UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

RE-SEEDING *THE WASTE LAND*: A JEWISH NARRATIVE RESPONSE TO THE LITERATURE OF EXHAUSTION

BY

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Re-seeding *The Waste Land*: A Jewish Narrative Response to the Literature of Exhaustion" submitted by Jennifer Wispinski in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

Many works of twentieth-century fiction and poetry can be broadly categorized as "literature of exhaustion." Works which fit this literary pigeonhole often showcase fragmented, socially constructed subjects, speeding though cluttered carnivalesque landscapes, incapable of choosing from what T. S. Eliot calls the "heap of broken images" (*The Waste Land*, I, 22) available to them, items which would enable them to build selves or lives. In these novels or poems, the characters are at the mercy of forces larger than they are, be they technology, apathy, war or materialism. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is probably the best known example of such a work, and the most influential.

However, some authors choose to write against this trend. Once such author is Chaim Potok. In his novel, *Davita's Harp*, his central character, Davita, is actively involved in her own fabrication and composition. She is both subject and agent, acting upon the world as well as being acted upon by it. She takes the tangled, scattered threads of the jumbled, modern landscape, and weaves them into something which closely resembles balance, or contentment. In writing *Davita's Harp*, Potok writes against the literature of exhaustion, and in so doing, raises some interesting questions about reading and writing that modern and post-modern literary criticism fail to satisfactorily answer.

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Introduction

Have meaning and literature parted company? This question first occurred to me last fall, when I was hunting for a thesis topic. Rushing to the photocopier with some articles I needed to read for class, I happened to overhear a snatch of conversation between two undergraduate students walking the halls of the English department. They were discussing Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies,* which, presumably, they had just finished studying in class. The first student (a man) commented to his female friend that he had found the novel "really depressing." When she asked him why, he replied that the characters were so shallow. All they did was drift from party to party, yet they never had any real fun. They were, he said, "just killing time." His friend laughed, then teased him by remarking, "Well, think about it. What big exciting things did you do last weekend?" The two quickly moved out of hearing range.

This conversation made me think about possible connections between what we read and how we live. The woman's remark, although teasing, showed me she believed that on some level, her life experiences mirrored those of Evelyn Waugh's characters. She appeared to recognize that her life was just as devoid of meaning as theirs. She, like the protagonists of *Vile Bodies,* was "just killing time."

The female student's remark disturbed, but did not surprise, me. Anyone who studies twentieth century literature soon realizes that many works of modern fiction and poetry can be

broadly, but accurately, categorized as "literature of exhaustion." In his essay, "The Literature of Exhaustion," John Barth uses this term to refer to the "used-upness" of literature. He argues that writers had, by 1967, come to an "intellectual dead end" (Barth, 31), signalled by their inability to present any new ideas to their readers, or to write with an innovative style. According to Barth, the literature of exhaustion asserts that there is nothing new under the sun. In a second essay, "the Literature of Replenishment, Barth states that the only only way authors can produce anything artistically new, fresh or meaningful is to deploy "[artistic conventions] against themselves to generate new and lively work" (71). Barth cites works like Beckett's "The Lost Ones," in which "Beckett has his protagonist(s) literally exhaust, in a systematic way, all the possibilities of action calculable given a certain restricted state of objects" (McHale, 28), dismissing all alternatives as equally futile, or Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, where Nabokov exhausts "the possibilities of narratorial reliability" (McHale, 29), leaving the reader with "nothing certain" (29).

Works of "exhaustion literature" usually depict fragmented, helpless subjects, speeding through chaotic, cluttered landscapes, unwilling, and often unable, to find any item or idea in the landscape capable of moving them, of lending meaning and structure to their lives. Alternatives, as well as motivation and energy, have been depleted. Narrative subjects are shown to be at the mercy of gigantic, crushing, impersonal forces, like technology, industry, war or materialism, because they believe that they have no power act, create or discover anything that would allow them to build or weave a sense of self or sense of

purpose. According to Barth, this movement towards a literature of exhaustion began with the modernists, who tried to "trace the pattern [of twentieth century life] however disconnected and incoherent in appearance" (Woolf, "Modern Fiction," 109), only to discover that there was no pattern. It did not reach full flower until the 1960s, which Barth describes as an "apocalyptic place and time" ("The Literature of Replenishment," 70).

How and why did "exhaustion literature" become so popular? Did the "literature of exhaustion" which emerged in the early part of this century grow in response to a social malaise detected by authors in their culture, or did authors begin to write about disempowered narrative subjects out of a desire to transform the tone and subject matter of fiction and poetry? Did authors begin to feature apathetic, defeated, angst-ridden protagonists in their fiction because they wanted their work to reflect their own life experiences? Or did the modernists, the group Barth credits with popularizing "literature of exhaustion," employ these protagonists to change the focus and philosophy of writing, moving away from romanticism towards writing with an edge? Is it possible that both of these statements are true? If so, how and when did twentieth century literature and lifestyle begin their thematic and structural slides towards meaninglessness? Are there any authors out there who are trying to write against this trend? The answers to these questions will become clearer if we closely examine the seminal work of modernism: T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

In *A Handbook to Literature*, C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon describe modernist writing as:

> . . . writing marked by a strong and conscious break with traditional forms and techniques of expression. It employs a distinctive kind of IMAGINATION, one that insists on having its general frame of reference within itself . . . *Modern* implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It not only rejects history but also rejects the society of whose fabrication history is a record. It rejects traditional values and assumptions, and it rejects equally the RHETORIC by which they were sanctioned and communicated. (309, original emphasis)

The Waste Land possesses all of these features.

When T. S. Eliot published *The Waste Land*, he performed a deliberately influential act. This poem, which Eliot was later to characterize (ironically?) as "'only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life . . . a piece of rhythmical grumbling'"(Brooks 318), was, in the early stages of Eliot's career, his lyric testament to and demonstration of the basic aesthetic of modernism, an aesthetic and a practice he was instrumental in creating and popularizing when he wrote "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in 1919. As Shyamal Bagchee states in his article "Eliot and the Poetics of Unpleasantness," "[A]t one level, Eliot was always formulating a

theory of poetry, and . . . he himself needed this theory as much as he thought his age did" (260). His age apparently agreed with him, because *The Waste Land* and Eliot's early critical theories became works that other writers and critics of his time, whether they agreed or disagreed with his poetics, liked or disliked his poetry, had to contend with. Even poets like William Carlos Williams, who despised *The Waste Land* because it "blocked or distorted the authentic native tradition" (Kermode 147), and used the poem as evidence that Eliot was "betraying his American origins" (147) could not ignore the work. In his article "The Last Classic,", Frank Kermode quotes from Williams' autobiography, "'Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him'" (147).

As Russell Elliott Murphy writes in "'It is impossible to say just what I mean': *The Waste Land* as Transcendent Meaning," "The end of the transition from the imaginative mind of the Romantic Age to the imaginative mind of the Modern Age is as surely signalled in T. S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' as William Wordsworth's 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' signals its commencement" (51). Modernism as a literary movement was a squeak that started a big rumble, started the "probing attentiveness to language that is still at the centre of critical activity" (Needham 271) today. As a result, "*The Waste Land* has been the subject of virtually every critical approach twentieth-century literary studies have yet devised" (Murphy 52), from the New Critical perspectives Eliot is often credited with

The complexity of Eliot's poem matches his negative view of cultural dis-order. Russell Murphy describes *The Waste Land* as "a poetry where all distinctions -- between past and present, real and unreal, romantic and classic, ancient and modern, sense and nonsense, self and other -- seem to blur in a confusing symbolic landscape" (51). In it, Eliot employs multiple voices, shifts in tone, location and language, and a looser, more associative structure than that of his Romantic predecessors. These techniques serve to enrich his work. Yet, they also complicate his work, making meanings difficult to pin down. As Murphy states, although today "in a critical landscape coloured by the theories of Deconstruction" we should "feel that we are at last ready to confront even *The Waste Land* as we would 'a comfortable kind of old scarecrow', a poetry of that older and now more optimistic school where meaning is expected and apparently given" (52), we cannot do so. Instead "the poetry of *The Waste Land* remains as cloudy as ever, as if the poet had already anticipated our arguments" (52).

Nevertheless, I disagree with Murphy's statement. Although the poetry of *The Waste Land* remains complex, theorists have, over seventy years of analysis, come to some rudimentary consensus regarding what *The Waste Land* is about. Every critical article on *The Waste Land* deals with the concepts of unfulfilled desire, the search for meaning, and fragmented self and society as expressed by the poem. These topics or theses may not be the central concerns of these articles, but critics certainly recognize them as central elements of the poem. Even more

significantly, in my opinion, introductory texts, texts which present us with a general overview of the poem, tend to emphasize these ideas. When doing research on this paper, I read two of these introductory texts on *The Waste Land, A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot*, by B.C. Southam, and *A Reader's Guide to T. S. Eliot*, by George Williamson. While I recognize that Southam's book is not meant to be original (it is, as he states, a student guide) and Williamson's book was considerably more original and innovative forty years ago, when first published, by today's standards, neither of these books is particularly innovative in its approach to *The Waste Land*. Indeed, both books appear designed for the undergraduate's perusal, as books which would help you understand *The Waste Land* if you had no experience with literary analysis, or close reading. However, both clearly affirm that "Eliot's immediate Waste Land is the world, . . . the emotional and spiritual sterility of Western man, the 'waste' of our civilization" (Southam, 69) and that the poem is "concerned with both the development and the decline of religious feeling in modern man" (Williamson, 154) -- religion, in this case, defined as any philosophy which adds meaning to life. These ideas are what students who study the poem are likely to perceive as the central concepts of the poem. These concepts have become, in most people's eyes "what *The Waste Land* is about."

I also acknowledge that other critics have found *The Waste Land* to possess central ideas other than the ones I have mentioned. For example, Christine Froula, in her article

"Eliot's Grail Quest, or, The Lover, The Police, and *The Waste Land*," sees *The Waste Land* not as an "abstract and impersonal report on modernity by an avatar of a world-weary generation but a passionate elegy -- a modernist *In Memoriam* " (235). In it, Eliot is trying to comply with the "law of the father" by killing off that part of himself which identifies with the mother, the desiring self. She reads *The Waste Land* as Eliot's drama of sacrificing his own lover-self to "the forbidding, judging, threatening self -- the Police" (237). Similarly, David Roessel, in his article "'Mr. Eugenides, The Smyrna Merchant,' and Post-War Politics in *The Waste Land*," states that one of the themes of *The Waste Land* is that "the new nation-states (springing up in Europe after World War I) did not foster the 'European mind' as well as the old empires had" (171).

It is not my purpose here to examine the changes in Eliot's poetics after *The Waste Land*. I acknowledge that works like *Four Quartets*, *The Elder Statesman* and "A Dedication to My Wife" show that Eliot's belief in the power of faith, religion, and love as meaningful forces increased as he grew older. However, *The Waste Land* remains Eliot's most popular and theoretically influential work. The attitudes expressed in in are the ones most often, rightly or wrongly, associated with Eliot. For these reasons, I will only be examining *The Waste Land*. Nor is it my purpose to study all of the potential interpretations and nuances in *The Waste Land*. That would be the work of several lifetimes, a task I am not equipped to tackle. I will, instead, examine two of *The Waste Land's* signature features -- its fragmented subjectivity

and its sterile imagery -- to show how these features of the poem support the some of central precepts of modernism. Using *The Waste Land* as a test case, I will investigate the possibility of deconstructionist and postmodernist readings of a modernist work, illustrate some of the advantages and disadvantages provided by these readings, and trace literary and theoretical slide towards meaninglessness such readings encourage.

I will then examine one author's response to the theory and literature of exhaustion: in Chaim Potok's novel, *Davita's Harp*, his narrative subject, Davita, is actively involved in fabrication and composition. She is a powerful agent who acts upon the world as well as being acted on by it. Employing the transformative power of language and story, and anchored a newly-acquired Jewish faith, she takes the tangled scattered threads of the jumbled modern landscape and weaves them into a meaningful, personal philosophy, achieving a certain degree of balance and contentment. In writing against the literature of exhaustion, Potok challenges assumptions about writing, reading, learning and living in the twentieth century that modernism and modernist authors and critics make. It also challenges some of the central presumptions about life, language and meaning made by deconstrution and post-modernism.

Chapter One

One of the most striking features of *The Waste Land* is its fragmented subjectivity. It is impossible to identify who is speaking this poem. As Laurence Lerner writes in his article "On Ambiguity, Modernism, and Sacred Texts," "The speaking subject is constantly unsettled [by language], so that we cannot ascribe the lines to one coherent voice" (135).

This characteristic of the poem is evident from its first stanza. *The Waste Land* opens with the lines:

> April is the cruellest month, breeding
> Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
> Memory and desire, stirring
> Dull roots with spring rain.
> Winter kept us warm, covering
> Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
> A little life with dried tubers. (I, 1-7)

The narrative voice (or speaking subject, if you prefer) in the first four lines is an authoritative, narrative, first person voice. Because men have traditionally been the sources of authority, in literature as well as society, because male poets, at the time Eliot published *The Waste Land*, were more widely published and read than female poets, and because the author is himself male, we tend to gender the speaking subject as male at this point in the poem. The male, individual "I" is the subject we have come to expect from poetic tradition, and, at

first, it does not seem that Eliot will disappoint us. The narrator or subject speaks directly to the reader using frank, connected, referential language. Even the subject matter he speaks of is "traditional." Despite the fact that the narrator subverts the usual relationship of the poetic narrator to spring (April is not usually described in poetry as the cruellest month, but one that saves the population from the harsh cold of winter), these lines could have come from any poem extolling the virtues of nature and the seasons. The narrator speaks, with telling irony, of flowers, a favourite Romantic poetic subject, from Whitman's "When Lilacs last in the Dooryard Bloomed" to Tennyson's "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal." He also contrasts spring and winter, dredging up another traditional poetic subject, the seasons.

In the next three lines, Eliot complicates his subject's narrative position slightly, by changing the speaker from singular to plural. He is no longer speaking only of himself, and his responses, but is speaking with a "we" voice. The narrative voice is that of a clique or social class. Indeed, one could postulate at this point that the subject is not a single, male, individual, but a group of people. Eliot writes "Winter kept *us* warm" (emphasis mine). The subject(s) still speak with authority, and the ideas the subject(s) present in these three lines are connected, both syntactically and through subject matter, to the lines which preceded them. The subject(s) does not stop talking about the seasons, nor does he/they reverse his/their opinion about the advantage winter has over summer.

He/they enlarge(s) the original thesis "April is the cruellest month" by extolling, in contrast, the benefits of winter over spring. Winter helps to make him/them forget (which, the narrator(s) imply, is a good thing. Further, winter maintains "A little life with dried tubers." By this line, the narrative subject(s) imply that a little life is more than enough for him/them, much more kind than the mixing of "Memory and desire" which spring encourages.

The reader's easy relationship to topic and subject position does not last. The next lines ("Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee/ With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,/ And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,/ and drank coffee, and talked for an hour" (I, 8-11)) do not seem to be connected to the ones which came before them. Instead of the expository singular/plural narrative voice found in the first seven lines, we have a descriptive, singular/plural voice that describes a specific experience he/they had. Further, the season in which this experience occurred is summer, rather than winter or spring. There has been an abrupt shift in time and place, chronological as well as locational disjunction. Only by forcing connections between the topic being discussed (drinking coffee in summer in Germany) and the topic ot the preceding lines (the anesthetizing, numbing, comforting experience of winter) can we even think of the subject drinking coffee in the German sunshine as the same subject who made the universal declaration "April is the cruellest month." (You could, if forcing the issue, read the coffee drinking lines as the subject's attempt to delineate for

the reader the place and time he/they decided or discussed the concept of April's cruelty.) But it is more probable that a different subject is speaking the coffee drinking lines than the one who spoke the first seven lines, a speaker who may represent one of the voices making up the he/they universalized voice which begins the poem.

Any attempt to read the speaker of the coffee drinking lines as the subject of the first seven lines is further destabilized by the line, "Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch" (I, 12). The reader questions whether the subject who speaks this line is even related to the person who was speaking before. The first subject seemed to be a native English speaker, so expressive was his/their English. However, this line is in vernacular German, so either the speaker has changed, and a different subject is speaking this line, or the first subject is bilingual. The question becomes even more complicated when one learns that the German line means "I am not Russian, I come from Lithuania, pure German." The subject is not even "German" as the boundaries of Germany exist today, or indeed, as they existed in 1919 - 1921, when the poem was written. He is from Lithuania, a Baltic state.

Who is the speaker of this line, and why does it matter to him that he be considered German? Is it possible that the speaker was trying to draw our attention to the English/German linguistic ties? If so, to what purpose? What possible connection could one subject's pride in German heritage have to

the subject(s) who told us that "April is the cruellest month?" The reader is left to flounder in the wake of these questions. The shifts in language, in subject matter, in style and in tone have made him/her question who is speaking, and what exactly he/they are trying to say about language, self, nationality and culture.

Eliot further alters or transforms the speaker with the lines:

> And when we were children staying at the arch-
> duke's,
> My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
> And I was frightened. He said, Marie,
> Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
> In the mountains, there you feel free. (I, 13-17)

Now, the subject is a woman reliving childhood memories, whose presence causes us to reevaluate our assumptions surrounding who was speaking before, to realize that nothing explicit in preceding lines tells us that the speaker, the subject of this poem, was not always a woman. By beginning his poem using an authoritative, narrative, first person subject to open his poem, Eliot leads us (at least, those of us who know something about poetic tradition) to hypothesize that the speaker is male. Now we realize that we made an assumption based on the sex of the author, and the fact that narrators of serious poems traditionally have been male. This tug-of-war between expectation and reality parallels Eliot's strategy of shattering

social, artistic and sexual notions. We are left unsettled by this "sex change," which further complicates our understanding of subjectivity in the poem.

