BOOK REVIEW

An Eye Grows in Brooklyn

Marcie Hershman

Leaving Brooklyn by Lynne Sharon Schwartz. Houghton Mifflin, 1989, 146 pp.

"Next year in Jerusalem," we vow at our Seders, even though we expect to be in the same dining room the next spring. Similarly, we might declare that, a while back, we left Brooklyn. Again, few of us may ever have lived there. But, in literary terms, we understand. Leaving Brooklyn has been something American Jews have done in fiction since our ancestors first struggled to get there.

Lynne Sharon Schwartz's novel takes on two traditions, that of coming-of-age fiction and that of leaving Brooklyn. She succeeds in spinning both conventions around until the storyteller's own past blurs with the city's familiar signposts. And when we try to grab hold of the narrator—this supposed nice Jewish girl, this apparently conventional author—to steady ourselves in what should be a comfortable and comforting landscape, she causes us to lose our grip. Was it a joke, some sleight of hand? We couldn't quite see. But we're set loose and wandering again; and now, it feels familiar.

In this tantalizing memoir-as-novel, Schwartz stares over her shoulder at the problems of coming into being, which are always right before us. It's a neat postmodern trick, this doubling of mirrors and images. To accomplish it, Schwartz creates an adult writer/narrator who is trying to see herself again as a girl living through a crucial time in her life. This is her fifteenth year, just after World War II, when she, Audrey, gets and rejects "the lens."

Or, as the book begins: "This is the story of an eye, and how it came into its own." An *eye*? Doesn't she mean an *I*? Yes, that too.

"Between the moment of my birth," continues Audrey, "and [my mother's] next inspection I suffered an injury to my right eye. How it occurred is a mystery. Some blunder made in handling was all she would murmur—drops, doctors, nurses, vagueness: 'These things happen.'"

The result is that Audrey moves through the world with one "good" eye/I and the other, of course, "wandering." As a youngster, she wants to approach life the way people around her seem to, but she cannot. First, one of her eyes "escapes to the private darkness beneath the lid ... [and] much of the time no one would know about its little trip." And second, "the world through my right eye [was] a tenuous place ... where a piece of face or the leg of a table or frame of a window might at any moment break off and drift away—a tenuousness ... unknown to those with common binary vision who saw the world of a piece."

Audrey's "double vision" makes her different, right from the start. Says the adult of the youngster:

> Telling about her is an act of self-sabotage. [But] before she vanishes altogether from memory—for now memory threatens to be more invention than recall—I want to make her transparent. I want to expose the mystery of change and recall, peel her story off her the way some people can peel an orange, in one exquisite unbroken spiral.

The Brooklyn of this fifteen-year-old is past its own coming of age; it's no longer immigrant, which was an earlier incarnation, but largely middle-class. In the first months after the war's end, there are some immigrants, but they stay on the periphery of the community's vision. They are the Jews who outfoxed and outlived the Nazis. The narrator tells us how she felt seeing the arm of a new classmate, bared in springtime; on it, tattooed two-and-a-half inches above the wrist, was a many-digited number. "I felt a twinge of envy between my ribs and was immediately ashamed and horrified.... But I didn't covet the other girl's suffering, only her knowledge; I wished it were possible to have the one without the other."

Audrey is hungry for all kinds of knowledge, but she's living in a place that immigrants and the children of immigrants built in order to shield their children from the kind of carnage and deprivation undergone by the people with numbers on their arms. Brooklyn is as much a "state of mind" as a geographical place, a "locus of customs and mythologies" where "being settled" is the ultimate virtue. Activities are planned solely for enjoyment and for the ease of their repetition. Pinochle games every Wednesday for the men; bridge games in a different room, but on the same night, for the women; coffee and Danish later for both sexes. Everything neat; everyone in their place.

If Audrey is curious about a larger world where "a window might at any moment break off and drift away," she'll have to find answers from the few ways available to her. One is the apparently "good" public eye of television, the other the "bad" secret journey of sexuality.

"We were among the last on our block to succumb," admits the narrator about TV. But once they did, they lived, as all Brooklyn did, "like cave families who sat around sighing in the dark until the accidental discovery of fire." From the television came

> the image of the man my father called "the pig," in fuzzy black and white on the evening news, marbly eyes darting, shoulders lunging, spit gathering at the

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corners of his mouth, while my father, stretched out on the red couch, ground his teeth audibly, gnawed on his cigar, and said, "Somebody's going to get that bastard one of these days."

