

STAVANS
UNBOUND

THE CRITIC
BETWEEN
TWO CANONS

The Lands and Ages of the Jewish People

Series Editor

IRA ROBINSON (Concordia University, Montreal)



STAVANS UNBOUND

THE CRITIC
BETWEEN
TWO CANONS

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Life as Role Play: Ilan Stavans, the Life (long) Writer

Isabel Durán

Since my chapter will be devoted to Ilan Stavans and life writing, let me begin with an autobiographical note (one tends to adopt the genre one writes about) that could be entitled “How I Met Ilan Stavans.” I had read *On Borrowed Words* (2011), *The Hispanic Condition* (1995), and several of his critical essays, and had him on my list of “worthy readings.” As I engaged more with ethnic literatures in the United States, I started to find pronouncements against him, for not fitting into a particular agenda of group-identity politics (often aligned with other names such as Richard Rodriguez or Cuban-American Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, for example)—a fact that from my Spanish perspective of the outsider not involved in the politics of American academia) upgraded him to the shortlist of “still worthier people to read and follow.” So, when I was about to do a three-month research stay at the Real Colegio Complutense at Harvard in the summer of 2012, I wrote him an e-mail saying that I would be interested in meeting him to ask some questions about his work, since I had used parts of *On Borrowed Words* in one of my classes on American autobiography and ethnicity. He replied at once and invited me to visit him at Amherst.

Therefore, one odd day I rented a car, drove to Emily Dickinson’s hometown and, after visiting her house and marvelling at the beauty of the room from which she wrote in that quaint, small village, I walked to the Mexican restaurant where Ilan had booked a table. We met, talked over lunch and a margarita, and my impressions were confirmed. Ilan Stavans was a worthwhile man, writer, academic, critic, and potential friend. What I never thought then was that five

years later, I would be writing an essay *about* Ilan Stavans, instead of using his scholarship to write on other themes and writers.

Stavans is one of the most prolific writers and critics I have ever met. As is well known, his *magnum opus* as a scholar is his general editorship of the massive *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2011), a book that Spanish scholar Felipe Fernández-Armesto has described as “imaginatively conceived, painstakingly executed, stunningly broad, profoundly stirring, endlessly engaging, this book can change the way the world thinks about America, and the way Americans think about themselves.”¹ The volume took thirteen years to complete, and, as Stavans stated, “I put all my energy—all my might—into it.”² Therefore, selecting part of his work to contribute to this volume seemed at first like a hard task. But my decision was immediate: since I had discovered his work doing research on Latino/a life writing, that should be the genre upon which I would focus.

In the lines that follow, I shall be dealing with Ilan’s memoirs *On Borrowed Words* and *Return to Centro Histórico*, but also with other variants of life writing, such as interviews and conversations. *On Borrowed Words* looks at his education from the perspective of language; his graphic novel *El Iluminado* (2012) delves into his Jewish past. In *Resurrecting Hebrew* (2008), he explores his life in Israel. In addition, in several essays included in *A Critic’s Journey* (2010), he meditates on his life as a cultural critic and public intellectual. Finally, *Return to Centro Histórico: A Mexican Jew Looks for His Roots* (2012), is structured around the idea of returning to one’s roots, so important in bicultural selves who have lost or neglected a part of their history. Indeed, autobiography permeates Stavans’s entire *oeuvre*.

Richard Rodriguez, alluding to a popular Puerto-Rican music star, who in turn was referencing his own book *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, stated in an interview that “to be really brown is to be impure. It is to change your name to Ricky Martin. It is to dye your hair. It is to be gay singing about heterosexual love [...] That’s real brown. Because he’s absolutely *an impertinence against borders*. I love that. That’s what I mean by brown.”³ In many ways, Stavans, one of the sharpest pens of the American literary panorama, is also a “brown” author (even though his complexion is totally white): an impertinence against

1 Quoted in the back flap of the 2011 hard-cover edition.

2 Isabel Durán, “Ethics and Aesthetics: A Conversation with Ilan Stavans,” in *Camino Real. Estudios de las Hispanidades Norteamericanas* 6, no. 9 (2014): 160.