The first stanza in *The Waste Land* concludes with the line "I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter" (I, 18). This could be a statement made by the female narrator who just finished describing her ride on the sled. However, the lines she spoke were descriptive, detailing a specific experience. They were not expository. They did not declaim, or describe a habitual experience, as this line does. In tone, this line has more in common with "April is the cruellest month" or "Winter kept us warm" than with "Marie,/Marie, hold on tight." The subject who speaks this final line resembles the straightforward, male subject who began the poem. However, the "I" goes south in the winter. If this is the same "I" who began the poem attesting to the cruelty of spring, why would he then go south for the winter, causing spring to come even earlier for him? Why would he go out of his way to avoid the "winter" that "kept us warm?" Eliot seems now to be subverting the notion of a narrator, a narrative, a stanza. The final line suggests that its narrator and the one who began the poem are not the same person, even though they speak with similar authority.

With seven changes in narrative voice within the first stanza, Eliot signals his intent to destabilize the subject, to fragment him/her throughout *The Waste Land*. The subject/voice moves from that of a male, omniscient prophet to a female in a

garden, from a man having his fortune read, to the voice of a drowned Phoenician sailor, from an upper-class dilettante lover, to a lower-class female pub-crawler. The subject appears to be the Fisher King at one point, Ferdinand of Naples at another, and Tiresias at still another point, acting as the fulcrum of male/female experience, ". . . throbbing between two lives" (III, 218). He/she is a river nymph, a Grail quester, the hanged man, the modern man. He is everyone, to some degree, and he is no-one. He/she is bricolage.

Why would Eliot want to make his reader uncertain about who is speaking? There are many possible reasons, social, political and literary. Perhaps Eliot is trying to tell the reader that the identity of the speaker is not particularly important. Eliot was, after all, apparently comfortable with radically altering traditional poetic and narrative structure when he wanted to. He makes this clear in his notes to *The Waste Land*. When he describes the Madame Sosostris section of the poem in his notes, he states that he did not match characters in the Tarot deck with their traditional meanings. Some of the characters in this section of the poem were created/transformed to "suit my own convenience" (42). He writes:

> The Hanged Man, a member of the traditional pack, fits my purpose in two ways: because he is associated in my mind with the Hanged God of Frazer, and because I associate him with the hooded figure in the passage of the disciples to Emmaus in Part V. The Phoenician Sailor and the Merchant [who are not part of the

> traditional pack] appear later; . . . The Man with Three Staves (an authentic member of the Tarot Pack) I associate, quite arbitrarily, with the Fisher King himself (42-43).

By this statement, Eliot informs his readers that although making use of traditional sources to enhance meaning is important to him, exact correspondence to traditional meanings of those sources is not. Although the Man with Three Staves is part of the traditional pack, and speaks in the pack with one voice, signifies one thing, he can, through manipulation by the author, just as easily represent the Fisher King, and come to stand for something else. The reason Eliot gives for changing the traditional meaning, for making one subject stand for something history does not support is his personal, creative association.

If one carries this belief to extremes, one would be able to write with great freedom, unhooking subject and objects from their traditional locations and meanings and binding them to new ones. April could easily be "the cruellest month" instead of the traditional harbinger of joy, fertility, beginnings and hope. The reader's security and clarity are sacrificed to the writer's innovation and all reference points, and ironies, would disappear.

Eliot acknowledges the slippage of the subject/voice in his poem:

The second kind of objectivity presupposes that there is no "purely objective order or reality wholly independent of and unmodified in human perception" (200) because human perception is the only tool through which we can perceive reality. The best that we can hope for is to have a group of informed observers observe and analyze the same thing and come to the same conclusions. In order for this type of "consensual" agreement to be achieved, the members who come together must have a similar "way of living" or "living practice" (202), or to put it another way, must have a similar social and cultural history. They also must be able to build on their common experience, using it as a springboard from which they can extrapolate "'a practice beyond the contingent instances one is already familiar with'" (202).

Eliot, and other modernists, tended to conflate these two views of objectivity in their literary theories. In his "Impersonal theory of poetry," Eliot showed that impersonality means "not being governed or distorted by narrowly individual private or personal prejudice or outlook but rather conforming (deliberately or not) to the more-than-personal norms, criteria or methods of viewing or judging things of the given sort in the given culture" (204). This would seem to be in line with the theory of consensual objectivity explained by Shusterman. According to Shusterman, Eliot believed that:

> '[T]he progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality' . . . so that he can serve as a 'neutral', 'non-distortive,' finely perfected medium' for sundry

> things and images to be accurately recorded, stored and allowed to form themselves into 'new combinations' (205).

If Shusterman is correct in his interpretation of Eliot's opinions (Eliot's use of word like "neutral," "non-distortive," and "medium" to describe the what an artist should be striving for in his/her work indicates to me that Shusterman probably interprets Eliot's views accurately in this instance), Eliot also believed in some independent or universal reality which could be accurately observed and recorded by the poet if he were able to eliminate personality.

How does Eliot's literary theory of Impersonality manifest itself in fragmented subjectivity in *The Waste Land*? I refer back to Eliot's notes where he states that "all women [in the poem] are one woman" and Tiresias represents both sexes. The fragmented subjects in the poem, then, can be regarded as a composite personality, or different manifestations of a disunited community. Each subject has a different perspective, as each subject represents the perspectives of sex, class and occupation. Taken together, however, these subjects represent all of humanity. Linked by anomie, ennui and isolation, ironically, they approach the universal.

When the subjects express their disillusionment with sex, love, Western culture and society, their collective disappointment forms the disillusionment of a whole civilization. The singular subject disillusioned with society as it currently

exists, may, because of specific personal experience, feel that way when no one else does. He or she may be experiencing a subjective response. However, when the Fisher King sits "Fishing, with the arid plain behind [him]" (V, 424), when one of the water nymphs asserts "I can connect/ Nothing with nothing" (IV, 301-302), when another man hears, at his back "[t]he rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (III, 186), and when yet another subject promises, "I will show you fear in a handful of dust" (I, 30) one sees a historical thesis. There is something wrong with Western civilization. It is collapsing. Anyone and everyone knows it.

When one reads in Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land* that he has subjectivity is arbitrary, that he "arbitrarily" associated characters with meanings "to suit [his] own convenience," one is tempted to wonder what Eliot meant. Did he mean "arbitrary" in the sense of capricious or erratic, picked by the sheer whim of the author? I doubt this. *The Waste Land* is, after all, a poem by a man who believed that crafting poetry is difficult, requiring the true poet, the classic poet, the mature poet (all of which he believed he was) to work with the utmost deliberateness and diligence. He favoured what Shyamal Bagchee terms "a poetics of 'unpleasantness' . . . characterized by self-discipline, hard labour, much learning and an ascetic temperament" (263). He also advocated "the dramatic use of language" (Needham 280) where "'the combinations of words offer perpetual novelty'" (280). In order to achieve this dramatic use of language, poets must choose their words with care. All in

all, Eliot does not sound like a poet who would choose anything capriciously. Why, then, did he say this?

I believe Eliot's chose the word "arbitrary" for its alternate connotations, to show the reader that choices are both subjective and personal. Through his use of the word arbitrary, he was attempting to explain that not even he, a poet who believed in the value of a literary tradition, who asserted in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that "'tradition must be obtained by great labour'" (Bagchee 263), who claimed that the poet must be aware of his historical place in order to write well and effectively, could refer with accuracy to the past. Eliot could not know all the past significances of the subjects he resurrects in *The Waste Land*, the uses to which they were traditionally put. The meaning of The Man with Three Staves in the Tarot card pack, for example, is not commonly known any more. Eliot pretends he has "arbitrarily" designated him to be the Fisher King. However, he has no choice. The people of Eliot's age have misplaced too much of their history in their rush to "progress."

Eliot demonstrates this disconnectedness in other sections of *The Waste Land*. For example, in "A Game of Chess," "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king/ So rudely forced" (II, 99-100) is no longer a myth most people know. It has become one of the "other of the withered stumps of time" (II, 104) which decorate a room. It is no longer a story that animates a culture, sheds some meaning on our lives, but rather a carved

scene on a mantle piece, used for decoration only. Similarly, a line from Verlaine's Parsifal, which once formed part of one version of the grail quest ("Et, O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole" (III, 202)) has become nothing but a tag-along phrase to a ribald Australian ballad. Nothing retains its original meaning.

In "*The Waste Land*: A Prophetic Document," Cleanth Brooks states that Eliot, like many of his modernist contemporaries, "shared . . . a sense of the [Western] culture's failure and breakdown" (321). He was also very concerned with "the fragmentation of the older culture and its consequences" (323) for contemporary life. One of the consequences is that modern humanity can only know everything in fragments. As Murphy states, "Everything we 'know', the poet of *The Waste Land* reminds us very early on, we know only in bits and pieces, in halves if not less" (58). Eliot makes this very clear in the first section on the poem when he writes:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images . . . (I, 19-11)

Another consequence is a loss of wisdom in action. As Cleanth Brooks states:

> The past is important to the protagonist [or protagonists of *The Waste Land*]. It may even contain wisdom, though rarely of the sort that would occur to

> a social engineer or to the typical politician. But the actions that wisdom may propose are at once too simple and too inward to be attractive to modern man . . . many of those living in the United States today see them [fragments of the past] as meaningless bits and pieces, mere detritus. (326).

When people fail to learn from the past, the present and future do not make as much sense to them, the value of knowledge disappears and civilization dissolves. No matter how many ". . . fragments we have shored against [our] ruins" (V, 430), we are still "Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie" (V, 429). We are never complete and satisfied. "London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down" (V, 426). It is possible that Eliot's used fragmented subjectivity to intensify the sense of decay and social instability he wanted to depict in *The Waste Land*.

If Eliot's use of fragmented subjectivity in *The Waste Land* has to do with wanting to demonstrate his stylistic or critical beliefs, it also has to do with personal insecurities and neuroses. During his life, Eliot seemed to be a man uncomfortable in his own skin, unsure of his position in relation his world, uncertain of his own cultural, political, literary, interpersonal and sexual identities.

Although he was born in St. Louis, Missouri and grew up in Massachusetts, upon moving to England, he became "more English than the English." In "The Last Classic" Frank Kermode remarks that Eliot:

> showed some of the enthusiasm of the convert, even, on occasion, presenting himself as a slightly ironic caricature of the royalist: he liked to wear a white rose on the anniversary of the battle of Bosworth and a red tie on the feast of St. Charles . . . He was a serious clubman and notorious for his wish to be recognized as a connoisseur of British cheese. He believed in empire. (151-152).

He was in voluntary cultural exile from the land of his birth. In addition:

> [i]n the years between the wars, as editor of a journal of exiguous circulation that was held in an unusual posture by its dual loyalties, [Eliot] was, despite his growing celebrity, in a condition of literary and political exile. Furthermore, in his personal life he was an exile from marriage. It is evident, too, that in many of his relationships he was constrained to avoid the degree of intimacy that might require him to confide in, or simply to feel easy with and approachable by, another person. Lyndall Gordon tells us repeatedly of the rhythm by which Eliot would seem to come close to friends or potential lovers and then back off, without explanation and perhaps inexplicably rejecting them, as if isolation or aloneness were something he was compelled to choose. (159)

In "Eliot's Grail Quest, or, The Lover, the Police and *The Waste Land*," Christine Froula asserts that Eliot "could neither embrace nor abandon, neither repress nor sublime (or in Verlaine's word, 'conquer') his early desire not to have but to be a woman." (251). She suggests that Eliot had homosexual and transsexual yearnings he could not come to terms with. She believes that he suffered sexual exile in addition to the other types of exile Kermode identifies. It is possible, then, that Eliot's fragmented subjectivity in *The Waste Land*, his abrupt shifts in narrative voice -- from female clairvoyant, Madame Sosostris, to the Fisher King, to Ferdinand of Naples, to the sled-riding Marie, to upper class lady, to lower class pub-crawler, to the male/female Tiresias -- also reflect personal discomforts. Both his internal and external landscapes were broken, then.

I would like to move on to a discussion of the landscape depicted in *The Waste Land.* The subject(s) of the poem find themselves in a land that is flat, barren and sterile. Eliot, in his notes, connects his poem to Grail legend and vegetation myths. He implies that reading Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* "will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do" (42). The reader immediately notices that *The Waste Land* does not conform to the structure of the traditional Grail quest.

According to Froula, Jessie Weston, in *From Ritual to Romance,* "traces the origins of the Grail romances to primitive

male initiation rites, which, anthropologists and psychologists have argued, work to effect a separation between the boy and his mother" (Froula, 239). The boy first finds himself in the "green world of the mother" a pastoral landscape. When he performs initiation rituals that "make the boy over to the father's law" (239), he "lays waste to the green (well-watered) world" (240). He then must search for a magic vessel or grail to restore the land. He pierces the womb/cup, stealing the woman/mother's power, and uses this to restore the father.

This is not how *The Waste Land* is structured. The narrative voices do not find themselves in a green land at the beginning of the poem: *The Waste Land* opens just before spring begins. The speaker(s) dread spring because "April is the cruellest month." He/she/they would rather stay in winter forever, numb and anesthetized. The physical landscape surrounding the subject(s) are bleak: "stony rubbish" (I, 20). The speaker(s) only assets are "A heap of broken images" (I, 22). The world is dry, not lush, not verdant, not well-watered. The subject(s), beginning their quest are in a place where ". . . the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief/ And the dry stone no sound of water." (I, 23-24). Their only relief is the shadow, under the red rock, a safe space in which to contemplate what had gone before, and what is to come. They remember a time when the physical landscape was alive and growing ("'They called me the hyacinth girl'" [I, 36]) but that time is not now. Now, the sea, too, is desolate and empty ("Oed' und leer das Meer" [I, 42]).

When the subject(s) decides to begin his quest, things do not improve. He/she/they see(s) a vision of the future which is anything but fertile. The dead are walking, almost hypnotized, across London bridge, "[u]nder the brown fog of a winter dawn" (I, 61). Not even death as sacrifice to bring about new life can save the world. The corpse planted in the garden, can easily be dug up by the dog, "that's friend to men" (I, 74) if you are not careful.

The subject(s) try sex, once celebrated in myth and fertility rite as a regenerative technique, but to no avail. In the guise of an upper-class male, the subject still sees his vision of death and doom. He tells his lover, "I think we are in rats' alley/ Where the dead men lost their bones" (II, 115-116). Nor does the subject as lower-class, female barfly have any more success with sex and regeneration. Producing children has almost cost her her own life. We are told that "[s]he's had five already, and nearly died of young George" (II, 160). She had to abort the last child, and that's why she looks so old. Further, now that she is getting old, her husband may leave he for someone else. In *The Waste Land*, sex is not the road to regeneration. It has become something mechanical, something of which you say, as another subject in the poem does, "'Well now that's done; and I'm glad it's over'" (III, 252). It is commercial, something to be exchanged for ". . . luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel/ Followed by a weekend at the Metropole" (III, 213-14).

At the poem's end, the subject(s) face, not a green, renewed landscape, but the withered, dry landscape they tried to escape or find a way to cure at the beginning of the poem. One subject makes this clear when he/she/they state:

> After the torchlight red of sweaty faces
> After the frosty silence in the gardens
> After the agony in stony places
> The shouting and the crying
> Prison and palace and reverberation
> Of thunder of spring over distant mountains
> He who was living is now dead
> We who were living are now dying
> With a little patience. (V, 322-330)

The quest has been unsuccessful. The subject(s) have heard the "thunder of spring" from a distance, but have not been able to reach it, to tame it, to cause healing rains to fall on the land. Instead, they are in a "here" where there is " . . . no water but only rock" (V, 331). There is only " . . . dry sterile thunder without rain" (V, 342). The subject(s) pray and plead for "water" with the rest of the " . . . voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (V, 384), but no God hears them. Religion is yet another traditional source of regeneration which is, in this poem, unable to help regenerate the physical and psychological landscape. As the subject(s) state, "There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home" (V, 388).

When all hope is gone, finally, the rain falls and the thunder speaks to them, giving counsel and advice. Surprisingly, the solution proposed to the problems of Western civilization is a recipe from the East, from the Upanishads. That recipe is "'*Datta, dayadhvam, damyata*'" or "Give, sympathize, control." By appropriating an Eastern philosophy and offering it to his narrative subjects and his readers as a possible solution for Western civilization's crisis of faith, Eliot underscores his belief in the West's moral and spiritual bankruptcy. If the subject(s) and those they represent were able to follow this recipe, they might yet be saved (such is the implication). But they cannot. The last narrative voice we see in this poem, the fisher king, is "[f]ishing, with the arid plan behind [him] (V, 424). And all he can do to ". . . set [his] lands in order" (V, 425) is to gather up his fragments and try and shore up the ruined tower that is his life, his reality.

Why did Eliot depict the landscape of *The Waste Land* as consistently barren? There are many potential answers to this question. Perhaps he did so out of a theoretical and critical belief in the "poetics of unpleasantness" In his article "Eliot and the Poetics of 'Unpleasantness,'" Shyamal Bagchee discusses Eliot's belief, in the early part of his career, that difficult poetry meant poetry that was harsh, unpleasant in subject matter, disturbing in imagery and landscape. If there were to be humour in this poetry, "that humour was to be pronouncedly of and intellectual kind" for Eliot "saw little ready use for what he once called 'a comedy of mirth'" (263). As a result of this

as his last word on poetics. In fact, Eliot's later poetry was highly criticised for being "mawkish and awkward" (Bagchee, 257). Ironically, Eliot's work lost some of its stature in the eyes of modernist critics, who chose to judge him by his own former aesthetic standards. These critics were "influenced greatly by Eliot himself" and had, by the time these later poems were written "elevated unpleasantness and fastidiousness of the level of admirable and fashionable aesthetic criteria" (257). Eliot and his fellow modernists, such as Woolf, Yeats, and Pound and Richards, tended to privilege difficult, disturbing texts over optimistic, straightforward, lyrical texts.

