

*Columbia History of the British Novel.* You learn, for example, that no matter how meager your bibliography is, you should always include a citation of the editor or associate editors, if at all possible. You learn, too, that anything that

gets you out of the house is good for you. A long walk promotes health, neighborliness, and improved knowledge of local architecture and trees. And finally you learn to tell your children not to major in the humanities, but to re-

serve the pleasures of reading for private life. Accounting, business administration, premed—that's the ticket.

*J.O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.*

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## Oratorio in the Ruins

*by Richard Waller*

That summer in Rome, Rome—the name itself  
is a measure of time, and it may be  
that Rome and Time are synonymous,

for each is a quality, like starlight,  
that can't be measured. Both flicker like an old  
silent movie, stopping and starting through the

centuries, flowing backwards, then forwards,  
until Time disappears altogether leaving  
only images suspended motionless in space,

images like those the evening I took my seat  
among ten thousand in the Basilica of Maxentius,  
the last great law court built in Imperial Rome.

It was begun by Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maxentius  
and finished by Constantine the Great after he  
slew him at the Milvian Bridge in the year A.D. 312.

I sat beneath the sunken panels of one of three  
immense remaining vaults overarching its space  
for sixteen centuries. Filing in on stage below

was the Bachgemeinde Choir of Vienna  
and the Orchestra of the Academy of St. Cecilia,  
founded by Palestrina in 1566.

The oratorio that evening was *Die Jahreszeiten—  
The Seasons*—in German, set to the music  
of Haydn, and completed in 1799.

The year was 1953. I was in my twenties,  
awestruck with admiration as I “looked across  
the Forum at the Colosseum, and gazed

at the temples, tiled with gilded bronze,  
on the Capitoline hill, and wondered at the  
number and size of the basilicas

and triumphal arches, the statues, obelisks  
and fountains, the baths and libraries,  
circuses and theatres” and the pines of Rome.

“Are those dull breaking sounds the crunch  
of Christian bones in the Colosseum?” “No,  
it's the tympanist in the Orchestra of St. Cecilia.”

“Was that the cry of a gladiator  
dying like a beast in there?” “No,  
it was a horn warming up in the back row.”

“I think it's just awful what the Nazis did  
to this town.” “For God's sake, Helen, this is  
the Roman Forum. Hitler had nothing to do with it.”

The verve of the crackling overture began,  
surrounding us with the breath of spring in the ruins  
and of planting and ploughing and heavenly showers

that kissed the furrows with the promise of plenty,  
and the sounds of sheep and bees and birds and boys  
and girls dancing in green meadows to fresh music.

Weird effects in the orchestra simulated  
the withering heat of summer, the ripple of brooks,  
of storms, of flights to safety, and calms,

and the sound of milking in cheap tin buckets,  
of quails and crickets and the croaking of frogs.  
Haydn blew his stack—but he was commissioned.

Autumn brought harvest choruses and love duets,  
fiddle scrapes, bagpipes, drones of the hurdy-gurdy  
*und tanzen und trinken* around wine barrels,

and the sounds of hounds and hunters and horns  
and the bound of the stag from the copse to the field,  
the tally-ho and victory chorus of the exhausted hunters.

Fogs and chill winds ushered in winter's gloom,  
retreat to the fireside and the spinning wheel:  
*knurre, schnurre, knurre*, whiz, wheel, whir.

The music ended in joyful praise to Him  
from Whom all blessings flow with major chords  
that must have awakened Constantine himself,

and Spartacus and Nero and the ghost of everyone  
who ever died on the bloody floor of the Colosseum.  
In just two hours, we had endured four seasons

under a coffered vault that has seen six thousand.  
Time made the clock tick again and for an evening  
like that, Rome, you did well to decline and fall.

## Letter From Finland

by Jacob Neusner

### Postcommunist Judaism



After two days of intensive sight-seeing in St. Petersburg, Russia, not so much a city as a cemetery holding the remains of what was once a city, I returned to Finland and turned on the St. Petersburg TV channel that we get here in Åbo. St. Petersburg TV was broadcasting a show about Russian Jews in Tel Aviv—a program of Russian Jewish humor made in Israel. What a contrast! St. Petersburg is grim, dirty, decaying. The trams belong in museums, the buildings crumble, the people scavenge for food, the parks abound in weeds, whoever does not beg steals if he can. Russian Jews in Israel—with their fine Jewish faces and their vital Jewish humor—looked lively, witty, and joyful—everything St. Petersburg is not.