3 Hector Torres, *Conversations with Contemporary Chicana and Chicano Writers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 294. Emphasis is my own.

borders and orthodoxy, wherever they come from. He is an impertinence for those who think that there is a closed canon and insurmountable boundaries between “serious” and “popular” culture; an impertinence against the Royal Spanish Academy of Language and their sacrosanct defense of pure Spanish; against those who think that writers should be grouped by language, race, or sex and that group-identity politics is a religion one endorses or debunks in a Manichean manner; an impertinence against those who think that interviews, translations (even into Spanglish), reviews, and personal essays have no place in literary studies, for they are minor genres.

Stavans, the utmost defender of Spanglish, captured his existential and linguistic journey in *On Borrowed Words* (aptly subtitled *A Memoir of Language*), by weaving personal reminiscences with an exploration into language acquisition and cultural code switching. In fact, Stavans has devoted a large part of his intellectual life to reflecting on the status of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States, and on Spanglish as a border language in its own right. In *The Hispanic Condition*, he suggests that Latinos today have ceased to be belligerent in the way writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and so many more were during the anti-establishment decade of the 1960s. The “New Latino,” he says:

consciously embrace[s] an ambiguous, labyrinthine identity as a cultural signature. Resistance to the English-speaking environment has been replaced by the notions of transcreation and transculturation, to exist in total confusion, to be a hybrid, in constant change, eternally divided ... a bit like Anglos and a bit not.⁴

A writer’s true country, he continues, is language, not place. And one might have many countries. “Am I a traitor because I refuse to choose one? I couldn’t care less.”⁵ Stavans’s departure from his native Mexico to New York, as depicted in *On Borrowed Words*, is as much an odyssey through languages as it is a physical experience. The book begins symbolically, when he packs his library in 1993 to move out of New York, after having landed in this town from Mexico eight years before, in 1985, aged 24. “The journey, I foresaw,” he says, “would be twice as difficult, for somewhere along the line I had made the conscious decision to find my voice in language and habitat not my own. The wandering Jew.”⁶

4 Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), 13.

5 Durán, “Ethics and Aesthetics” 148.

6 Ilan Stavans, *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (New York: Viking, 2001), 7.

Once he made the decision to find his voice “in a language and habitat not his own,” (thus the title “*On Borrowed Words*”)⁷ he had to forge an identity as well, for language is identity. So important is polyglotism and lack of purity for Stavans, that New York represents the essence of the hybridity he wished to embrace:

[New York] surely, is the source of sources, a city of fraternal strangers, of cultural sophistication and high civilization, the city... where tongues intermingle to such a degree that a new language seems to be born every other second, where everyone pretends to be a bit more than what he really is, where all nationalities and backgrounds coexist by seeing each other face to face without an alibi. Mixture, impurity, promiscuity, heat. In New York every fake item becomes original.⁸

But his intellectual and linguistic journey is, at the same time, a truly relational memoir, as John Eakin would put it. One is led to think that the four languages in Stavans’s life, Yiddish, Hebrew, Spanish, and English, are somehow embodied in some family members who deeply influenced his development. Indeed, three of the six book chapters tell us more about them than about him, and those lines become, at the same time, tributes to them. Bobbe Bela, Stavans’s tough Yiddish grandmother who escaped Poland before Hitler invaded, is presented as Stavans’s predecessor in life writing, as she wrote a diary in English, to leave as a legacy to his descendants, containing the story of how she:

settled in Mexico, prospered, had children and grandchildren... Nothing intrepid about it, except for the feeling, so deep in the heart, that we are what our words say we are, and *tsuzein* is different from the Polish *byc*, the Hebrew *leiyot*, and the Spanish *ser*.⁹

We see here again, the idea that words are that of which we are made. Chapter three is mainly devoted to Ilan’s charismatic father, a passionate and inspiring Mexican actor whom the son admired but perceived as his rival. A perfectionist with Spanish orthography and diction, this Quixotic character symbolizes Ilan’s tie to his native Spanish tongue and his native Mexico. Chapter four centers