One quest they shared was for an unconventional, counter-traditional art form to match their ironic views of civilization. Woolf, in "Modern Fiction," declared, "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (108). The task of the superior novelist, wishing to produce a superior novel, was to avoid filling pages "in customary ways" (108). Instead, readers and writers should embrace "the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," 128). Yeats, in "A People's Theatre. A Letter to Lady Gregory," confided his desire to "create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many" (81). His ideal audience would be well-educated, literate, and the plays would possess "a complexity of rhythm, colour, gesture" (81).

Pound argued for poetry which was "compose[d] in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome" (59) and urged poets to "let the neophyte know assonance and alliteration, rhyme immediate and delayed, simple and polyphonic, as a musician would expect to know harmony and counterpoint and all the minutiae of his craft" (62). And Richards praised *The Waste Land* because it causes the "responsive reader" to "reread and do hard work before the poem forms itself clearly and unambiguously in his mind" (150). These critics, like Eliot, were trying to formulate a new poetics to oppose the aesthetic view of the Romantic poets. A poetics of unpleasantness, and a new literature written and evaluated on the basis of this new literary theory would help to accomplish this, and Eliot was certainly aware of this.

Eliot was also trying to reflect, through his scenery, his belief that civilization was falling apart. This was a belief shared by other modernists. It is often attributed to the disillusionment felt by intellectuals after World War I. As Cleanth Brooks remarks:

> At the end of World War I, many of the brightest minds saw that what had occurred had dealt not only a fatal blow to the European cultural unit but perhaps a devastating blow to the meaning of culture itself. Technology, the opening up of the "dark" continent of Africa, and the westernizing of Asia had given the promise of a peaceful and progressive world. Then the war that could not happen, happened. (322)

As a result of the war, and the changes initiated by the war, many of the artists and critics who became part of the modernist movement lost their faith in humanity, in the capacity or willingness to perform meaningful action in a world where people were de-humanized by increasing violence, industrialization and alienation from the past. From Yeats' prophetic declaration in "The Second Coming" ("Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (294, 4-5)) to Shrike's assertion in Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts* that there is no escape from the horrors of reality ("'My friend, I know of course that neither the soil, nor the South Seas, nor Hedonism, nor art, nor suicide, nor drugs, can mean anything to us.'"[35]), the modernists seemed to believe no force, be it religion, beauty, sex or self-indulgence, currently exists that is capable of acting as a regenerative catalyst. Nothing could add meaning to the modern existence, at least nothing the modern person would accept: "society provides 'no logical place' not only for religion but also for 'compassion, or contemplative reason' -- which is to be expected from a 'culture of narcissism'" (Brooks, 330) that would rather dream than act. The bleak landscape of *The Waste Land* demonstrates that Eliot shares with his fellow modernists a lack of faith in Western civilisation and its capacity to find any philosophy or ideal meaningful. He uses sterile imagery and the Grail legend to predict how the future of Western civilization could and would look, unless we became more willing to "give, sympathize, control."

Thus far, I have shown that T.S Eliot, through his use of poetic devices like fragmented subjectivity and desolate landscape in *The Waste Land* was able to dramatize some of the central theses or concerns of the modernist movement. Yet, *The Waste Land*, which can so readily by read as a modernist or New Critical manifesto, containing within it the central concerns or beliefs of the modernist authors and popularizing their critical theories, can be and is also read as a deconstructionist text. As Ruth Nevo states in "*The Waste Land*: Ur-Text of Deconstruction," *The Waste Land*:

> . . . presents us with, appropriately enough in a field thick with them, our first paradox, or strange loop in time. T.S. Eliot, one of the fathers of the New Critical sensibility, with its bias toward the objective, the unsentimental, the dispassionate, the rational, the technical . . . was also the founding father of New Criticism's devourer. (454)

In Nevo's opinion, "*The Waste Land*, that seminal modernist poem of 1922, can now be read as a postmodernist poem of 1982; as a deconstructionist Ur-text, even as a Deconstructionist Manifesto" (454). She further states that "[i]n the heyday of New Criticism it was customary to attempt to unify *The Waste Land*" (454), to discover within the poem central structuring myth(s), or theses, and an overall subject matter. However, Nevo believes that "on the contrary, disunification, or desedimentation, or dissemination (to use Derridian terminology) is the *raison d'etre* of the poem . . . and that if one wanted a

concise account of it, one could not do better than to quote Derrida himself on his own practice" (454-455). *The Waste Land*, she argues:

> exhibits throughout 'a certain strategic arrangement, which, within the field and its own powers, turn[s] against itself its own stratagems, produc[ing] a force of dislocation which spreads itself though the whole system, splitting it in all directions and delimiting it through and through.' (455)

Nevo provides many reasons why she believes *The Waste Land* to be the Ur-text of deconstruction. It is her observation that "in *The Waste Land* the fundamental categories of literary discourse are dismantled or simply abandoned" (453). She believes that:

> there is no narrative, there is no time, though there are 'withered stumps of time,' and no place -- or rather there is no single time or place but a constant, bewildering shifting and disarray of times and places; there is no unifying central character either speaking or spoken about, no protagonist or antagonist, no drama, no epic, no lyric, though there are moments of all of these. (455)

As evidence, Nevo presents us with some of the same qualities or features of the poem which the modernist critics I cite in the first portion of this paper use to support modernist critical theory, and Eliot's own critical writing. For example,

Nevo remarks that the lack of a central, unified, constant narrative presence or subject in the poem, combined with the lack of "an overall subject matter, or argument, or myth, or theme for the poem to be unequivocally about" (455) and the lack of "obvious conventional poetic features such as meter, rhyme, stanza, or . . . symmetries" (455) destabilize the relationship between signifieds and signifiers in a "modernist" or structuralist work. *The Waste Land* is "an apogee of fragmentation and discontinuity, referring, if at all, only to itself. But this self that it is is constituted by what it is not, its presence is made up of its absences" (456). As such, *The Waste Land* focuses the readers attention more on what is not present in the poem than what is present. In so doing, Eliot is (perhaps unwittingly) supporting the deconstructionist program of criticism, since "deconstruction wants to show that the text says the opposite (or: also says the opposite) of what it seems to say, or is traditionally thought of to say" (Ellis, 262). Read this way (and that is Nevo's purpose in her article, to read things in deconstructionist fashion) Eliot's text becomes a celebration of ambiguity, flouting the concepts of authority and order.

In similar fashion, Nevo argues that the symbols in *The Waste Land* simply "refuse to symbolize" (Nevo, 456). Although the poem contains all of the traditional, standard, overarching symbols, like "City, Garden, Desert, River" (456), they do not represent, clear, identifiable concepts. Instead they are "Janus-faced, multivalent, ambiguous" (456). Modernists would

likely have read these symbols as being "opaque with the opacity of the concrete" (456), or, as Yeats did, regarded the symbols as being "transparent lamps around a spiritual flame, unified, abstract, conceptional" (456). Nevo, however, reads them as "possibilities in unceasing dialectical interchange" (456), contradicting and unmaking themselves before our very eyes. As readers, we are "challenged to find an interpretive key to this dream" but "cannot" (456). Since one of the central precepts of deconstruction is that "the construct, by its very nature, has already undone or dismantled or deconstructed itself" (Harmon and Holman, 133), the multivalent symbols in *The Waste Land* serve as additional evidence that *The Waste Land* is the "Ur-text" of deconstruction.

Nevo further argues that *The Waste Land* is a text which "has no beginning or end." It could "begin anywhere and end anywhere because it has no inception and no center and no closure" (456). Although "Shantih, Shantih Shantih" has the ritual sound of closure, it is "only a fragment in the plethora of dissociated fragments" which make up the poem. She believes that the poem is so random, in structure, ordering and subject matter that "[o]ne could reallocate the parts at any point with no noticeable consequence to the overall effect, and with no noticeable effect upon the innumerable exegeses which have been attempted" (457).

Nevo views the lack of structure in *The Waste Land* as the reason for the poem's "irreducible plurality of meaning" (457), the reason it can be read as "reconstructed myth," as "a sermon .

. . preaching a Christian message in a Brahman disguise," as a "yet unachieved long poem in the Imagist mode" (an exercise in poetic ability only), as "an objectivist panorama of the decadent times" or as "deeply personal elegy" on the death of a friend (458-59). By writing a poem which "valoriz[es] plurality to a point where no vestige of embarrassment stemming rationalist, universalist traditions of thought is left" (459), Eliot is destabilizing and deprivleging authority and the idea of single, authoritative readings, "deconstruct[ing] distinctions between critic and author, 'fiction' and 'fact,' presentation and representation, origin and supplement" (460-61), and using "the classic, central deconstructionist themes" (461).

The Waste Land possesses many of the characteristics Nevo outlines in her article: the fragmented subjectivity, the symbols which multiply and proliferate, the many different readings which can be supported by it or meanings imbedded within it. These are important features of the poem. These features are valued by deconstructionists. In her article, "A Commonsensical Protest Against Deconstruction, or How the Real World At Last Became a Fable," Caroline Eckhard defines deconstruction as:

> [an] approach to literary analysis [that] takes the text apart into discreet sections, subjects the sections to close reading (so far this is the same process that critics of a quite different bent might invoke), and demonstrates that the text dissolves into irreconcilable sets of contraries. Its grammar may be

> seen as contrary to its ostensible meaning, or its metaphors in opposition to each other or to themselves, or its verbal texture as a whole in conflict against the possibility of unequivocal interpretation. The net effect is a message that there can be no message. (311)

A deconstructionist reading of *The Waste Land* might be very useful. When one begins to break a piece of writing down into its constituent elements, when one begins to read, as Derrida states, so that all language becomes discourse, then all literature becomes:

> a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification indefinitely. (280)

Or, to phrase it as Roland Barthes does in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

> *Text* means *Tissue;* but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue -- this texture -- the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of his web. (64)

A deconstructionist reading transfers the reader's focus away from the author, from the narrative subject, and from the meaning of the work, and instead focuses his/her attention squarely on language and subject matter, on the words used and what they refer to (and each word can refer to many contradictory things). When one reads literature this way, one begins to realize, as Michel Foucault states, that:

> [t]he frontiers of a book are never clear-cut; beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stops, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences; it is a node within a network (23)

By reading *The Waste Land* as a deconstructionist Ur-text, one becomes, paradoxically, hyper-aware of its structure. By scrutinizing the words Eliot chooses (or does not choose), the proliferating symbols, and the poem's structure (or lack of it), one not only gains a greater understanding of the choices (or non-choices) made by Eliot but of the structure or lack of it, choices or non-choices made by the society that spawned him (and indirectly, the work). A deconstructionist would say that Eliot's text speaks just as eloquently through what is does not say. The text "'functions *against* its own explicit (metaphysical) constructions'" (Atkins, 115).

Carla Raschke explains the deconstructionist's attitude towards the search for meaning in "Harlequins and Beggars:

Deconstruction and the Face of Fashionable Nihilism." She writes:

> Just as nominalist semantics exploded late Scholasticism's habit of reifying types, so deconstruction calls into question what I elsewhere have called the 'ruse of reference,' the philosophical presumption that the linguistic signifier has a privileged correlate, a given cypher. . . Ingredient in all theories of reference is the supposition that one representation has its intelligibility only through another representation. (121-22).

When one believes this, then "[t]here is never a reference point . . . to ascertain, understand, repudiate, or defend. There is only a *verbal display*, the 'scene'" (122). Or, as Rasche also phrases it, "[t]he meaning is in the saying. . . [it] depends not on identification, but on differentiation" (123). A deconstructionist believes that "[t]he plenitude of meaning in language can only be released when the familiarity of reference is sacrificed" (123). Thus, a deconstructive reading only exits at the expense of the subject, both in terms of the disappearance of distinct, individual, narrative subjects, and of distinct, individual, identifiable subject matter.

That deconstructive readings may not be useful for some types of work is a fact that many deconstructionist critics do not seem to want to believe or acknowledge. In "A Commonsensical Protest Against Deconstruction," Eckhard quotes deconstructionist

critics, like Douglas Atkins, who believes that "the text is a means of access to something else, and the harder we look at it the more its apparent solidity disappears" (311), and Stanley Fish, who "regards the ideal that texts (or even authors) have a reality of their own as an outmoded illusion, for it is only interpretation that is real" (311) and states that "those of us who have thought, in the ordinary way, that words on paper constitute a meaningful text have been deluding ourselves" (312). When one believes that texts do not mean and subjects have no solid identity, one relegates those in the past who believed in meaning, authorial intention, unified subjectivity, to the back room. The deconstructionist critic assumes a position of supreme authority over a text. According to him/her, only he/she (and possibly, fellow deconstructionists) know "the truth" about it. Eckhard writes:

> If it is true, as [deconstructionists] claim, that there is no text, or that the text can communicate only uncommunicability, then all critics who have attributed intelligibility to texts, over the whole long span of the centuries through which literature has existed, have been mistaken. . . Virtually the entire previous critical tradition is invalidated . . . An equitable discussion of any subject becomes impossible if one participant claims arbitrary authority over the nature of meaning. (312)

This is a very dangerous position for any critic to take: it fails to recognize the value of other types of literary

There has always been more than one way to read a text, and more than one meaning imbedded in it, if the text is sophisticated enough.

Eckhard makes a similar point when she compares the reading of texts to the old story of the blind man and the elephant. She remarks:

> One of [the story's] morals is that the interpretations of human beings are surely, though involuntarily, fallible. Another moral, equally important, is contained in the fact that the elephant, strange beast that it is, continues to stand there before the three blind men as they speculate. The animal persists in being what it is, solid and huge and whole and pachydermously quite real, no matter how contradictory or foolish the blind men's unenlightened descriptions of its parts might be. The factuality of the object cannot be undone by the multiple errors of those who observe it; the singularity of the elephant continues to exist despite the diversity of those whose tendency is to misunderstand or to deny. (316)

That deconstructionist critics often behave more ignorantly than even the blind men of this tale is one of their (and the theory's) most serious shortcomings. Not content merely to analyze the fragments they find before them, and describe the conflicts between their descriptions, the critics run around screaming, "There is no elephant! There is no elephant!"

Deconstruction may be perceived and taught as the theory which demonstrates the unintelligiblity of meaning and the inability of the author to control language and meaning, to describe anything more accurately than these blind man can. When literature is taught this way, the connection between literary theory and most people who read is broken.

Deconstruction also does its part to ensure that literature remains irrelevant to most lives. For unlike traditional types of literary theory which question the analyses of those who have gone before, and subvert and replace them with new ones, deconstruction never really replaces the old theory with a new one which can be criticized through textual evidence alone. Instead, "[t]he traditional idea is questioned, subverted and undermined -- and then *retained* in order that we can focus on the act of subversion itself which, however, does not constitute a final rejection of that idea" (Ellis, 262).

I have similar concerns about postmodernist literary theory. This is not surprising as postmodernism relies on the same principles and underlying assumptions that deconstruction does. In *Constructing Postmodernism*, Brian McHale begins describing postmodernism in the words of J.F. Lyotard, who defined it as "'incredulity towards metanarratives'" (19). According to McHale, Lyotard believed that:

> [s]cientific (analytical, theoretical) knowledge . . . arose in opposition to 'traditional' narrative knowledge. Yet because scientific knowledge is

> incapable of legitimating itself, of lifting itself up by its own epistemological bootstraps, it has always had to resort for legitimation to certain 'grand narratives' *about* knowledge -- the Enlightenment narrative of human liberation through knowledge, the Hegelian narrative of the dialectical self-realization of Spirit, the Marxist narrative of revolution and the founding of a classless society, and so on. (19-20)

As the population's faith in these grand narratives failed, as people absorbed the modernist ethos of *The Waste Land* which asserts that none of these grand narratives has the power to re-energize or rejuvenate society in the twentieth century, people, according to Lyotard, turned their attention to "'little narratives'" (21), or narratives which do not rely on great universal concepts to support them, but are instead self-supporting. These narratives:

> construct their own pragmatics, they assign the participant roles in the circulation of knowledge (addressor, addressee, narrative protagonist) and found the social bond among these participants. They 'define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.' (20)

In other words, little narratives focus the attention of the reader on the text and the text alone, on the rules set up by the text, the words used by the author, the world the author creates

through the text, and what that shows us about the world the author is from. This is the focus of deconstructionist literary theory, a focus on how things are built, on what is said and not said about/through the text.

However, postmodernism, according to McHale, takes things one step further than Lyotard did. In postmodernist literary theory, even literary theory and criticism are narrative, and, as narrative, are therefore suspect. Like all other writing, critical theory, even the critical theory of postmodernism, can never be objective. McHale quotes Christopher Norris, who wrote, "'As the idea gains ground that *all* theory is a species of sublimated narrative, so doubts emerge about the very possibility of *knowledge* as distinct from the various forms of narrative gratification'" (20-21). Unlike deconstructionist theory or modernist theory, then, postmodernist theory questions, doubts, even laughs at, its own authority. McHale writes:

> We are justified in telling or entertaining the metanarrative of the postmodernist breakthrough just so long as we do so not in the mode of objectivity. . . . so long as we do not claim that our story [theory] is 'true,' a faithful representation of things as we find them 'out there' in the world . . . but only that our story is *interesting to our audience* and *strategically* useful. (25)

The willingness of postmodernism to question its own precepts has led to some signature features of the movement. For

example, McHale lists "what Alan Wilde has called 'suspensive irony'" (21) as one of postmodernism's defining characteristics. McHale contrasts this type of irony with the "'disjunctive irony'" (21) practiced by modernists. Modernists attempted "to master the world's messy contingency from a position above and outside it" (21). Postmodernists realize that such an objective position is not possible. The author is him/herself trapped inside the very system he/she writes about, and "far from aspiring to master disorder, simply accepts it" (21). A conventional postmodernist text (if there is such a thing), always half-laughs at itself. It avoids grand theme, instead portraying life as "'a muted series of irritations, frustrations, and bafflements'" (22). The sense of irony is heightened by the use of little, specific, popular details. Banal and specific names of grocery stores, prices, references to T.V., movies, make sure that we as readers do not forget that a very individual world is being described, and that the author's frame of reference is limited by that world. If we are from the same world that the author is describing, the inclusion of such details merely heightens the irony, intensifies the "joke."

