing time  
 for most to escape to new identities.  
 Survivors in the Hebrew Care Home toss  
 and turn against Adriatic swelter

as the fan intones "*Baruch, Baruch.*"

This Ghetto of confinement has become  
a place of haven, here, where language blends  
into babble, and babble, for an instant,  
rings clear. Along a narrow chute called  
Calle del Forno, impade cakes reward  
a taste for exile, a hunger for home.

"A Walk to the Ghetto: Venice, 2006"

for Shaul Bassi