7 Ibid., 7.

8 Ibid., 13-14.

9 Ibid., 51.

around Ilan's younger brother Darián, whose stutter and exceptional gifts with the piano add up to an unsolved, anomalous personality that was never resolved. In this, the most troubling chapter in the whole memoir, Stavans dwells on the difficult relationship he had with his brother, so that Darián's biography becomes intertwined with Ilan's confessions of guilt. The narrative of this almost biblical brotherly love and rivalry is structured around a duel of "abjections." We could use Kristeva's idea of abjection as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect boundaries, systems, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"¹⁰ or Elizabeth Grosz's definition of the abject as *those things that come from the body* –urine, semen, menstrual blood, odour- but are not a part of it.¹¹ Stavans's explicit language regarding his "abject" body comes to the point here:

I had suffered from skin disease -a merciless invasion of abscesses ... No, "pimples" is a better word, better than "abscesses", "carbuncles", "pustules" and "swellings"; it is the most recognizable. But I can't use it, so tormenting are its echoes How I longed to exchange my body for a less vulnerable, more appealing one, like Darian's... For a long, long time it (the skin disease) was a source of public shame.¹²

The language describing "those things that come from the body" is still more explicit when Ilan recalls his sexual encounter with a prostitute—his Mexican sexual rite of passage—and wonders whether his body would disgust her. The young woman's request is self-explanatory: "How about using a towel to prevent leaving spots (pus, blood) on the bed?"¹³ Ilan's expression of bodily complexes corresponds to Darián's precarious sense of self, built around his *tartamudez*.¹⁴ Conversely, Ilan's success in the process of Americanization corresponds to Darián's inability to achieve his American dream. The remorse of the successful brother at the neglect of the weaker one reaches its climax when Stavans writes: "Darián: no one else, not a single person, awakens in me so much guilt [...] Did I act responsibly? . . . Could my reluctance accelerate

10 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

11 Quoted in Alison Kimmich, "Writing the Body: From Abject to Subject," in *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies* 13, no. 2 (1998): 224.

12 Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, 147.

13 *Ibid.*, 153-154.

14 *Ibid.*, 138.

Darián's downfall? Did I hold the key to his instability?"¹⁵ These questions remain unanswered, but the cathartic act of life writing proves to be the best therapy to confront the ghosts of his past.¹⁶

"No matter where I live, no matter where I travel, the only place I feel I truly belong is New York,"¹⁷ states Stavans in the first chapter of his memoir. From the perspective of spatial studies, we have learned to appreciate that space and place are as important identity markers as language may be. And that *topos* and *tropos* are inextricably bounded. As a "*tropoic topos*," New York also represents mixture, impurity, brownness, lack of stability, and belonging. And, belonging, together with space and identity, conform a recurrent triad in almost all ethnic life writing.

Whereas ethnic nationalists still accept the naturalness of a "boundary consciousness" through supposedly objective variables such as language, religion, or geography, these categories cannot predict where boundaries are to be drawn in a globalized world. To such an ethnic essentialism that relies on what Werner Sollors terms "static notions of descent and on primordial, organicist, sometimes even biological concepts of ethnic-group membership,"¹⁸ other writers, such as Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, for instance, understand the volatility of such membership and its relation to space and geography, in their memoirs of exile or immigration:

Where am I most me? Which of these two locales that I have described is my true place? Miami or North Carolina? Cuba or America? This book grows out of my need to find an answer to these questions, or at least to understand more completely why I cannot answer them I write to become who I am, even if I'm more than one, even if I'm *yo* and you and *tú* and two.¹⁹

Traditional Jewish immigrant literature in the United States, Mary Anton's *The Promised Land* (1912) or Anzia Yezirska's *Red Ribbon in a White Horse* (1950) for example, is defined by clear boundaries (or lines) that distinguish between the two places, the here and the over there. Stavans, on the other

15 Ibid., 133, 160.

16 See Marilyn Chandler, "A Healing Art: Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography," in *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies* 5, no. 1 (1989): 4-15.

17 Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, 21.

18 Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 11.