John Barth, in "The Literature of Exhaustion," asserts something very similar. According to Barth, postmodernism is what happens when one realizes that grand narratives are false, that traditional sources of meaning have been exhausted. Modernists, like Eliot, realized that this was happening (hence a poem like *The Waste Land*): postmodernists accept is as an accomplished fact. Having accepted it, postmodernists are left

with the problem of animating literature. It was Barth's thesis that "'[a]rtistic conventions . . . [can be] deployed against themselves to create new and lively work'" (Safer, 109). One can undermine traditional versions of historical tales, or traditional knowledge, through comedy, through irony. By twisting the truth, by merging styles of writing, by presenting "straightforward accounts of extraordinary events" (114) or making magical the very ordinary, one can revitalize literature.

In what is termed "postmodernist fiction" we also discover an unbridled mixture of what has traditionally been thought of as "high" and "low" art. High art may be defined as art (literature, music, painting) which has historically been thought of as art of substance by those are properly equipped to judge it. For the purposes of this definition, "art of substance" means art that deals with serious and weighty subject matter, universal themes or messages. High art is crafted with sophistication and deliberate purpose. Those equipped to judge high art have made a career of studying a particular art form, and have been taught by others who have made a career out of doing the same thing, to tell good from bad. Examples of artists whom these experts believe have produced "high art" would be Milton, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Picasso, Joyce and Eliot. These artists have produced what a vast number of qualified judges have recognized as significant artistic contributions, important works. *Paradise Lost, Hamlet, Ode to Joy, Guernica, Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* are examples of some works which have received this recognition. Because they have been recognized by experts as

"high art," these works would probably be defined as "good" by the general public even if they had never read, seen or heard them.

By contrast, low art may be defined as art that is or does anything else. It is art that entertains, seduces, advertises, but rarely instructs. Low art is not expected to have a "universal message." In fact, the "experts" would assert that the message is usually trite or cliched. Examples of low art would include romance novels, magazine ads, soap operas, and rock and roll. Although low art may be crafted with care, it is usually considered (by these same experts) as ephemeral in nature. The public will read it, enjoy it, be stimulated by it, but will soon forget it. Works of low art are not remembered through the centuries. Nor are its artists.

For postmodernists, who consider meaning in literature and meaning in criticism suspect, who express incredulity towards all metanarratives, even their own, the traditional difference between high and low art disappears. When the concepts of "universal message" and "weighty subject matter" become laughable, *Ulysses* becomes just as worth of study as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Guernica* is as meaningful as an ad for Calvin Klein jeans. Thus, postmodernism "dismantles and collages and pastiches styles, genres, forms" (Oldmeadow, 60). One result of this dismantling is that postmodernism also "decomposes 'history' and the 'past' as a given datum and treats it as a 'metafictional narrative'" (60). In postmodernism, the realization that

"premodern devices [such] as 'linearity' and 'cause and effect . . . are not the whole story'" (Safer, 113) coexists with the realization that "'disjunction, simultaneity, irrationalism' . . . 'are not the whole story either'" (113). Deconstruction argues that the latter predominates. Postmodernism moves one step beyond this, and allows for the use of both.

By displaying "incredulity towards metanarratives," including its own central thesis, and by telling us that its theories should only be used only if strategically useful, postmodernism allows us to question not only the applicability of postmodernist theory to works of fiction, giving us the power to decide whether or not viewing a certain work through the eyes of postmodernist theory would be at all useful, but also the applicability of other literary theories to works of fiction. Modernism and deconstruction have been presented by their advocates as universal approaches. Adherents of each of these movements tend to believe that it will always be useful/correct to read a work of fiction using their respective critical techniques. The doubting attitude of postmodernist theory, the disbelief on the part of its advocates that it is the final word in theory enables the reader to question the monolithic front presented by deconstruction and modernism.

I have concerns about postmodernism and the postmodernist approach. Postmodernism built upon, and grew out of, the world weary attitude found in modernist works, like *The Waste Land*. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, points to the fragmented subjectivity,

the lack of unified view point and the sterility of Western culture. However, at least his subjects were searching for meaning in their lives. In postmodernism, this search has been completely abandoned as useless, futile, inappropriate. As Harry Oldmeadow writes in "The Past Disowned: The Political and Postmodernist Assault on the Humanities:"

> [T]o insist that literature (or art or philosophy) should always be viewed through ideological spectacles [such as incredulity towards all metanarratives] amounts to a *denial of the spiritual* which is either ignored altogether or turned into some kind of epiphenomenon, as if most of the greatest works of the past have not been primarily spiritual dramas concerned with the fundamental questions of human existence. The scorning of the spiritual characterises much of both the radical political outlook and postmodernist theory. (62-63)

I still believe that the search for messages, for universal truths, and for statements about life and how it can work and what it may mean in literature is a valuable enterprise, one of the most significant reasons for reading literature. I also believe that although an author might not be fully in control of language (and thus, what his/her work means) he or she did have some idea of what he/she wanted to say, and did say, in a particular work.

In addition, postmodernist theory (and indeed many postmodern works of fiction and poetry) is often extremely slippery, indirect, and cryptic. In fact, at times it seems as if the words are slithering out of the author's control, as if they have minds of their own. While this is not necessarily a bad thing (I do not object on principle to indeterminacy) it sometimes seems as if postmodernist (and for that matter, deconstructionist) literary theorists value this indeterminacy because of the games it allows them to play with language. As Harry Oldmeadow writes, it seems as if "theory has become an enclave to which one gains entry by writing obfuscatory and opaque prose heavily lettered with references to the Parisian oracles of the moment" (64). While Oldmeadow's statement is expressed in very judgemental language, there is, I believe, some truth in it. Postmodernists, like deconstructionists, sometimes seem to believe that "'clarity is capitulation'" and write that way, using all manner of jargon. This makes postmodernist theory, and fiction, inaccessible to all but those initiated in its theories, with the educational backgrounds to grasp them.

Works like *The Waste Land* will not help you find a force to animate your own life. *The Waste Land* is a text whose central thesis is the inability of people to find meaning in their lives in the twentieth century. Deconstructionist theory, by admitting many meanings, by admitting to ambiguity in literature, would seem to help, but in effect does not, since one of its precepts is the unintelligibility of language, language's inability to

mean. If postmodernist theory is similarly unhelpful, where can one turn for sources of meaning or inspiration that investigate language, art, myth, religion and modern ties to the past of Christian and non-Christian civilization?

Chapter Two

In one sense, one must turn to novels which are popular with the public, and unpopular with chic or academic critics. One such novel is Chaim Potok's *Davita's Harp*. It is a novel which made it onto the bestseller's lists, but has received little critical acclaim, and has been subjected to almost no academic, literary analysis.[1] While this is no guarantee of quality in a work of fiction (many pieces of trash fiction could be similarly described), *Davita's Harp* depicts a narrative subject who is struggling with the conflict and brutality of life in the twentieth century, the same forces that confront the subjects in *The Waste Land*. The protagonist, Ilana Davita Chandal, receives horrible blows to her faith in grand narratives, just as the subjects in *The Waste Land* do. However, instead of throwing out

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[1]Very little has been written on *Davita's Harp*. With the exception of dissertations like Katherine Woodman's *Secular and Sacred in the Art of Chaim Potok*, I was only able to locate two reviews of *Davita's Harp*, written at the time it was published. Neither of these two reviews provides much insight into the novel. Paul Cowan, in "The Faiths of Her Childhood" calls *Davita's Harp* "Mr. Potok's bravest book, though it is not his best" (12); however, he does not give any reason for this opinion. Further, Cowan simplifies Davita's struggle to balance the secular and Jewish worlds she finds herself in when he writes "[Davita] continues to insist on her rights as a woman within the limits of Orthodox Jewish law" (13). Davita does much more than this. Similarly, Edward Abramson, who briefly reviews the book in *Chaim Potok* (his chapter on the novel is appropriately titled "A Postscript on *Davita's Harp*), praises Potok for presenting "variation in the beliefs of the major character" (135) and notes "Potok's positive presentation of Christianity" (134), but criticizes his flat dialogue, and claims that Potok's description of Davita's menstruation (not a significant episode, in my opinion) lacks necessary emotional stress. He, too, states that it is not Potok's best work without providing reasons for this remark.

something to give meaning or sense of purpose to one's life. He has explicitly affirmed the value of this search in both interviews and articles. For example, in the interview with Harold Ribalow, Potok responds to a quotation of Allan Sillitoe who wrote, "'[e]verything written is fiction, even non-fiction'" (Ribalow, 113), with the words:

> . . . we are essentially model-making beings. We don't know what reality is. We take the raw data that impinge upon our consciousness, and when we think that data, we are already giving it structure and configuration. (113)

In his article, "The State of Jewish Belief," Potok states:

> The assertion of emptiness, blindness, essential meaninglessness as an inherent characteristic of the totality of things seems to me to be an inadequate response -- for there is after all much around us that has apparent meaning. I would rather live in what I take to be a meaningful world and be staggered by moments of apparent absurdity that in an absurd world and be troubled by instances of meaning. (127)

Potok believes that the human effort to order experience, to have it "make sense," if only to oneself, is not only necessary if one is to live a fruitful, productive life, but automatic, an effort that we as human beings engage in throughout our lives because

that is how our minds are structured. We unconsciously act this way.

Potok's views on the need for an individual to create or discover meaning in his/her life, and his opinion that conflict or confrontation is often necessary for the creation/discovery of this meaning are also evident in the epigraphs which introduce the book. Potok quotes Wallace Stevens, who writes, "'They said, "You have a blue guitar,/ You do not play things as they are."/ The man replied, "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar'" (ii). He also cites Cotton Mather, who wrote, "'Wilderness is a temporary condition through which we are passing to the Promised Land'" (ii). Through the use of both quotations, Potok is able, before even providing us with one line of his novel, to convey his belief in the need for all of us to create our own tune, our own understanding of life and what it signifies, his perception that this knowledge or understanding will only come through struggle, and his faith that eventually, after the struggle, it is possible for us to find a set of beliefs or ideas we can live by and with.

Potok also demonstrates that, unlike Eliot, he has no personal fears about sexual (or subject) barriers. By fragmenting subjectivity in *The Waste Land*, switching changing narrative voices, jumping from male to female, upper to lower class, one nationality to another nationality, Eliot's approach emphasizes the differences between people. By contrast, Potok has the courage to write *Davita's Harp* solely from a girl's

perspective. He takes the issue of crossing sex barriers that so bothers Eliot and turns it around, making the common human experiences purpose and treasure. In doing so, he reclaims one of the oldest traditions in Jewish thought, one which is sometimes lost in the patriarchal structure of Orthodox Judaism, that men and woman are united, they have more in common than they have differences. Katherine Woodman, in her dissertation, *Secular and Sacred in the Art of Chaim Potok*, quotes a passage in the *Zohar*, one of the sacred books of Judaism:

> Any image that does not embrace male and female is not a true image . . . The Blessed Holy One does not place His abode in any place where male and female are not found together. Blessings are found only in a place where male and female are found, as it is written: 'He blessed them and called their name Adam on the day they were created.' It is not written: 'He blessed him and called his name Adam.' A human being is only called Adam when male and female are one. (219)

According to Woodman, "The achievement of Potok lies in his adopting the mantle, the life-story, of such women as . . . Davita and thereby challenging an often repressive, anti-woman system [that exists as part of Orthodox Judaism]" (222).

Before discussing the subject matter of *Davita's Harp*, I want to spend a little time discussing the novel's structure, style and narrative voice. The narrator of the novel is an older

Davita, engaged in the effort of tracing her own development from childhood to adolescence. *Davita's Harp*, like Potok's previous novels, is both "bildungsroman (novel of formation) and *Kunstlerroman* (artist novel)" in which the protagonist "develop[s] and grow[s] in understanding, thus not remaining [an] 'eternal' innocen[t]" (138). In a *bildungsroman*, the writer recounts "the youth and young adulthood of a sensitive PROTAGONIST who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and acquire a philosophy of life and 'the art of living'" (Harmon and Holman, 35, original emphasis). In a *Kunstlerroman*, "the PROTAGONIST is an artist of some sort who struggles from childhood to maturity against an inhospitable environment and within himself toward an understanding of his creative mission. (271, original emphasis). Examples of these types of knowledge include *Sons and Lovers*, *David Copperfield*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Of Human Bondage*. Perhaps the most famous *Kunstlerroman* is Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*, which Potok acknowledges as a major influence on him and his writing. He writes:

> Joyce . . . did, in terms of models, precisely what I'm trying to do. Joyce was right at the heart of the Catholic world and at the same time at the heart of western secular humanism. And his confrontation, both as an artist and as a human being in the twentieth century was a core-to-core confrontation. As a human being, he fused his Catholicism with his secularism and produced a Catholic-secular way of writing, if

> such a thing is possible. His epiphanies, his sacrament of language, the way he structures and sees things are all Catholic, Jesuitical, and he went the secular route through his Catholicism. That didn't happen to me. I stayed inside the Jewish tradition and took the secular into it. (Kremer, 96-97)

With *Davita's Harp*, Potok writes in an established traditional form, but produces a most unconventional, challenging novel.

Further, as bildungsroman or kunstlerroman, *Davita's Harp* is not very experimental in form or technique. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce writes the same type of novel as Potok writes; however, Joyce used modernist literary techniques like stream of consciousness writing, sentence fragments and variations in dialect to energize his prose. For example, when the novel begins, Stephen Dedalus is very young. He prattles like a baby about the "moocow" who "met the nicens little boy" (7). When he is older, he talks about forging "the uncreated consciousness of my race" (228). In the school yard, boys speak slang. Stephen's father speaks very informally, while Stephen speaks formally. Dialogue sweeps along. Often the speaker of lines is not identified, so that you cannot tell who is speaking, or whether someone is speaking or thinking. Stephen's thoughts shift from one subject to another, rapidly, without Joyce making logical connections between these thoughts.

In Potok, there is none of this. Davita, the narrator, is as lucid at eight as she is at fourteen. Events in the novel occur in chronological order. All characters in the novel speak the same standard English, and there is almost no slang, no variation in tone and dialect. Even when Davita tries to commit suicide, and experiences hallucinations, she seems to think coherently, and her thoughts (if not rational) are expressed coherently. Davita is at all times presented as a unified, individual subject. It is not she who is fragmented, but society, and social forces try to tear her apart. Potok appears to have almost no interest in using the experimental writing techniques of modernism, deconstruction or postmodernism. Rather, in "A Reply to a Semi-Sympathetic Critic" Potok cites the simplicity of Milton sonnets, and the "flattening effect" (32) of Stephen Crane's prose as two stylistic influences.

Potok's decision not to experiment with form, character and style has been severely criticised in small quantity of literary criticism written on Potok's novels. Edward Abramson writes:

> Potok's style . . . has been criticized for the flatness of the dialogue, the subservience of characterization to thematic considerations, and a degree of contrivance to create a symmetrical plot structure in which various plot developments end in a neat balance. (31)

Curt Leviant, in "The Hasid as American Hero," accuses Potok of "lacklustre craftsmanship and uncombed prose" (80) because of he

does not experiment with style in his novels. Similarly, Michael Gilmore, in "A Fading Promise," writes that Potok's symbolism lacks the complexity necessary for greatness, "setting up one-to-one relationships which are barren of insight or subtlety" (79).

However, Potok's stylistic approach is appropriate for an author who chooses to focus on thematic considerations in his work and his life. Potok tells Harold Ribalow that what he most wants to do in his novels is try "to track this core-to core cultural confrontation [between competing beliefs and cultures] in as honest a way as [he} can" (Ribalow, 117). His paramount concern is for the ideas he discusses in his text. He simplifies the style, the dialogue and the structure of *Davita's Harp* so that the struggle he wants to depict is clearly represented as that of a young girl, not an adult. Potok's writing style, and the novel's structure, supplement his stated purpose in writing novels.

Young Davita's shares Potok's focus on meaning. Her concern with meaning and origin is apparent from the first sentences of the novel. In order that the reader understand where she comes from, and how she comes to believe what she believes, Davita begins the novel not by talking about her own past, but about her parents' past, about the religious and ideological foundation they laid for her:

> "My mother was a nonbelieving Jew, my father a nonbelieving Christian. They met in New York while my father was doing a story for a leftist newspaper on

> living conditions in a row of vile tenements on Suffolk Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where my mother worked. (3)

Shortly after this, Davita remarks that only her parents' leftist friends came to their wedding. Her father's parents had disowned him, because he was a leftist journalist and because he married a Jewish woman, while her mother had no family in America but a cousin.

By describing her parents' past before she describes her own, Davita shows she believes that what she is now is, to some degree, dependent on where she originated and how she was raised. She was born into a household where religious faith was not important. Because her parents were "leftist," the implication is that religion was probably seen as useless, even a menace. Further, that her parents married in the face of familial opposition shows them to be independent in their thinking, people who will do something because they believe in it, regardless of outside pressure. In such an environment, Davita would learn to question, to think on her own. Her parents' background and the way they raise her as a result of that background influence Davita's views of the world, and her search for personal meaning, greatly.