The "bastard" is Joe McCarthy. Audrey assumes he's only "a fat face on a flat screen," far removed from her protected life. But the implicit message he conveys—that power is the ability to exploit and even destroy other people for your own purposes—charges many of the seemingly naive interactions in the story with a predatory energy. It disturbs the calm surface of relationships that we first expect simply to laugh with and savor, as we certainly laugh when the narrator continues her TV report:

> "*Schmuck*," my father taunted the television screen. "Communists! Communists! You wouldn't know a communist if he came and sat on your goddamn head." ...
>
> "Communism," my father shouted at the screen, "is a system of economic organization of goods and services! Communism is not a moral flaw!"
>
> "Shush, for God's sakes!" warned my mother. "The walls are thin. They can hear you on East New York Avenue."
>
> "Who!" He turned on her, ready to pounce. "Who'll hear me? Rosenbloom? Schneider?" Our next door neighbors. "They're illiterate anyway. Let them hear!"

McCarthy's is only one of many personal crusades that disturb the apparently stable surface of things. Among the local authorities is Miss Schechter, Audrey's geometry teacher. Miss Schechter holds the passionate conviction that it is wrong for girls of thirteen to wear bras before "in her judgment" they are necessary. "Her Savonarola eyes scanned the row of seats, scrutinizing bosoms—it was an era of tight chartreuse and fuchsia sweaters—and lit on a daily suspect. Leaving the class with a difficult proof to work on, Miss Schechter marched the girl to the girls' room."

Thinking herself safe, because "braless," Audrey is shocked, as other innocents must have been in more dangerous, life-threatening situations, to hear her name called out loud in the middle of one afternoon. She remains shocked enough, years later, to say, after recalling how she had pulled up her sweater on command, "I wish I were making it up or reporting from hearsay, appropriating the scene to make the narrative more telling. Perhaps I am, I hope I am. Once again, the line blurs...."

"Schmuck," my father taunted the television screen. "Communists! Communists! You wouldn't know a communist if he sat on your goddamn head. Communism is not a moral flaw!"

Schwartz is able to hint how "these things happen"—how numbers might get tattooed on pale forearms, how livelihoods could be destroyed in public, how people could be deprived of experience and imagination yet remain secure in their power to exploit others. And she also brilliantly evokes the pathos of Audrey's most disturbing, most outrageous "wandering ... private" encounter with the eye doctor. He is an authority on vision—or, as Audrey's mother puts it, "a big man."

The big man's office is in Manhattan, the True City within the city. Audrey goes there to be fitted for one of the first experimental contact lenses, which her parents hope will "correct" her "bad" eye; they want her to look—if not see—like other girls in her neighborhood. Audrey doesn't want the lens, but, as a "good" girl from Brooklyn, she acquiesces. Then, during the third checkup, when she's in the examining chair, something unexpected happens. Leaning over her, the eye/I doctor insistently presses her leg, and Audrey, contrary to the order of things, responds:

> As though in a dream, as though it were not a conscious act, I reached out and touched him. I touched him where I knew he would want to be touched. I know that I—she—was not the kind of girl who could do that.... Even as I recall it, record it, I suspect I really didn't do such an outrageous thing and memory is falsifying, inventing what I wish I could have done or imagining it from what I have since become capable of doing.

Knowing where she is today, working backward to get at the multilayered truth of her history and identity, the storyteller allows her younger self to physically embrace the eye doctor. She says, "I must let her have it now, do it for her, since it is right that it should have happened. It suits the person I became."

As patient and doctor disrobe, the line between what is accepted and acceptable is subverted. It now seems that Audrey has nowhere to return to. After this visit to the eye doctor, how can she, how can any of us, continue to live in Brooklyn?

She and we remain there by creating fictions, implies the narrator. We keep our private wanderings to ourselves, and, if we're as young, adolescent-like, and selfish as Audrey was at fifteen, we divide our vision as we divide our life. We pledge a high school sorority and pretend to be like the "sisters." We lie—by way of omission—to parents. We visit the doctor, whom we refuse to see is falling blindly in love with us, even though we won't talk to him during our sweaty, escalating physical encounters. We have our weekly tryst with the eye doctor. We believe we can just keep riding the subway back and forth. That's so we can pretend that we're still part of Brooklyn and not part of it at the same time.