I asked myself: Why should any Jew in Russia, now free to emigrate to Israel, want to stay there? I see no compelling answer to that question. Russian Jews have been out of touch with Judaism for three generations. Hitler wiped out much of the population possessed of knowledge and memory; Stalin obliterated a thousand years of spirituality. Today Russian Jews gain no native access to the resources of Judaism—either the books that convey its wisdom and spirituality or the human beings who embody its learning and sanctity. The heroic refuseniks underwent political martyrdom; none left a legacy of religious consequence. In Russia, to be a Jew is an ethnic identity, stamped on a passport. But that identity carries with it only confrontation with contempt, for, as everyone knows, the broad rivers of Russia's anti-Semitism run deep, swift, and very cold.

True, *aliyah*—migration to Israel—carries its costs. But the reward vastly outweighs them, for Russian Jews in Israel choose from among a hundred choices of what being a Jew may mean. The identity carries with it sanctity for some, a sense of fulfillment for others,

and the sheer joy of being ordinary for another group—for all, it decries nothing but pride and well-earned self-esteem. For none is identification as a Jew defined by outsiders, who commence with hatred.

But Russia is miserable not only for the Jews. Trying to find a visual representation of the human condition in Russia, I think of the palaces of the czars and the churches of their day. Like the great stone heads on Easter Island in the remote Pacific, they speak of an age incomprehensible today, in a language no one speaks. And the same is so of Judaism, the ancient faith.

Whatever the future brings—and for the so-long-abused, suffering Russian people, who can wish anything but good?—tomorrow brings no more palaces. As for the transcendent churches of St. Petersburg, Russia will do well to retain what it has and is not likely to compete with the achievements of a glorious age of faith.

Seventy years of de-Judaization also mark three generations of de-Christianization, and while both great faiths renew themselves, neither draws on deep roots in a near-term past. But while Christians can look at surviving churches and their martyrs to remember and try to renew, where are Jews supposed to find their models? In neither native stone nor native-born models can they find definition for what they may become. American Jews took three generations to define for themselves a distinctively American and enduring mode of being Jewish, and they drew, and still draw, on learning and living memory to form the viable future we now have. Russian Jews have nothing but the broken stones of an edifice none today can hope to reconstruct.

In that context, why should a Jew stay in Russia instead of emigrating to Israel? Russia holds no future for Judaism, so far as a future depends upon the native resources of a vital present. Russia never valued the Jews and does not value us today. "But if not there, then where?" is a question easily answered. Israel wants the Russian Jews, needs them, values them, has placed a lien on the whole world of Jewry to help them settle within its borders. Israel offers them an entire menu of Judaisms for their taste. It can take Jews possessing nothing more than

a vacant ethnic identification and turn them into joyful partners in the ongoing debate that defines the state and dignifies its people.

Then what of the United States? In the bitter American Jewish debate of the 1970's on whether the resources of the Jewish community worldwide should be divided between emigrants to Israel and those to the United States, I took the view that, with scarce resources, we have rationally to allocate what we have by appealing to the public interest and not only to private preference. World Jewry has taken as its first priority the building of the Jewish state. Whatever resources we muster to help Jews find a better life should then flow to the building of the Jewish state. We also called into question the capacity of American Jews to explain to newcomers the wherefores and hows of being Jewish according to our model, which works in its context but in no other. Israel is the sole destination for those who turn to world Jewry for help, since only by devoting all scarce resources available for migrants to Israel can we accomplish our primary goal of building the Jewish state, our secondary goal of helping Jews to be Jewish, and the subsidiary one of helping Jews to improve their private lives.

Today the same is so. But times have changed, both for the better and for the worse. Jews can legally leave Russia, and Israel is ready to receive them. Who would have dreamed? But anti-Semitism renews itself, and any explanation for the great hatred that appeals only to the economic crisis and ignores the deeply rooted Russian contempt for Jews and the Russian Orthodox Church's deep loathing of Judaism is insufficient. Russian Jews not only *can* leave; for the sake of the future they *should* leave. Judaism has no future in Russia. Money spent on building Judaism there buys a dubious present and extends false hope. The only future that Jews in the former communist countries can hope for if they wish to live as Jews—and, I fear, if they wish to live at all—will take place in the state of Israel.

*Jacob Neusner was recently Visiting Research Professor at the Research Institute of Åbo Akademi, Finland's Swedish-language university.*