However, it is not only her parents' natures and beliefs which exert their influence on Davita. She is also influenced by language and words, language and words they introduce her to. Davita makes this clear early in the text when she talks about

the political meetings in her parents' apartment. She describes the meetings by stating:

> Almost all the talk was noisy and about politics. Strange words and names would fly about like darting birds. Dialectical materialism, historical materialism, tools of production. Hitler, Stalin, Roosevelt, Mussolini, Trotsky. Brownshirt gangsterism, black-shirt murderers. Unions, bosses, capitalists. On with the struggle. (10)

At first, these words are just confused gibberish to Davita. However, she takes care that they do not remain so for her. Unlike the subjects of *The Waste Land*, who become resigned to the disjunctiveness of life, and accept that life will never be more than fragments to them, Davita, even as a small child, expresses a desire to be what Woodman calls the "constructed knower," (244). Woodman quotes Belenky's book, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind*, in which Belenky defines the constructed knower as one who "seeks the integration of 'reason *and* intuition *and* the expertise of others'" (224). According to Woodman, Belenky also states, "'Women constructivists show a high tolerance for internal contradiction and ambiguity . . . and they want to develop a voice of their own to communicate to others their understanding of life's complexity'" (224-225).

A constructed knower and writer-in-embryo, Davita is fascinated these (indeed, all) words and what they mean. And, as

a child usually does, she turns to her parents for interpretation, to help her make sense of what she is hearing. In particular, Davita turns to her mother, who, Davita tells us, "explained words to me in a special way" (9), not by merely providing her daughter with the current meaning of the word, but also telling her where the word originated, and what it used to mean. Once when Davita became exasperated with her mother for these long winded explanations, Anne Chandal explained:

> 'Everything has a name, Ilana. And names are very important. Nothing exists unless it has a name. Can you thing of something that doesn't have a name? And darling, everything has a past. Everything -- a person, an object, a word, everything. If you don't know the past, you can't understand the present and plan properly for the future. We are going to build a new world, Ilana. How can we ignore the past?' (11-12)

That the older Davita has absorbed this lesson is evident by the way she proceeds with her narration. She moves forward in step by step fashion, without skipping the past. After presenting the reader with her parents' background, Davita then presents herself and the reader with her own past, as background, so that she and we can understand the decisions she makes.

Davita also absorbs another lesson from her mother's words. She learns that "'[n]othing exists unless it has a name" (11). Words are powerful, potent. They can even be dangerous. This

lesson is reinforced when the street gang asks her whether or not she is Jewish. Somehow, she knows that if she answers "yes" that she will be assaulted. By answering their question indirectly, stating, "'My father isn't Jewish,'" she employs the power of words in her own defence. The gang becomes confused, and they let her escape. Davita learns from experience that language, words and, in particular, stories are sites of power. They are the building blocks of reality, or at least, or at least one's own conception of reality. Although this is a central concept of deconstructionist literary theory, Davita ultimately uses language for the purposes of self-construction, not demolition, and of unification with ancestors, companions, and the generation to follow.

Entwined with the concept of self-construction in this novel is the concept of storytelling. As a result of the attitude towards language and the past encouraged by her mother, Davita responds to and thirstily absorbs the stories of others. And the people around her are very eager to tell her stories, many different kinds of stories. Her mother's "stories were about Poland and Russia and sometimes an evil witch named Baba Yaga" (19) Her aunt Sarah tells her stories about "Pilgrims and Indians and lonely women who used their imagination to fight loneliness," (19) and stories about the settling of the Western states. Her father relates stories about "Paul Bunyan, Johnny Appleseed, Baron Munchausen, and other such gentlemen of fabled accomplishment" (22). Michael Chandal also teaches her by telling her stories "about Maine and its lakes and hills and

coastal villages and islands" (22). These stories mix and swirl inside her. They become metaphors through which Davita confronts the world.

For example, when her younger brother dies, and again, when the fascists, under Franco initiate civil war in Spain, Davita's worries take the shape of the mythic woman, Baba Yaga, who pursues her in her dreams, trying to kill her. It is only through Davita's "magic glasses" which allow her to see things clearly, that Davita is able to defeat Baba Yaga. Unfortunately, the defeat of Baba Yaga is only momentary. Baba Yaga recurs in Davita's dreams, whenever something occurs to rock Davita's world, an enriched or embedded figure.

Given Davita's background, it is not surprising that overarching story, the metanarrative Davita learns and absorbs in Books One and Two of the novel is that of communism. That is the Chandal family "religion" and Davita learns it well. In school, for example, when the subject of aunts and uncles comes up, Davita tells the class about her aunt Sarah's work as a nurse in Ethiopia, helping to heal Ethiopians hurt by Italian fascists. This leads to a political discussion in which Davita condemns the fascist leaders as evil and terms Stalin "'a communist who is not afraid to use his power for good purposes'" (37). Like her parents, and the members of the communist party with which her parents associate, she learns Marxist dogma so well that even later in the novel, when she practices the Jewish faith and attends the yeshiva she refers to the people in government as

implacable futility of life" (236). He expressed his belief in "the meaninglessness in the outer world" that "produced in [him] a discomfort, an anxiety, a loneliness in the face of human limitations" (Harmon and Holman, 193). By writing fiction, Kafka expressed "a desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act [or write] in a meaningless, 'absurd' world lead to anguish, greater loneliness, and despair" (193). Similarly, "Jakob Daw crafts tales for Davita that are replete with images and details of despair; his ubiquitous black bird flies endlessly over the earth, seeking a place of rest and healing, or searching for the source of the music which disguises life's horror" (Woodman, 236).

When Jakob Daw first comes to stay with the Chandal family, it is not the despair of his tales which interests her, but the act of writing itself. One of the first things Davita asks Jakob is whether or not he writes stories. She seems fascinated by the idea of someone writing fiction, and inquires whether the stories he writes are like the stories of Baba Yaga told to her by her mother. She connects the type of stories Jakob Daw writes to her only frame of reference, the stories that she has heard or read before. When Jakob Daw tells Davita that the stories he writes are not very like the stories about Baba Yaga, she changes the subject. However, Davita remains fascinated by the process of writing fiction. This becomes apparent when she finally catches Jakob writing. She describes the creative act in almost mystical terms when she relates:

> Jakob Daw had on spectacles rimmed in silver metal. Somewhere in the room with him was my mother, but I could not see her. Jakob Daw was writing with a black fountain pen. The only light in the room came from the desk lamp; it bathed his features in soft lights and shadows. He turned his head slightly. The spectacles flared; his dark eyes burned. (46-47).

This image of Jakob, engaged in what Davita describes as an almost holy act, becomes an image which sticks with the young Davita. Or, to phrase it as she does, "'[I]t lingered in memory'" (42). Unlike Eliot's anti-artist, deconstruction's non-artist, and post-modernist's joker artist, Jakob Daw is described here as artist/priest. This is how Davita sees him, even if this is not how he sees himself. When Davita learns about Jakob's stories, she absorbs, yet still criticizes, their bleakness in content, their indeterminacy in tone. However, she never criticizes the reverence, the inspiration with which he writes. Throughout the novel, she continues to associate this image of Jakob Daw writing with his essence. The image of Jakob Daw writing recurs in Davita's mind. Because his act of writing is so vividly impressed upon her mind. Davita never forgets the sacred nature of the creative act, mingling of art, symbol, myth, and natural objects.

The content of Jakob Daw's stories, stories that are unlike the other tales, legends and fairy tales told to her, also strongly influence Davita, even though she does not fully

understand what the stories say. They make a marked impression on her because Jakob Daw inhabits a social position unlike that of anyone else Davita knows. Her parents are staunch communists, who fully believe in the goals of the communist party and the power of communism to revolutionize the world. Belief gives their lives meaning.

Davita's Aunt Sarah believes in the transformative power of Jesus Christ, and fully believes in Christ's ability to change the world. The Dinns and the Helfmans believe wholly in the power of God and Torah, as for them God and Torah are the source of meaning and life. Jakob Daw, however, exists on a tenuous, in-between plane. Although he initially seems to share the Chandals' faith in the communist party, he is never as fervent in expressing his beliefs as they are, and whatever limited faith in Stalinist communism he possesses dies a quick death once he experiences first-hand the events of the Spanish Civil War. He does not believe in Judaism, but still finds rituals like the *Havdoloh* (the ceremony which marks the closing of *Shabbos*) beautiful and meaningful for their own sake, and for the sake of the memories they revive. He remains sceptical of anyone who embraces any religion or ideology too fervently, finding intense belief in any one philosophy (like communism) limits one's ability to find meaning in opposing rituals or philosophies. Yet, his inability to passionately embrace any one ideology as "the truth" causes him to wistfully envy those who approach the world with a black and white certainty about right and wrong, about their place in society. His own positioning is inclusive,

yet marginal, feeding his artist's need for emotionally enriching experiences rather than mere faith. Jakob Daw's stories reflect his self-imposed, in-between cultural and ideological placement, and it is from these stories that Davita first learns of the independent-mindedness required to exist between cultures and ideologies, and also of the tremendous price which can be exacted from an individual who chooses to live that way.

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Similarly, Jakob Daw's story of the gray horse is also a story of a life in-between. The horse, beautiful in its own gray way, lives in a little valley. It has searched exhaustively for other gray horses like it, but has found none. In his world, he is the only gray horse. He exists between the dangerous black

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It is easier to read the story of the gray horse allegorically than that of the black bird, as Jakob Daw draws many connections between his life and that of the gray horse. We learn earlier in *Davita's Harp* that few people appreciate Jakob Daw's stories. The gray horse suffers through the same experience because, while the other horses seem to somehow need each other, they all behave with "utter indifference" (75) towards him. Like the gray horse, Jakob Daw does not stop trying to communicate his "unusual ideas" (75). And like the gray horse, Jakob Daw is forced, by his loneliness, to choose to live with either the black or the white horses.

Another obvious allegorical connection comes from reading the black and white horses as the two opposing metanarratives in the text, communism and Judaism, the secular world and the religious world. In addition, staunch proponents of each ideology see the world in "black and white" terms. For example, Davita's parents believe that strict adherence to the communist party will ensure a new world order, a classless society, a "heaven on earth" for all people. They view religion as "'a

dangerous fraud'" (315), used by those in power to keep the poor content in their misery. Similarly, her Aunt Sarah believes in the complete, "'radiant power of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ'" (239) and despises the communist ideals of Davita's parents. In her mind, they have strayed off the path to salvation and are in grave spiritual danger.

Like the gray horse, Jakob Daw chooses the cynical and secular world over the religious world. Yet he remains uncomfortable with his choice. Further, the choice eventually wears him down, and becomes one of the causes of his death. Once again, Jakob Daw, through story making, has taught Davita about the desolation of life as an in-between person. He also teaches her about the dangers of surrendering to one or the other worlds, the dangers inherent in not walking your own path, in not combining ideas in unusual ways to come up with your own sources of meaning. Like her parents, her aunt, and the other members of her extended family and neighbourhood, Jakob Daw exposes Davita to the past and the present, the secular and the sacred, the gentile and the Jewish, the real and the spiritual. Unlike them, he tries to show her how to combine pieces of these conflicting elements through writing, to synthesize them into a life philosophy which will bring one peace, happiness. Unfortunately, because Jakob Daw never achieves this peace in his life, he does not achieve it in his writing. His teaching is beyond his own ability to demonstrate, but Davita comprehends it, and performs this synthesis in her life and her writing with more success.

Davita only begins to question the communist doctrine she grew up with, and begins to seek meaning elsewhere after a number of events disrupt her life. The initial disturbing event is the Spanish Civil War. Because her parents are so politically active, Davita is acutely aware of the events of the war. Unlike other children her age, she is encouraged to read the news, the headlines in the paper. Further, the war affects her personally. Many of the people she cares about feel a need to get involved, and end up going abroad, leaving her behind. First, her aunt Sarah takes up nursing duties in Ethiopia. Then, Jakob Daw leaves to go to Europe where, Davita asserts, "'. . . people are made dead" (118). Finally, her father leaves to cover the war for his paper. These events make her resent politics and war, and the philosophy which makes her parents, in particular, feel the need to get involved.

As these disturbing events start happening, Davita meets the Dinns and the Helfmans. Their behaviour arouses her curiosity about religion. She finds there is something peaceful in the way they live. While she, her parents and Jakob Daw are in their beach house, and the war is a constant topic of conversation, she sees David Dinn waving his arms back and forth across the sky. This intrigues her, and takes her mind off the world events directly impeding her happiness. On another occasion, she hears the Dinns singing *zemiros* (cheerful songs, written in the sixteenth century, praising the glory of *Shabbos* [the day of rest, Friday evening and Saturday]). She finds the singing soothing when compared to the turbulent world events impinging

upon her life. On yet another occasion, she follows David and his uncle to synagogue and watches David say *Kaddish* (a prayer of praise recited at the end of synagogue services during the period of bereavement following the death of a close relative) for his mother. These experiences allow her brief glimpses into an unfamiliar, attractive and relatively peaceful world, but it is not one in which Jakob Daw's ideology exists, or one in which her gentile aunt's teachings can be voiced.

Once Davita's father leaves for Europe and her mother begins to spend more and more time working so as to avoid feeling lonely, Davita becomes even more disturbed by the war in Spain and the danger it represents to the people she loves. Spain dominates her world. She studies a map of Spain so long that she "knew its shape by heart" (128). Through the articles she reads and her mother's explanations, Davita perceives "[a} brutally divided world" (129). She feels that communist ideology and secular knowledge separate her from others her age, remarking, "None of my classmates talk about the war; few even knew about it. But somewhere in Spain was my father amidst bombs and shells and burned out villages. . ." (129). Davita wonders why only she and her family seem to be so affected by the war. She mentally questions her parents' involvement, asking:

> Why did he run around so much? Why did my parents *care* so much? No one else's parents seemed to care much about the world. Mr. and Mrs. Helfman didn't seem to care about the world; nor did the students in

> my public school class or their parents. Mr. Dinn cared a little about the world; he helped people who were in trouble over immigration laws. But most people had jobs and came home at night and played with their children. (207-08)

Davita craves the type of stability, the detachment from world events felt by other people. She also begins to seek it. During the Spanish Civil War, Davita develops an odd behavioral pattern. Each time she reads about the war in the newspaper or a letter about the war from Jakob Daw or her father, she seeks out the Helfmans or the Dinns and learns a bit about their religion.

For example, after finding a letter sent by Jakob Daw from Bilbao on her mother's dresser, Davita seeks out Ruthie Helfman for the first time. She learns from Ruthie that Ruthie's father does not want Ruthie to read normal American newspapers. He views the events of the world as garbage, something one should not bother too much about. During this meeting, Davita also learns about kosher food and the Torah. When she reads the headlines "PANIC SEIZES CAPITAL" and "CENTER OF MADRID IS REPORTED AFIRE," Davita follows Ruthie and her mother to *shul* (the Jewish house of worship). She listens to the service, and renews her acquaintance with David Dinn. When her mother receives a cable telling them that her father has been wounded and is returning home, Davita again decides to attend *shul*, and sits through a *bar mitzvah* (the ceremony which marks the entry of a boy into his full place as an adult in the Jewish community).

When Davita reads the headline " REBELS CLOSE ON MALAGA AFTER HARD 2-DAY BATTLE," she asks Mrs. Helfman for a book to help her learn Hebrew. Davita's interest, at this point, does not seem to be in acquiring Jewish faith. She is drawn to these Orthodox rituals because they are comfort her. They make her feel secure and safe. The Helfmans and the Dinns sing beautiful songs and light beautiful candles. When they allow Davita to participate, Davita is able to allay some of the pain she experiences as a result of her knowledge of world events.

Davita does not actually turn to a religious ritual because of its intrinsic meaning until her father is killed in Spain. After she learns about the circumstances of her father's death, and after reading the truth about the events in Centralia which prompted her father to join the communist party, after the party's memorial service for him, Davita feels sick and dissatisfied. More than this, she wants to mourn him properly. She thinks, "There has to be more for you papa than just one memorial service" (235). His death, she decides, must be made to mean something. So, with her newfound knowledge of Judaism, she decides to recite *Kaddish* for her father. However, it is interesting that when Davita turns to religious ritual in the hope of finding meaning, she does not adhere strictly to Jewish tradition. By saying *Kaddish* herself, rather than asking a man to do it for her, she innovates. Like any good artist, she creates her own "tradition." Davita's introduction to Judaism allows her to make meaningful the death of her father. The fact that she was not brought up in the Jewish faith, and the fact

that she has learned something about creativity and inclusion from Jakob Daw gave her the freedom, and the desire to change tradition and to speak *Kaddish* herself. Saying *Kaddish* for her father is Davita's first attempt to make her own story, by her own rules. Further, she inspires other people to do the same. The women in the synagogue begin to utter responses to the *Kaddish*. Davita's action inspires them. Her religious, social (political), and artistic natures converge, each complementing the others.

Davita does not reconcile all of her beliefs, all of the stories and "truths" she grew up with, through her first effort to make story. The events of the secular world still impact upon her. Indeed, their impact intensifies after the death of her father. His death, followed by Jakob Daw's deportation, precipitates Davita's suicide attempt. In my opinion, the primary reason Davita tries to kill herself is that Davita is already beginning to experience the lonely life the "gray horse," Jakob Daw had cautioned her about. She has been brought up to pay attention to world events, and indeed, she can hardly ignore these events which affect her so directly. She has tentatively experienced what it might feel like to have a religious anchor, so that world events might not hurt her so much, but these sensations are new to her, too new to be of much use at this time. She responds to the crisis through desperation, by trying to end her life.

understand what the stories say. They make a marked impression on her because Jakob Daw inhabits a social position unlike that of anyone else Davita knows. Her parents are staunch communists, who fully believe in the goals of the communist party and the power of communism to revolutionize the world. Belief gives their lives meaning.

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Once again, however, religion rescues her. Strangely enough, this time it is not the Jewish religion, but the Christian religion which helps her. When Davita goes to Prince Edward Island to recuperate from her suicide attempt, and begins to pray with her Aunt Sarah, once again ritual (even though it is not Jewish ritual) brings her peace. It is a peace that lasts until she returns to her normal life. Without that religious anchor, once more she begins to have nightmares and behave erratically. Peace is only restored when, in desperation, her mother enrolls her in David Dinns *yeshiva* (Jewish parochial school).