The statement "These things happen" clashes with "Did it really happen?" Audrey's "secret journey" out of Brooklyn is not what we have learned to expect from other novels. As readers, we don't know what or how much to believe, so, in postmodern fashion, we confront the physical structure of the text itself. Is this book a novel or a memoir? Is Audrey a stand-in for the author, or is she all artifice? Perhaps, if we knew whether this "wandering" was a doubling of vision (eye) or of self (I), we'd know where *we* stand in relation to "Brooklyn."

Our literary mythology of Brooklyn has been largely seamless or, to twist a pun the way Schwartz might, seemless. After all the years spent in the old

world watching out for dybbuks and deluges, many of us were relieved to see the New World of Brooklyn. We could read the energetic stories of immigrant Jewish families working hard and pulling together in order to make a new beginning in that city where "a tree grows." A bit later, we took in the trials and tribulations of the assimilated young (men, usually); these youngsters were going on to the great city colleges and respectable (literary, usually) careers, and returning to give Mama and Papa *nachas*.

Leaving Brooklyn uses the conventions of the postmodern, self-referential text and the tone of feminist self-disclosure. As such, it implies that the other Brooklyn stories may have been superficially true. But as the narrator admits about her past self, "lying wasn't my style. I tended more toward omission." For isn't it so that a "wandering" eye/I finds refuge, as it must, in a private darkness and secret journeys? And all things—somehow—happen.

Through the lens of her seasoned vision, the adult narrator accepts, finally, her own history: "If it wasn't a memory to begin with, it has become one now." By giving ourselves over to Audrey's coming-of-age-and-leaving tale, we accept the blurring of the lines of truth, memory, and fiction that lead to the past.

For a people concerned with the past, perhaps because we're not sure when next we'll be "wandering," Lynne Sharon Schwartz's meditation on the dangers of intentional innocence is infinitely rich. □

BOOK REVIEW

The Hazards of Eco-chic

Robert Gottlieb

Environmentalism and the Future of Progressive Politics by Robert C. Paehlke. Yale University Press, 1989, 325 pp.

Ecology in the 20th Century: A History by Anna Bramwell. Yale University Press, 1989, 292 pp.

Green is in. George Bush, the one-time champion of environmental deregulation and cost-cutting, holds a dramatic press conference by dirty Boston Harbor and then, early in his administration, decides to make a widely publicized presentation in support of a Clean Air program. Mikhail Gorbachev, in the wake of Chernobyl and an industrial policy that has caused tremendous pollution, encourages a widespread debate over environmental consequences. Similar political interventions take place in Hungary, England (even Margaret Thatcher tries on the lightest shade of green), and West Germany (where *all* the political parties, from the Social Democrats to the Neo-Fascists, attempt to emulate the Green party's original claim to an environmental politics).

In the United States, the conservative commentator Kevin Phillips has recently argued that green issues could well influence the outcome of one of the next presidential elections. His analysis has been confirmed by recent polls suggesting that more people than ever are not only willing to support environmental interventions but are even willing to pay for them. At the same time, alternative grouplets battle fiercely over who has the right to appropriate the green label and, by extension, to define the new "paradigm" of politics arising from it. Social ecologists, bioregionalists, Earth Firsters, and ecofeminists all contend for hegemony over this new politics, but no group has yet developed the kind of powerful organizational presence found in Europe. Meanwhile, mainstream environmental groups like the Sierra Club (most of which are staff-directed, nationally based organizations) continue to refine the skills of lobbying, litigation, and technical expertise they have been practicing, with little change, since the early 1970s, when environmentalists first extensively spread their influence into the governmental domain.

The current preoccupation with environmental issues is due in part to a shift in political discourse. In the late 1970s, a corporate counteroffensive took shape around resource policy (energy, water, and wilderness lands especially), environmental regulation (clean air, clean water), and industrial activity (workplace safety and consumer product guidelines). Jimmy Carter was a perfect foil for this strategy: his notion of environmentalism as *individual sacrifice* presented an easy target for newly organized corporate lobbies such as the Western Regional Council and the Business Roundtable.

The corporate counterattack focused on negative tradeoffs (job loss, industrial relocation, the high cost of regulation), downplayed the extent and seriousness of environmental pollution (symbolized by the "Good Science" of comparing and thus minimizing risks, which was promoted by Reagan EPA administrator—and later convicted perjurer—Rita Lavelle), and emphasized the importance of renewed industrial production.

For a time, it appeared this corporate counteroffensive had succeeded. Ronald Reagan, with his outlandish views on the environment, was easily elected and reelected. The mainstream environmental groups thought themselves vul-

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