19 Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *Next Year in Cuba: A Cuban Émigré's Coming of Age in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 270.

hand, locates himself in a hybrid space whose stance, according to Carmen Faymonville, can be described as transnational—neither assimilationist nor oppositional. The crucial difference between traditional and more recent theorizations of nations and identity lies in the latter's separation of geography from identity and a subsequent re-negotiation of national belonging that questions cultural roots as a literal metaphor of soil and land.²⁰

A “wandering Jew,” Stavans never learned to love Mexico; he felt it was a “rented house”²¹ that was never fully his own. His motherland, thus, is not a country, but instead is its language. The Spanish language, rather than Mexico, is his *patria*: “It is far easier for me to think of my birth as having occurred in the tongue of Quevedo, Cervantes, Borges, and Octavio Paz than to perceive myself as *un mexicano hecho y derecho*.”²² Thus, when Stavans thinks of the challenge ahead of him as biographer of his own life, he is aware that crafting it in English would be a sort of treason. For “shouldn't it be written in at least three if not four languages (Yiddish, Spanish, Hebrew and English), the four tongues in which—and through which—I've experienced life?”²³ He solves this identity problem with his resolution that he does not wish to convey his nationality but his *transnationality*; and, “an illegitimate language is exactly what I seek.”²⁴

After the three biographical chapters mentioned above, we reach chapter five of *On Borrowed Words*. The longest chapter, it represents the core of Stavans's epic journey and his negotiation with various geographies, languages, and identities. The two spellings of the dream land that give title to this chapter, “Amerika and America,” represent the two ends of his odyssey from his Eastern-European ancestry to his present Americanization, from Yiddish to English, from unclear identities such as a “non-Mexican Mexican,”²⁵ a “Yiddish-speaking Mexican Jew,”²⁶ or a blond “*güerito*,”²⁷ to a Mexican-American academic, novelist, and journalist who makes the decision to gain himself an American passport, and to write in English. His wanderings throughout the world (Israel, Spain, Europe, back to Mexico, Cuba, back to Spain, and finally the U.S.); his awakening to political awareness as a student in Mexico at the UAM; his discovery of literature (American, Hispanic, Spanish, Jewish) and translation;

20 Carmen Faymonville, “New Transnational Identities in Judith Ortiz Cofer's Autobiographical Fiction,” in *Melus* 26, no. 2 (2001): 2.

21 Stavans, *On Borrowed Words*, 23.

22 *Ibid.*, 23.

23 *Ibid.*, 88.

24 *Ibid.*, 88.

25 *Ibid.*, 227.

26 *Ibid.*, 216.

27 *Ibid.*, 213.

his marriage to an American woman; and the birth of his son Joshua culminate in an almost Augustinian revelation that would mark the path towards a newly found destiny (never again lost in translation):

Amerika had opened its arms to me, having proffered a full fellowship to perform graduate studies; in return, I should turn it into my America, I would attempt to perfect my English as much as I could and become a useful citizen [...] I was, I realized, finally at home in Manhattan and the geography that surrounds it. Never, not in a thousand years, could I be made to leave.²⁸

The final chapter of his *Memoir of Language* reproduces a conversation that Stavans once had with Richard Rodriguez shortly after the publication of *Hunger for Memory* (1982). Following in the path initiated by that break-grounding memoir, “the un-self-righteous coming-of-age chronicle of a mestizo Mexican American marked by Catholicism,”²⁹ Stavans reveals to Rodriguez that he is writing his own autobiography, described as “a series of snapshots . . . not of me but of my mind. A disjointed picture, the way life really is—incongruous.”³⁰ As if trying to liberate himself from the “anxiety of influence” inspired by the elder master, Stavans explains the peculiarities of his own memoir: it will be a reflection on “the roles he has played in life,” marked by the four languages that constitute his multi-faceted “essence.”³¹ Impersonating his father’s profession, Stavans explains that he “should try to explain what it’s like to switch languages by invoking the many personalities of an actor.”³² Again, he reaches the conclusion that, since he has to choose between Yiddish (a warm, delectable, onomatopoeic language), Spanish (a romantic and somehow loose one), rough Hebrew, and the mathematical precision of English, he is determined to live and write in the latter—“My English-language *persona* is the one that superimposes itself on all previous others.”³³

The journey through his mind and his languages has come to an end, and it concludes with a reflection on memory, as the human faculty without which we are nothing, for “it is the only record we have of who we were and what we want to become.”³⁴ As a matter of fact, together with space and language,