When Davita starts attending the *yeshiva* and her mother renounces communism and marries Ezra Dinn, Davita finally begins to achieve a sense of balance. Anne Chandal's marriage to Ezra Dinn, makes her once more a part of a traditional nuclear family, while Davita's attendance at the *yeshiva* marks her entrance to the Jewish community. She feels much more comfortable there than she ever did in the secular world. Of her new environment in school, Davita asserts:

> I realized quickly enough that no one in my class snickered or whispered or laughed when I raised my hand to ask or answer a question, to react to a book which we had been told to read, or to make a point about the opera at the Metropolitan or the exhibition of paintings at the Brooklyn Museum . . . no one at this school laughed at learning. (299)

It would appear that by this point in the novel, Davita has attained a sense of security. She, her mother, her new father and brother, strictly adhere to the Jewish laws and rituals. Davita's life becomes structured, ordered. In the Orthodox Jewish community, all rituals, all events have a given meaning. Events in the bible have a given meaning. What one is supposed to do is always clear. Because of the community's emphasis on celebrations and festivals of the past rather than in the present, Davita "knew little of what was happening in Spain. [She} no longer read newspapers and only occasionally glanced at a headline" (301). The reader cannot help but read this change in Davita's lifestyle as a loss, as well as a gain. Davita and her mother seem to living the lives of new converts. switching one ideological environment for an opposing, and equally restricting one. While the reader can understand Anne Chandal's conversion (she is a woman who has the capacity for complete and total faith, and after losing faith in communism, she reached out to grasp one of its opposites), he/she cannot help but react with sadness to the change in Davita. Her suicide and healing would appear to have sapped her sceptic's eye, her unique, questioning vision, her artistry.

The reader must ask whether or not Davita has paid too high a price for the sense of security Orthodox Judaism provides. In Book Three, it seems initially that she has. Davita's fledgling efforts to discover and then express who she is, what her life means and what path she wants to take may be weakened by adopting the traditional Jewish view. Fortunately for her, this does not

occur. The questioning Davita resurfaces. Just as Davita's feelings of pain over the loss of her father, and the horror she felt over the events of the Spanish Civil War cause her to question the mental satisfaction to be had in living one's life in the service of communist ideology and goals, in the arbitrary barbarity of the secular world, so her experience in the secular world makes her question the Jewish world she finds herself in, to see where it falls short. Her secular experience exposed her to different perspectives, many more than she would have come across had she been raised from childhood as an observant Orthodox Jew in a Jewish community. If she had been raised from her birth as David Dinn and Ruthie Helfman were raised, Davita would not have learned to question the precepts of Jewish faith and ritual, especially the restrictions placed upon female Orthodox Jews.

Davita begins to question and protest the more restrictive elements of Orthodox Judaism. For example, when she asks David Dinn about his dreams about the future, and he tells Davita that he wants to be a *rosh yeshiva*, "the head of the academy of Torah learning" (363), his dreams sound good to her. She asks David whether it is possible for a girl to do this. When he tells her no, Davita is unwilling to accept this, and asks "'Why not?'" The question makes David nervous, so Davita does not pursue it at that time. However, such a question demonstrates that the independent-minded Davita is indeed alive and well. Similarly, when her mother makes the decision (probably under the influence of Davita's example) to say *Kaddish* for Jacob Daw, Davita

objects, both at home and at school, to the fact that the rest of the men in *shul* make her mother sit in a little closet made of bamboo. She believes this to be unfair, and does not hesitate to state her belief that her mother should be able to sit with the men. Her assertions get her into trouble in school. Her behaviour is seen as threatening by her teacher, who cautions her with the words, "'No one here forces you to come to this school. But once you do come, you must obey the rules and laws'" (384). He threatens her status in class: she will not receive awards and prizes when she graduates if she makes waves with her revolutionary ideas. These threats do not make her give up her opinions. From this experience that Davita learns that "walls are laws to some people, and laws are walls to others" (385).

Davita's dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed upon her and other women because of the role assigned to Jewish women in the Orthodox faith, combined with her secular background and training, finds further expression in the stories Davita once again begins to invent. In Talmud class, for example, the interpretation offered for the line "the Caananites were then in the land" (385) does not seem right to her. Because she grew up viewing the bible as stories written by someone, she invents her own interpretation of the line. She invents an explanation of that line which makes sense only if one views the bible as having a human author: the author of that line was making reference to an earlier time, when Caananites were in the land. Her efforts at story-making in this instance are not appreciated. Her teacher and her fellow students are disturbed by her story, her

own interpretation. By engaging in textual criticism, Davita threatens the sanctity of the bible in the eyes of her teachers and fellow students.

This does not check her observations, however. She continues to think this way, and uses the same type of analysis on the Hebrew words "*B'ever ha-Yarden*" or "beyond the Jordan." Not agreeing with the class' interpretation, Davita comes up with her own. She learns that a famous Talmud scholar imagined the same story she does, and offered it a valid explanation. This shows her that there is not, in fact, a single interpretation of the Talmud, but many. She is pleased by this and puzzled about the reaction of her teacher, for "[i]t seemed to [her] that a story that had only one kind of meaning was not very interesting or worth remembering too long" (391). By this statement, Davita demonstrates not only that she believes in the possibility of words or stories to mean, but that she believes in personal revelation or understanding of meaning. She, like a Talmud author, can create a story. She, like a Talmud scholar, can create an interpretation of that story. Meaning is not automatically given to words. Nor does one have to accept a meaning handed down by tradition. Each individual has a role to play in interpreting meaning, and interpretations may differ, without one having to be abandoned to make way for another. Different meanings can coexist.

Davita also exercises her creative abilities on the stories of her personal past. For an English assignment, she makes a

story about her reaction to seeing Picasso's *Guernica*. In it, she becomes part of the painting and rescues a bird. Stories she makes up, like the stories told to her has a child, become a living connection to the past, tying traditions to felt experiences. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, mourned humanity's loss of this ability. Davita knows continuity demands the power of story. She recognizes this when she thinks:

> What connected me to my past? Memories? Save for certain sharp images, they seemed to be fading. Stories? Yes stories. I still remembered the stories. Even though I didn't understand them. I remembered. (393)

Davita exercises her creative ability on the story of Rabbi Akiva as well, writing two essays on him. In one of them, she changes the story by making Rabbi Akiva give a long speech thanking his wife for the years of sacrifice during the time he was away, studying Torah. In the other, she graphically describes his being combed to death, with a steel comb, by the Romans.

One of her teachers seems pleased by her ability. The other does not. However, Davita no longer seems to care one way or the other. The stories have become her way of reconciling her secular heritage and her Jewish present, body and mind, senses and intellect, the New and the Old World, past and present. Through her writing and explanations, she is being true to

herself, and losing the sense that the world is black. Creativity helps create Davita's reason for not dying.

After being denied the Akiva award, Davita proves that she has learned this lesson. She forges her own meaning in life out of everything she has learned, and holds a private graduation ceremony for herself in her imagination. When she is denied the award, Davita is angered that because she is a girl, the school denied her the award she deserves. This demonstrates to her the limitations placed on female Orthodox Jews by the Jewish community. It demonstrates the injustice allowed by the tradition she loves. She learns from this experience that unlike her brother, she will be denied full intellectual participation in the community of Orthodox Jewish scholars. She will never be allowed to follow directly in Rabbi Akiva's footsteps. She rages:

> I had wanted to show that I could be a Jewish hero -- a scholar. I had wanted to enter Jewish history. I had wanted to be part of that warm and wondrous world -- and they wouldn't let me. They had denied it to me because of a circumstance. An injustice had been performed by a world that taught justice. How could I live in that world now? How could I be part of its heart and soul, its core? Why should I continue to be part of something that behaved this way? How could I trust it? (431)

Yet she is not defeated by this experience. Once again, Davita's imagination, her ability to make life mean, to make her life make sense to her, rushes to her rescue. She is joined in her imagination by those people who were not able to be present for her actual graduation -- her father, Jakob Daw, and Aunt Sarah. To them, she speaks the words she wanted to say at her actual graduation ceremony, the word which would formally reconcile her two worlds, and publicly acknowledge the gifts that each of them gave her. In this speech, she recognizes everything that has gone into making her what she is: her mother's experience in Poland, her father's death, her uncle's death, her aunt's kindness. She tells her father that she has learned from his stories of Wesley Everest and Paul Bunyan. She tells her Uncle Jakob that she has learned from his stories and his act of writing. She speaks of the music of the door harp, and quotes from the bible and Rabbi Akiva. Even though she does not receive public approbation for her graduation speech, she receives the approval of her own conscience. And in her mind, the memories of her father, her Uncle Jakob and her Aunt Sarah approve of what she has learned.

By imagining their approval, she is in fact bestowing upon herself her own tacit approval of the way that she understands life and what it means. This approval also enables her to take the next step in her journey. By deciding to attend a public high school in the fall, while not renouncing her Judaism, she takes her rightful place as one of the in-betweens of the world. And by sharing her experience as an "in-between" with her new

sister Rachel, just as Jakob Daw shared his experience as an "in-between" with her, she recognizes that her position in the world has value. She believes that her story should be shared with others so that it has a chance to influence them, to become one of the stories others learn to grow on.

Potok would appear to share Davita's faith in the ability of story to make life meaningful. Davita tells her life story to her sister, so that Rachel can learn that there are many different paths in life, many ways to make life meaningful, and that the only valuable meaning is one that you carve out for yourself. By creating the character of Davita and providing us *Davita's Harp*, Potok tells the reader that he believes the same thing. One does not have to be defeated by the twentieth century. One can combine experiences, choosing the elements of many worlds that will best help one to move forward in life.

Conclusion

In my analysis of *Davita's Harp*, I have traced the narrative subject's search for meaning through the entire course of the novel. I have done so because I believe Davita's search for meaning to be the central, or controlling concept of this novel. This is not surprising, given Potok's background, and his stated desire to depict "core-to-core cultural confrontation" between secular humanism and Judaism in his novels. What better way to dramatize that struggle than to do so through the eyes of a central character who inherits both traditions, and is trying to come to grips with both of them, and the power they have in her life? I traced Davita's search for meaning through the novel because I wanted to compare Davita's search for meaning to the outcome of that search to the Grail quest that narrative subjects of *The Waste Land* engage in, and compare the end results of both searches for meaning. Why is Davita able to achieve a degree of personal peace by the end of the novel, to find meaning in life, while the protagonists of *The Waste Land* cannot? Why is she able to follow Aunt Sarah's advice to "[b}e discontented with the world. But be respectful at the same time" *(Davita's Harp*, 436) -- while the narrative subject(s) of *The Waste Land* has ". . . no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road" (V, 331-332) to show for his/their journey?

It is not because Davita's world is less complex or conflicting than the world Eliot depicts in *The Waste Land*. I recognize Eliot does a better job than Potok of making the reader

feel the fragmentary nature of the world, because the fragmented nature of Western civilization is not merely his subject matter, but also the structure of the poem. Eliot's abrupt shifts from one narrative voice to another, his inclusion of songs, nonsense syllables, literary illusions, and sentence fragments, allow the readers to feel, not just understand, this complexity. The world Davita finds herself in, however, is just as fragmented to her, just as complex as the world of *The Waste Land*. Davita's world possesses the same capacity to degrade and hurt people as the world depicted in *The Waste Land*. In Eliot's world, women are poor and sick and sometimes have no choice but to abort their children. In Davita's world, a man's penis and testicles can be cut off because he asks for a fair wage. In Eliot's world, Mr. Eugenides can suggest a sleazy sexual liaison after lunch. In Davita's world, women can be raped during a pogrom or their breasts can be grabbed in the hallways of a public school. In Eliot's world, the cities of the world are "[f]alling towers" (V, 374) and the people are ". . . singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (V, 380). In Davita's world, fascist and communists kill each other, and anyone else they want to, during the Spanish Civil War, as *Guernica* records. Both worlds are comprised of equal parts of horror. What causes Davita, then, to believe that life has meaning, to create that meaning for herself, through story, while Eliot's protagonists eventually fail in their quest for meaning, giving up, merely existing in an arid land?

I believe that the difference between their two responses is that Davita studies Orthodox Judaism, finds rituals, reclaims a spiritual heritage, "believes" in story and then develops a type of religious faith, while the narrative subject(s) of *The Waste Land* do not. As I explained in my analysis of *Davita's Harp*, when the events of the Spanish Civil upset Davita, when the horrors she sees described in the newspapers disturb her dreams at night, she begins to notice that the Dinns and the Helfmans are not similarly disturbed. Instead, they sing songs of great beauty. They do not read the newspapers. They celebrate tragedies and victories five thousand years old, tragedies and victories that have not lost their ability to hurt (as Ezra Dinn's equating the pain experienced by Jews under the Nazis to the pain of Jews in Sedom and Amorrah shows), but possess great meaning for them. In a world filled with chaos, the Dinns and Helfmans order daily existence, speech, dress and marriage through ritual, prayer and ceremony. Davita is attracted to the order, the serenity of the life they lead and tries to experience it. When her father dies, she uses the ritual of the *Kaddish* to make his death meaningful to her. She begins to experience faith, belief in religion as a vital and significant shaping force, and her influences have been drawn from the same melange of "voices" that disrupted meaning for Eliot.

Eliot's narrative subjects no longer believe in, nor do they engage in religious faith or ritual -- they have lost the past, and the present is mutilated. They do not experience the warmth and community of *shul*, the singing of *zemiros*. Instead, for a

church, "There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home/ It has no windows, and the door swings/ Dry bones can harm no one" (V, 388-90). Nothing spiritual or physical life inhabits the church. There is only dust. Religion is dead. The Fisher King, whose quest it was to find something in the vast land of imagination and history capable of making life mean something to the inhabitants of the parched, desolate, wasted land, fails in his quest. He remains "Fishing, with the arid plain behind [him]" (V, 423) trying unsuccessfully to shore up his life with the fragments of foreign towers. Why does the Fisher King not succeed? It is because he is unable to follow the formula for fertility, for rebirth, provided by the thunder. He cannot give, sympathize or control. Nor can the rest of the narrative subjects of *The Waste Land*.

It is not surprising that Eliot's formula for rebirth, for making life mean is "give, sympathize, control." These steps are the steps one must take follow if one is to surrender him or herself to the power of a grand narrative. Davita takes these steps. Her path to meaning is a path through the Jewish faith, one of the oldest grand narratives. In order to make sense of chaotic events like the Spanish Civil War and her father's death, Davita must first stop trying to make sense of them. She must detach herself from world events. She must stop trying to ignore the spiritual loss, the need to grieve, the need to address God, the moral and religious quests. She must "give" in, allow another force to enter her life. Davita engages in what Eliot

calls "[t]he awful daring of a moment's surrender" (V, 403) when she begins to follow the Dinns and the Helfmans to *shul*.

Davita realizes she must "sympathize" with those who practice Judaism. She must learn about her faith, she must practice it. It must become part of her personality part of her life. When Davita joins the *yeshiva*, and becomes part of the Dinn family, she completes this step. Only then is she able to exert "control." By knowing and understanding the limitations, as well as the advantages of her faith, she can modify her own beliefs, choosing the best elements from the religious world and secular world to create a "grand narrative" that is fully her own.

Although Eliot provides his unnamed, numerically (and somewhat sexually) ambiguous subject(s) with the non-Western directives to "give, sympathize, control," he really does not expect anyone can use these three guides. Like the other modernists, Eliot believes that grand narratives like religion, beauty, sexual gratification or pleasure, are exhausted, no longer able to make life make sense, give one's life order, purpose and meaning. For this reason, the only vision he is able to show his narrative subjects is ". . . fear in a handful of dust" (I, 30).

I would argue that if a reader chooses to read a work of literature for inspiration, for personal growth, because he/she wants to see or experience something in a work of fiction that

will help him/her uncover or enhance meaning in his/her own life, he/she is not fully modernist in perspective or personality. In relation to much twentieth century fiction and criticism, this reasder exists on the margins. Potok and *Davita's Harp* would serve this reader better than Eliot and *The Waste Land*. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot depicts about the turbulent, chaotic, fragmented, violent world of 1919-1922, and describes a search for meaning that proves ultimately fruitless. In *Davita's Harp*, Potok depicts the turbulent, chaotic fragmented world of 1936-42, Spain, the fascists, the Holocaust, personal trauma, religious dislocation and mental stress. However, the quest Potok describes is fruitful, both for the protagonist, who becomes a creative story-maker with faith in herself and her choices, and for the reader inspired by her journey. The chief difference between the two worlds the Potok and Eliot describe is that Potok allows for faith in at least one grand narrative: Judaism. This variation makes *The Waste Land* and *Davita's Harp* further apart in their approach than any differences in style and form between the two works.

I would further argue that *Davita's Harp*, with its meaning-centred text, its return in tone, style and subject matter to an earlier, less experimental subject matter, poses questions about critical precepts central to modernism, deconstruction and postmodernism. It calls into question the modernist assumption that there is no force (even a foreign force) capable of making life meaningful to thinking people in the West today. Davita demonstrates that this does not have to be true. She finds

forces capable of adding value to hers. Potok was able to write a book laden with symbolism, yet the reader is not only able to decipher the symbols (the black bird, the grey horse, the door harp) but understand and identify with the core-to core cultural confrontation Potok depicts in *Davita's Harp*. Confronted with this truth, one questions the deconstructionists' assertions that words are incapable of accurately conveying meaning. Similarly, in an interview, Potok states that the letters he receives from his non-Jewish readers show that:

> they are simply translating themselves into the particular context of [the characters] . . . and the situation [he] is writing about. So instead of being a Jew, you are a Baptist; instead of being an Orthodox Jew, you are a Catholic; and the dynamic is the *same*. The culture war is the *same*. (Ribalow, 116, original emphasis)

Reader response would seem to contradict the postmodernist thesis that story and theory cannot truly represent "things as we find them 'out there' in the world" (McHale, 25).

Davita's Harp raises questions about the "orthodox" exclusions encouraged by contemporary literary theorists and critics. Perhaps this is why a book which was so widely welcomed and purchased by the public is firmly ignored by literary critics. *Davita's Harp* is not a piece of fluff. It deals with

complex ideas and is worthy of serious attention. Why, then, have there been almost no critical articles written on it?

The conclusion that I come to is that people outside of the academy, when reading, are looking for something different from what modernist theorists were, and deconstructionist and postmodernist theorists are. Modernists, like Eliot, valued "objectivity," "disjunctive irony" (McHale, 21), complexity of form and style, a certain world-weary attitude towards life more than any rehabilitative vision.

Deconstructionists value fragmentating, proliferating symbols, texts that unmake themselves as quickly as they make themselves more than they value cultural unity or constructed knowledge. Postmodernists would prefer not to refer to meaning at all in their work, for to them, all meaning, all grand narratives are suspect. As a result, they prize a prose style which is cluttered with trivial, culturally specific details and references to pop culture. They value "suspensive irony" and novels where the characters are all half-laughing at themselves much more than characters who are engaged in the serious quest for personal and intellectual regeneration. Apart from a certain degree of objectivity, none of the elements so prized by these critics as the signature qualities of "good" literature are significant elements of *Davita's Harp*. It is not surprising, then, many contemporary deconstructionist and postmodernist critics do not want to tackle the novel. Why would they wish to

dissect a novel which does not support their central arguments about language, psychology, religion, art and culture?

Yet the public cannot seem to get enough of *Davita's Harp* or Chaim Potok's other novels. I know far more people who have read *Davita's Harp* than have read *The Waste Land* (although many people profess to know what *The Waste Land* is about, whether they have read it or not). Why is this? Unlike literary theorists, readers "foreground" holistic and rehabilitative visions. Unlike critics who deny or decry tradition, readers, by the very act of reading stories from the past, re-state the obvious, that through stories we come closer to knowing ourselves. People outside the academy are more interested in this self-knowledge, in ideas that nourish the soul than in experimental writing. And the idea that you can reconcile or balance the conflicting forces of the modern world, that you can act on the world and develop your own sense of self is a rehabilitative and nourishing one. It is also an unusual one, one not found in much of the fiction written this century. As I have stated previously, the central ideology of modernism, the idea that the Western world is collapsing, that the Western world is in a state of decay, that those of us who live in this world are at the mercy of forces larger that ourselves, like war, technology, apathy, or materialism, and must just sit around and take are medicine, has been absorbed into modern culture. The world-weary attitude of modernism has leaped out of books into society. It touches us all, and does so, from public school to University, as a "topic," something to be studied, almost memorized. Many more educated people believe

in or profess to accept the ethos of the jaded sophisticate, or the apathetic slacker than believe that they can do anything to change their lives. *Davita's Harp* and novels like it provide people with an alternate context through which to view the world. It is a context that people need and (judging by Chaim Potok's book sales) crave, escpecially after experiencing this century as Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, draws it.

This raises yet another question that the theories of modernism, deconstruction and postmodernism fail to answer. If novels like *Davita's Harp* are unusual in the current literary landscape, should critical theory not tackle them? It would perhaps not be profitable to subject *Davita's Harp* to modernist, deconstructionist or postmodernist analysis. If evaluated or judged by those who routinely employ these approaches to novels, *Davita's Harp* would likely be considered "sub-standard." However, it may be time to develop a renewed respect for authors like Potok, who write novels in the style of the traditional *bildungsroman*, who write in a clear prose style, who see meaning or theme the most important element of their novels, if these authors are also writing fiction which allows us to know ourselves better, to balance the conflicting forces in our own lives and move forward.

Deconstruction may have taught us that we are all social constructs, products of family and society. However, most people want to believe that we are, to some degree, still independent individuals, autonomous, free agents who are in charge of our own

destiny. And, surely, it is more constructive to believe so, to feel that one has some degree of control over one's life, over the choices one makes than to "foreground" anomie, ennui and indeterminacy. If we did not, all of us, believe this to some degree, we would never strive, learn or grow. Perhaps it is time to start having more respect for novelists who write to teach and inspire, and readers who read to learn and grow. Western secular writers can learn from a male, Jewish novelist like Potok, whose religions faith and belief in traditional "grand narrative" structure allows him to write this novel of a woman's personal, artistic and cultural replenishment. With faith in one or more of the world's grand narratives, we like Potok and Davita, would have a centre, an anchor, a stabilizing force in our lives which would allow us to admit the chaos of modern times into our lives, without being fragmented, made sterile, turned impotent, destroyed by change, left without a history, a present life of significance and a future of physical, spiritual and cultural possibility.

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understand what the stories say. They make a marked impression on her because Jakob Daw inhabits a social position unlike that of anyone else Davita knows. Her parents are staunch communists, who fully believe in the goals of the communist party and the power of communism to revolutionize the world. Belief gives their lives meaning.

Davita's Aunt Sarah believes in the transformative power of Jesus Christ, and fully believes in Christ's ability to change the world. The Dinns and the Helfmans believe wholly in the power of God and Torah, as for them God and Torah are the source of meaning and life. Jakob Daw, however, exists on a tenuous, in-between plane. Although he initially seems to share the Chandals' faith in the communist party, he is never as fervent in expressing his beliefs as they are, and whatever limited faith in Stalinist communism he possesses dies a quick death once he experiences first-hand the events of the Spanish Civil War. He does not believe in Judaism, but still finds rituals like the *Havdoloh* (the ceremony which marks the closing of *Shabbos*) beautiful and meaningful for their own sake, and for the sake of the memories they revive. He remains sceptical of anyone who embraces any religion or ideology too fervently, finding intense belief in any one philosophy (like communism) limits one's ability to find meaning in opposing rituals or philosophies. Yet, his inability to passionately embrace any one ideology as "the truth" causes him to wistfully envy those who approach the world with a black and white certainty about right and wrong, about their place in society. His own positioning is inclusive,

yet marginal, feeding his artist's need for emotionally enriching experiences rather than mere faith. Jakob Daw's stories reflect his self-imposed, in-between cultural and ideological placement, and it is from these stories that Davita first learns of the independent-mindedness required to exist between cultures and ideologies, and also of the tremendous price which can be exacted from an individual who chooses to live that way.

The first story Jakob Daw tells Davita is the story of the black bird who begins a personal quest to find the source of the world's music. The bird was searching for the music not to enhance or appreciate it, but to kill it, because it soothed people and took their minds of the harm they do one another. This is a story of extreme loneliness. No other animal or person in the bird's world seems to notice either the soothing music or the bird. Nor do other animals or people seem to feel the bird's quest to be a necessary one. None offers to accompany the bird on his journey. The bird makes an unpopular observation, and sets out to solve what he perceives as a problem in an unpopular way. If the music soothes most animals and the people, they will not want it to end. However, the bird does not allow this to stop him. He initiates the search anyway.

It seems natural to read this story in an allegorical manner, to view Jakob Daw as the questing bird, the jackdaw or crow who is noisy, alive but not happy. The "music" this jackdaw is searching for may be viewed allegorically as ideology or metanarrative, like religion, or politics, anything which

distracts people from what they are doing to each other, anything that makes life "bearable" which makes war seem O.K. This reading is supported by the parallels between Jakob Daw's life and the later instalments of the bird story. As Jakob Daw's health declines, and he loses the right to remain in America, he describes the bird to Davita as becoming too tired for his quest. When he tells Davita and her mother that their letters are the only bright spots in his life, he soon has the jackdaw of his story decide to take up residence in the door harp in the Chandal's apartment, an object which is the source of good music, a source of comfort to him and Davita. Read allegorically, then, this story becomes a teaching tale. Through the story of the black bird, Jakob Daw explains to Davita the need to act on the strength of one's convictions, one's impression of what the world means, even if this goes against the perceptions and understandings of others. However, he also explains, through this tale, that the effort might cost one his/her life and/or sanity. It is not significant that Davita does not understand intellectually the meaning of the story at the time Jakob Daw tells it to her. She absorbs it. Her own actions later in the story, and the stories she tells when she finally takes up story making, prove this.

Similarly, Jakob Daw's story of the gray horse is also a story of a life in-between. The horse, beautiful in its own gray way, lives in a little valley. It has searched exhaustively for other gray horses like it, but has found none. In his world, he is the only gray horse. He exists between the dangerous black

horses on the mountaintop, who are associated with the forces of lightning (power and destruction) and the white horses of the plain, who live in peace and contentment. Finally, the gray horse, because of sheer loneliness, fed up with his in-between state and the fact no other horses seem to need him, decides to join the black horses. However, he is burned by lightning and dies.

It is easier to read the story of the gray horse allegorically than that of the black bird, as Jakob Daw draws many connections between his life and that of the gray horse. We learn earlier in *Davita's Harp* that few people appreciate Jakob Daw's stories. The gray horse suffers through the same experience because, while the other horses seem to somehow need each other, they all behave with "utter indifference" (75) towards him. Like the gray horse, Jakob Daw does not stop trying to communicate his "unusual ideas" (75). And like the gray horse, Jakob Daw is forced, by his loneliness, to choose to live with either the black or the white horses.

Another obvious allegorical connection comes from reading the black and white horses as the two opposing metanarratives in the text, communism and Judaism, the secular world and the religious world. In addition, staunch proponents of each ideology see the world in "black and white" terms. For example, Davita's parents believe that strict adherence to the communist party will ensure a new world order, a classless society, a "heaven on earth" for all people. They view religion as "'a

dangerous fraud'" (315), used by those in power to keep the poor content in their misery. Similarly, her Aunt Sarah believes in the complete, "'radiant power of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ'" (239) and despises the communist ideals of Davita's parents. In her mind, they have strayed off the path to salvation and are in grave spiritual danger.

Like the gray horse, Jakob Daw chooses the cynical and secular world over the religious world. Yet he remains uncomfortable with his choice. Further, the choice eventually wears him down, and becomes one of the causes of his death. Once again, Jakob Daw, through story making, has taught Davita about the desolation of life as an in-between person. He also teaches her about the dangers of surrendering to one or the other worlds, the dangers inherent in not walking your own path, in not combining ideas in unusual ways to come up with your own sources of meaning. Like her parents, her aunt, and the other members of her extended family and neighbourhood, Jakob Daw exposes Davita to the past and the present, the secular and the sacred, the gentile and the Jewish, the real and the spiritual. Unlike them, he tries to show her how to combine pieces of these conflicting elements through writing, to synthesize them into a life philosophy which will bring one peace, happiness. Unfortunately, because Jakob Daw never achieves this peace in his life, he does not achieve it in his writing. His teaching is beyond his own ability to demonstrate, but Davita comprehends it, and performs this synthesis in her life and her writing with more success.

Davita only begins to question the communist doctrine she grew up with, and begins to seek meaning elsewhere after a number of events disrupt her life. The initial disturbing event is the Spanish Civil War. Because her parents are so politically active, Davita is acutely aware of the events of the war. Unlike other children her age, she is encouraged to read the news, the headlines in the paper. Further, the war affects her personally. Many of the people she cares about feel a need to get involved, and end up going abroad, leaving her behind. First, her aunt Sarah takes up nursing duties in Ethiopia. Then, Jakob Daw leaves to go to Europe where, Davita asserts, "'. . . people are made dead" (118). Finally, her father leaves to cover the war for his paper. These events make her resent politics and war, and the philosophy which makes her parents, in particular, feel the need to get involved.

As these disturbing events start happening, Davita meets the Dinns and the Helfmans. Their behaviour arouses her curiosity about religion. She finds there is something peaceful in the way they live. While she, her parents and Jakob Daw are in their beach house, and the war is a constant topic of conversation, she sees David Dinn waving his arms back and forth across the sky. This intrigues her, and takes her mind off the world events directly impeding her happiness. On another occasion, she hears the Dinns singing *zemiros* (cheerful songs, written in the sixteenth century, praising the glory of *Shabbos* [the day of rest, Friday evening and Saturday]). She finds the singing soothing when compared to the turbulent world events impinging

upon her life. On yet another occasion, she follows David and his uncle to synagogue and watches David say *Kaddish* (a prayer of praise recited at the end of synagogue services during the period of bereavement following the death of a close relative) for his mother. These experiences allow her brief glimpses into an unfamiliar, attractive and relatively peaceful world, but it is not one in which Jakob Daw's ideology exists, or one in which her gentile aunt's teachings can be voiced.

Once Davita's father leaves for Europe and her mother begins to spend more and more time working so as to avoid feeling lonely, Davita becomes even more disturbed by the war in Spain and the danger it represents to the people she loves. Spain dominates her world. She studies a map of Spain so long that she "knew its shape by heart" (128). Through the articles she reads and her mother's explanations, Davita perceives "[a] brutally divided world" (129). She feels that communist ideology and secular knowledge separate her from others her age, remarking, "None of my classmates talk about the war; few even knew about it. But somewhere in Spain was my father amidst bombs and shells and burned out villages. . ." (129). Davita wonders why only she and her family seem to be so affected by the war. She mentally questions her parents' involvement, asking:

> Why did he run around so much? Why did my parents *care* so much? No one else's parents seemed to care much about the world. Mr. and Mrs. Helfman didn't seem to care about the world; nor did the students in

> my public school class or their parents. Mr. Dinn cared a little about the world; he helped people who were in trouble over immigration laws. But most people had jobs and came home at night and played with their children. (207-08)

Davita craves the type of stability, the detachment from world events felt by other people. She also begins to seek it. During the Spanish Civil War, Davita develops an odd behavioral pattern. Each time she reads about the war in the newspaper or a letter about the war from Jakob Daw or her father, she seeks out the Helfmans or the Dinns and learns a bit about their religion.

For example, after finding a letter sent by Jakob Daw from Bilbao on her mother's dresser, Davita seeks out Ruthie Helfman for the first time. She learns from Ruthie that Ruthie's father does not want Ruthie to read normal American newspapers. He views the events of the world as garbage, something one should not bother too much about. During this meeting, Davita also learns about kosher food and the Torah. When she reads the headlines "PANIC SEIZES CAPITAL" and "CENTER OF MADRID IS REPORTED AFIRE," Davita follows Ruthie and her mother to *shul* (the Jewish house of worship). She listens to the service, and renews her acquaintance with David Dinn. When her mother receives a cable telling them that her father has been wounded and is returning home, Davita again decides to attend *shul*, and sits through a *bar mitzvah* (the ceremony which marks the entry of a boy into his full place as an adult in the Jewish community).

When Davita reads the headline " REBELS CLOSE ON MALAGA AFTER HARD 2-DAY BATTLE," she asks Mrs. Helfman for a book to help her learn Hebrew. Davita's interest, at this point, does not seem to be in acquiring Jewish faith. She is drawn to these Orthodox rituals because they are comfort her. They make her feel secure and safe. The Helfmans and the Dinns sing beautiful songs and light beautiful candles. When they allow Davita to participate, Davita is able to allay some of the pain she experiences as a result of her knowledge of world events.

Davita does not actually turn to a religious ritual because of its intrinsic meaning until her father is killed in Spain. After she learns about the circumstances of her father's death, and after reading the truth about the events in Centralia which prompted her father to join the communist party, after the party's memorial service for him, Davita feels sick and dissatisfied. More than this, she wants to mourn him properly. She thinks, "There has to be more for you papa than just one memorial service" (235). His death, she decides, must be made to mean something. So, with her newfound knowledge of Judaism, she decides to recite *Kaddish* for her father. However, it is interesting that when Davita turns to religious ritual in the hope of finding meaning, she does not adhere strictly to Jewish tradition. By saying *Kaddish* herself, rather than asking a man to do it for her, she innovates. Like any good artist, she creates her own "tradition." Davita's introduction to Judaism allows her to make meaningful the death of her father. The fact that she was not brought up in the Jewish faith, and the fact

that she has learned something about creativity and inclusion from Jakob Daw gave her the freedom, and the desire to change tradition and to speak *Kaddish* herself. Saying *Kaddish* for her father is Davita's first attempt to make her own story, by her own rules. Further, she inspires other people to do the same. The women in the synagogue begin to utter responses to the *Kaddish*. Davita's action inspires them. Her religious, social (political), and artistic natures converge, each complementing the others.

Davita does not reconcile all of her beliefs, all of the stories and "truths" she grew up with, through her first effort to make story. The events of the secular world still impact upon her. Indeed, their impact intensifies after the death of her father. His death, followed by Jakob Daw's deportation, precipitates Davita's suicide attempt. In my opinion, the primary reason Davita tries to kill herself is that Davita is already beginning to experience the lonely life the "gray horse," Jakob Daw had cautioned her about. She has been brought up to pay attention to world events, and indeed, she can hardly ignore these events which affect her so directly. She has tentatively experienced what it might feel like to have a religious anchor, so that world events might not hurt her so much, but these sensations are new to her, too new to be of much use at this time. She responds to the crisis through desperation, by trying to end her life.

Once again, however, religion rescues her. Strangely enough, this time it is not the Jewish religion, but the Christian religion which helps her. When Davita goes to Prince Edward Island to recuperate from her suicide attempt, and begins to pray with her Aunt Sarah, once again ritual (even though it is not Jewish ritual) brings her peace. It is a peace that lasts until she returns to her normal life. Without that religious anchor, once more she begins to have nightmares and behave erratically. Peace is only restored when, in desperation, her mother enrolls her in David Dinns *yeshiva* (Jewish parochial school).