28 Ibid., 222, 242.

29 Ibid., 247.

30 Ibid., 241.

31 Ibid., 250.

32 Ibid., 249.

33 Ibid., 249. Emphasis is my own.

34 Ibid., 263.

memory is the third-most important ingredient for the identity construction of the exiled or the immigrant being. Stavans responded to the need to go back to one's roots, to recapture a lost language, or a lost culture, in his memoir *Return to Centro Histórico*,³⁵ where he recaptures his Mexican-Jewish past. In this short memoir, Stavans searches for his Jewish roots through photographs, using pictures as "engines" that set his memory into motion. Ilan Stavans decides to revisit his hometown, Mexico City, but he heads to the *Centro Histórico*, the downtown area where the hidden Jews escaping the Inquisition were burned at the stake. In his pictorial meditation, Stavans not only undertakes a second personal journey, but also merges with an entire culture in his exploration of the important role that Jews have played in the development of the Hispanic world. Inevitably, the first pages of this mental autobiography are once more devoted to questioning the purity of his Mexican identity and, using the pronoun "we" that speaks of a communal sense of identity, admits that the effort of finding one's roots involves the entire community. After all:

. . . the search for roots is a way to look back at a page in history that explains our love for el país Azteca, the Aztec homeland. The imperative is to explain to ourselves not how far we've travelled in our journey of assimilation but how truthful we've remained to our origins.³⁶

Finally, I will use Paul de Man's classic essay, "Autobiography as De-facement," the most celebrated deconstructivist study of autobiography, to close my journey through Stavans as life writer. De Man dismantles the autobiographer's implicit claim to self-presence and self-recovery, by exposing the autobiographical act as an *impersonation* that induces a crippling constraint. If the border between autobiography and fiction is erected on a privileged notion of referentiality, then the study of autobiographical works will always be partly founded upon an illusion:

. . . we assume that life produces the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but cannot we suggest...that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer does is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture?³⁷

35 Ilan Stavans, *Return to Centro Histórico. A Mexican Jew Looks for His Roots* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

36 Ibid., 102.

37 Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," in *MLN* 94, no. 5 (1979): 926.

The word that de Man uses—“de-facement”—refers to this un-referential quality of the supposedly most referential of genres; that is because *prosopopeia* (*prosopon poiien*, to confer a mask for a face), de Man asserts, is the trope of autobiography. In other words: the persona we create in autobiography is at once *a face, a mask, and a defacement*. It is a faulty face, which represents the abyss that is the space between the signifier and the signified, between autobiographer and autobiographical subject. The last chapter of *Return to Centro Histórico* is the one upon which I will focus to undertake this de-Manian reading. Using the collage technique, Stavans simply transcribes an interview entitled “*Autobiography of My Face*” done for a magazine, weeks after his journey to Mexico, and he concludes:

“My face is really many faces. All of us have many selves. I’m not referring to expressions, for the face changes enormously depending on the emotions we’re experiencing. I’m talking about selves: the rebel self, the defiant self, the philosophical self. . .”³⁸

Having just turned 50, the interviewer explains that Stavans has now lived longer in the United States than in Mexico. So, to the question “Are you now a man of two faces, a Mexican and an American?” he replies: “of many faces . . . In national terms I’m a mongrel, a half-and-half. In no man’s land. Neither here nor there. None of which really matters *because it is all a performance*.”³⁹ Later on in the conversation, to the observation that Mexicans use masks as a potent symbol, the interviewer asks “How do you understand the role of masks and faces in the Mexican imagination and in your imagination?” to which Ilan replies:

I love the fact that in Greek the word mask means ‘persona.’ Since pre-Columbian times, *máscaras* have been Mexico’s favourite symbol. From Aztec iconography to *Las Calaveras*, the skeletons of the Day of the Dead, masks are an announcement *that everything in life is act*. . . [. . .] no matter how many masks we take off there is always another one behind it.⁴⁰

Like de Man, we may infer that Stavans sees autobiography as impersonation, as acting, as masquerading. The autobiographer is multi-faceted, and his

38 Stavans, *Return to Centro Histórico*, 117.

39 Ibid., 123. Emphasis is my own.

40 Ibid., 128-29. My emphasis.

memoir is role-play. Discovering who one is thus becomes an impossible task, for one mask leads to the next, one face to another face, and eventually to a de-facement. The outcome of this carnivalesque dance of masks is that a lifelong job of writing about one's self would lead us to no conclusions. And, that is very much an attitude à la Ilan: life as an impertinently borderless "Möbius strip."⁴¹

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41 Durán, "Ethics and Aesthetics," 152.