When Davita starts attending the *yeshiva* and her mother renounces communism and marries Ezra Dinn, Davita finally begins to achieve a sense of balance. Anne Chandal's marriage to Ezra Dinn, makes her once more a part of a traditional nuclear family, while Davita's attendance at the *yeshiva* marks her entrance to the Jewish community. She feels much more comfortable there than she ever did in the secular world. Of her new environment in school, Davita asserts:

> I realized quickly enough that no one in my class snickered or whispered or laughed when I raised my hand to ask or answer a question, to react to a book which we had been told to read, or to make a point about the opera at the Metropolitan or the exhibition of paintings at the Brooklyn Museum . . . no one at this school laughed at learning. (299)

It would appear that by this point in the novel, Davita has attained a sense of security. She, her mother, her new father and brother, strictly adhere to the Jewish laws and rituals. Davita's life becomes structured, ordered. In the Orthodox Jewish community, all rituals, all events have a given meaning. Events in the bible have a given meaning. What one is supposed to do is always clear. Because of the community's emphasis on celebrations and festivals of the past rather than in the present, Davita "knew little of what was happening in Spain. [She} no longer read newspapers and only occasionally glanced at a headline" (301). The reader cannot help but read this change in Davita's lifestyle as a loss, as well as a gain. Davita and her mother seem to living the lives of new converts. switching one ideological environment for an opposing, and equally restricting one. While the reader can understand Anne Chandal's conversion (she is a woman who has the capacity for complete and total faith, and after losing faith in communism, she reached out to grasp one of its opposites), he/she cannot help but react with sadness to the change in Davita. Her suicide and healing would appear to have sapped her sceptic's eye, her unique, questioning vision, her artistry.

The reader must ask whether or not Davita has paid too high a price for the sense of security Orthodox Judaism provides. In Book Three, it seems initially that she has. Davita's fledgling efforts to discover and then express who she is, what her life means and what path she wants to take may be weakened by adopting the traditional Jewish view. Fortunately for her, this does not

occur. The questioning Davita resurfaces. Just as Davita's feelings of pain over the loss of her father, and the horror she felt over the events of the Spanish Civil War cause her to question the mental satisfaction to be had in living one's life in the service of communist ideology and goals, in the arbitrary barbarity of the secular world, so her experience in the secular world makes her question the Jewish world she finds herself in, to see where it falls short. Her secular experience exposed her to different perspectives, many more than she would have come across had she been raised from childhood as an observant Orthodox Jew in a Jewish community. If she had been raised from her birth as David Dinn and Ruthie Helfman were raised, Davita would not have learned to question the precepts of Jewish faith and ritual, especially the restrictions placed upon female Orthodox Jews.

Davita begins to question and protest the more restrictive elements of Orthodox Judaism. For example, when she asks David Dinn about his dreams about the future, and he tells Davita that he wants to be a *rosh yeshiva*, "the head of the academy of Torah learning" (363), his dreams sound good to her. She asks David whether it is possible for a girl to do this. When he tells her no, Davita is unwilling to accept this, and asks "'Why not?'" The question makes David nervous, so Davita does not pursue it at that time. However, such a question demonstrates that the independent-minded Davita is indeed alive and well. Similarly, when her mother makes the decision (probably under the influence of Davita's example) to say *Kaddish* for Jacob Daw, Davita

objects, both at home and at school, to the fact that the rest of the men in *shul* make her mother sit in a little closet made of bamboo. She believes this to be unfair, and does not hesitate to state her belief that her mother should be able to sit with the men. Her assertions get her into trouble in school. Her behaviour is seen as threatening by her teacher, who cautions her with the words, "'No one here forces you to come to this school. But once you do come, you must obey the rules and laws'" (384). He threatens her status in class: she will not receive awards and prizes when she graduates if she makes waves with her revolutionary ideas. These threats do not make her give up her opinions. From this experience that Davita learns that "walls are laws to some people, and laws are walls to others" (385).

Davita's dissatisfaction with the limitations imposed upon her and other women because of the role assigned to Jewish women in the Orthodox faith, combined with her secular background and training, finds further expression in the stories Davita once again begins to invent. In Talmud class, for example, the interpretation offered for the line "the Caananites were then in the land" (385) does not seem right to her. Because she grew up viewing the bible as stories written by someone, she invents her own interpretation of the line. She invents an explanation of that line which makes sense only if one views the bible as having a human author: the author of that line was making reference to an earlier time, when Caananites were in the land. Her efforts at story-making in this instance are not appreciated. Her teacher and her fellow students are disturbed by her story, her

own interpretation. By engaging in textual criticism, Davita threatens the sanctity of the bible in the eyes of her teachers and fellow students.

This does not check her observations, however. She continues to think this way, and uses the same type of analysis on the Hebrew words "*B'ever ha-Yarden*" or "beyond the Jordan." Not agreeing with the class' interpretation, Davita comes up with her own. She learns that a famous Talmud scholar imagined the same story she does, and offered it a valid explanation. This shows her that there is not, in fact, a single interpretation of the Talmud, but many. She is pleased by this and puzzled about the reaction of her teacher, for "[i]t seemed to [her] that a story that had only one kind of meaning was not very interesting or worth remembering too long" (391). By this statement, Davita demonstrates not only that she believes in the possibility of words or stories to mean, but that she believes in personal revelation or understanding of meaning. She, like a Talmud author, can create a story. She, like a Talmud scholar, can create an interpretation of that story. Meaning is not automatically given to words. Nor does one have to accept a meaning handed down by tradition. Each individual has a role to play in interpreting meaning, and interpretations may differ, without one having to be abandoned to make way for another. Different meanings can coexist.

Davita also exercises her creative abilities on the stories of her personal past. For an English assignment, she makes a

story about her reaction to seeing Picasso's *Guernica*. In it, she becomes part of the painting and rescues a bird. Stories she makes up, like the stories told to her has a child, become a living connection to the past, tying traditions to felt experiences. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, mourned humanity's loss of this ability. Davita knows continuity demands the power of story. She recognizes this when she thinks:

> What connected me to my past? Memories? Save for certain sharp images, they seemed to be fading. Stories? Yes stories. I still remembered the stories. Even though I didn't understand them. I remembered. (393)

Davita exercises her creative ability on the story of Rabbi Akiva as well, writing two essays on him. In one of them, she changes the story by making Rabbi Akiva give a long speech thanking his wife for the years of sacrifice during the time he was away, studying Torah. In the other, she graphically describes his being combed to death, with a steel comb, by the Romans.

One of her teachers seems pleased by her ability. The other does not. However, Davita no longer seems to care one way or the other. The stories have become her way of reconciling her secular heritage and her Jewish present, body and mind, senses and intellect, the New and the Old World, past and present. Through her writing and explanations, she is being true to

herself, and losing the sense that the world is black. Creativity helps create Davita's reason for not dying.

After being denied the Akiva award, Davita proves that she has learned this lesson. She forges her own meaning in life out of everything she has learned, and holds a private graduation ceremony for herself in her imagination. When she is denied the award, Davita is angered that because she is a girl, the school denied her the award she deserves. This demonstrates to her the limitations placed on female Orthodox Jews by the Jewish community. It demonstrates the injustice allowed by the tradition she loves. She learns from this experience that unlike her brother, she will be denied full intellectual participation in the community of Orthodox Jewish scholars. She will never be allowed to follow directly in Rabbi Akiva's footsteps. She rages:

> I had wanted to show that I could be a Jewish hero -- a scholar. I had wanted to enter Jewish history. I had wanted to be part of that warm and wondrous world -- and they wouldn't let me. They had denied it to me because of a circumstance. An injustice had been performed by a world that taught justice. How could I live in that world now? How could I be part of its heart and soul, its core? Why should I continue to be part of something that behaved this way? How could I trust it? (431)

Yet she is not defeated by this experience. Once again, Davita's imagination, her ability to make life mean, to make her life make sense to her, rushes to her rescue. She is joined in her imagination by those people who were not able to be present for her actual graduation -- her father, Jakob Daw, and Aunt Sarah. To them, she speaks the words she wanted to say at her actual graduation ceremony, the word which would formally reconcile her two worlds, and publicly acknowledge the gifts that each of them gave her. In this speech, she recognizes everything that has gone into making her what she is: her mother's experience in Poland, her father's death, her uncle's death, her aunt's kindness. She tells her father that she has learned from his stories of Wesley Everest and Paul Bunyan. She tells her Uncle Jakob that she has learned from his stories and his act of writing. She speaks of the music of the door harp, and quotes from the bible and Rabbi Akiva. Even though she does not receive public approbation for her graduation speech, she receives the approval of her own conscience. And in her mind, the memories of her father, her Uncle Jakob and her Aunt Sarah approve of what she has learned.

By imagining their approval, she is in fact bestowing upon herself her own tacit approval of the way that she understands life and what it means. This approval also enables her to take the next step in her journey. By deciding to attend a public high school in the fall, while not renouncing her Judaism, she takes her rightful place as one of the in-betweens of the world. And by sharing her experience as an "in-between" with her new

sister Rachel, just as Jakob Daw shared his experience as an "in-between" with her, she recognizes that her position in the world has value. She believes that her story should be shared with others so that it has a chance to influence them, to become one of the stories others learn to grow on.

Potok would appear to share Davita's faith in the ability of story to make life meaningful. Davita tells her life story to her sister, so that Rachel can learn that there are many different paths in life, many ways to make life meaningful, and that the only valuable meaning is one that you carve out for yourself. By creating the character of Davita and providing us *Davita's Harp*, Potok tells the reader that he believes the same thing. One does not have to be defeated by the twentieth century. One can combine experiences, choosing the elements of many worlds that will best help one to move forward in life.

Conclusion

In my analysis of *Davita's Harp*, I have traced the narrative subject's search for meaning through the entire course of the novel. I have done so because I believe Davita's search for meaning to be the central, or controlling concept of this novel. This is not surprising, given Potok's background, and his stated desire to depict "core-to-core cultural confrontation" between secular humanism and Judaism in his novels. What better way to dramatize that struggle than to do so through the eyes of a central character who inherits both traditions, and is trying to come to grips with both of them, and the power they have in her life? I traced Davita's search for meaning through the novel because I wanted to compare Davita's search for meaning to the outcome of that search to the Grail quest that narrative subjects of *The Waste Land* engage in, and compare the end results of both searches for meaning. Why is Davita able to achieve a degree of personal peace by the end of the novel, to find meaning in life, while the protagonists of *The Waste Land* cannot? Why is she able to follow Aunt Sarah's advice to "[b}e discontented with the world. But be respectful at the same time" *(Davita's Harp*, 436) -- while the narrative subject(s) of *The Waste Land* has ". . . no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road" (V, 331-332) to show for his/their journey?

It is not because Davita's world is less complex or conflicting than the world Eliot depicts in *The Waste Land*. I recognize Eliot does a better job than Potok of making the reader

feel the fragmentary nature of the world, because the fragmented nature of Western civilization is not merely his subject matter, but also the structure of the poem. Eliot's abrupt shifts from one narrative voice to another, his inclusion of songs, nonsense syllables, literary illusions, and sentence fragments, allow the readers to feel, not just understand, this complexity. The world Davita finds herself in, however, is just as fragmented to her, just as complex as the world of *The Waste Land*. Davita's world possesses the same capacity to degrade and hurt people as the world depicted in *The Waste Land*. In Eliot's world, women are poor and sick and sometimes have no choice but to abort their children. In Davita's world, a man's penis and testicles can be cut off because he asks for a fair wage. In Eliot's world, Mr. Eugenides can suggest a sleazy sexual liaison after lunch. In Davita's world, women can be raped during a pogrom or their breasts can be grabbed in the hallways of a public school. In Eliot's world, the cities of the world are "[f]alling towers" (V, 374) and the people are ". . . singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells" (V, 380). In Davita's world, fascist and communists kill each other, and anyone else they want to, during the Spanish Civil War, as *Guernica* records. Both worlds are comprised of equal parts of horror. What causes Davita, then, to believe that life has meaning, to create that meaning for herself, through story, while Eliot's protagonists eventually fail in their quest for meaning, giving up, merely existing in an arid land?

I believe that the difference between their two responses is that Davita studies Orthodox Judaism, finds rituals, reclaims a spiritual heritage, "believes" in story and then develops a type of religious faith, while the narrative subject(s) of *The Waste Land* do not. As I explained in my analysis of *Davita's Harp*, when the events of the Spanish Civil upset Davita, when the horrors she sees described in the newspapers disturb her dreams at night, she begins to notice that the Dinns and the Helfmans are not similarly disturbed. Instead, they sing songs of great beauty. They do not read the newspapers. They celebrate tragedies and victories five thousand years old, tragedies and victories that have not lost their ability to hurt (as Ezra Dinn's equating the pain experienced by Jews under the Nazis to the pain of Jews in Sedom and Amorrah shows), but possess great meaning for them. In a world filled with chaos, the Dinns and Helfmans order daily existence, speech, dress and marriage through ritual, prayer and ceremony. Davita is attracted to the order, the serenity of the life they lead and tries to experience it. When her father dies, she uses the ritual of the *Kaddish* to make his death meaningful to her. She begins to experience faith, belief in religion as a vital and significant shaping force, and her influences have been drawn from the same melange of "voices" that disrupted meaning for Eliot.

Eliot's narrative subjects no longer believe in, nor do they engage in religious faith or ritual -- they have lost the past, and the present is mutilated. They do not experience the warmth and community of *shul*, the singing of *zemiros*. Instead, for a

church, "There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home/ It has no windows, and the door swings/ Dry bones can harm no one" (V, 388-90). Nothing spiritual or physical life inhabits the church. There is only dust. Religion is dead. The Fisher King, whose quest it was to find something in the vast land of imagination and history capable of making life mean something to the inhabitants of the parched, desolate, wasted land, fails in his quest. He remains "Fishing, with the arid plain behind [him]" (V, 423) trying unsuccessfully to shore up his life with the fragments of foreign towers. Why does the Fisher King not succeed? It is because he is unable to follow the formula for fertility, for rebirth, provided by the thunder. He cannot give, sympathize or control. Nor can the rest of the narrative subjects of *The Waste Land*.

It is not surprising that Eliot's formula for rebirth, for making life mean is "give, sympathize, control." These steps are the steps one must take follow if one is to surrender him or herself to the power of a grand narrative. Davita takes these steps. Her path to meaning is a path through the Jewish faith, one of the oldest grand narratives. In order to make sense of chaotic events like the Spanish Civil War and her father's death, Davita must first stop trying to make sense of them. She must detach herself from world events. She must stop trying to ignore the spiritual loss, the need to grieve, the need to address God, the moral and religious quests. She must "give" in, allow another force to enter her life. Davita engages in what Eliot

calls "[t]he awful daring of a moment's surrender" (V, 403) when she begins to follow the Dinns and the Helfmans to *shul*.

Davita realizes she must "sympathize" with those who practice Judaism. She must learn about her faith, she must practice it. It must become part of her personality part of her life. When Davita joins the *yeshiva*, and becomes part of the Dinn family, she completes this step. Only then is she able to exert "control." By knowing and understanding the limitations, as well as the advantages of her faith, she can modify her own beliefs, choosing the best elements from the religious world and secular world to create a "grand narrative" that is fully her own.

Although Eliot provides his unnamed, numerically (and somewhat sexually) ambiguous subject(s) with the non-Western directives to "give, sympathize, control," he really does not expect anyone can use these three guides. Like the other modernists, Eliot believes that grand narratives like religion, beauty, sexual gratification or pleasure, are exhausted, no longer able to make life make sense, give one's life order, purpose and meaning. For this reason, the only vision he is able to show his narrative subjects is ". . . fear in a handful of dust" (I, 30).

I would argue that if a reader chooses to read a work of literature for inspiration, for personal growth, because he/she wants to see or experience something in a work of fiction that

will help him/her uncover or enhance meaning in his/her own life, he/she is not fully modernist in perspective or personality. In relation to much twentieth century fiction and criticism, this reasder exists on the margins. Potok and *Davita's Harp* would serve this reader better than Eliot and *The Waste Land*. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot depicts about the turbulent, chaotic, fragmented, violent world of 1919-1922, and describes a search for meaning that proves ultimately fruitless. In *Davita's Harp*, Potok depicts the turbulent, chaotic fragmented world of 1936-42, Spain, the fascists, the Holocaust, personal trauma, religious dislocation and mental stress. However, the quest Potok describes is fruitful, both for the protagonist, who becomes a creative story-maker with faith in herself and her choices, and for the reader inspired by her journey. The chief difference between the two worlds the Potok and Eliot describe is that Potok allows for faith in at least one grand narrative: Judaism. This variation makes *The Waste Land* and *Davita's Harp* further apart in their approach than any differences in style and form between the two works.

I would further argue that *Davita's Harp*, with its meaning-centred text, its return in tone, style and subject matter to an earlier, less experimental subject matter, poses questions about critical precepts central to modernism, deconstruction and postmodernism. It calls into question the modernist assumption that there is no force (even a foreign force) capable of making life meaningful to thinking people in the West today. Davita demonstrates that this does not have to be true. She finds

forces capable of adding value to hers. Potok was able to write a book laden with symbolism, yet the reader is not only able to decipher the symbols (the black bird, the grey horse, the door harp) but understand and identify with the core-to core cultural confrontation Potok depicts in *Davita's Harp*. Confronted with this truth, one questions the deconstructionists' assertions that words are incapable of accurately conveying meaning. Similarly, in an interview, Potok states that the letters he receives from his non-Jewish readers show that:

> they are simply translating themselves into the particular context of [the characters] . . . and the situation [he] is writing about. So instead of being a Jew, you are a Baptist; instead of being an Orthodox Jew, you are a Catholic; and the dynamic is the *same*. The culture war is the *same*. (Ribalow, 116, original emphasis)

Reader response would seem to contradict the postmodernist thesis that story and theory cannot truly represent "things as we find them 'out there' in the world" (McHale, 25).

Davita's Harp raises questions about the "orthodox" exclusions encouraged by contemporary literary theorists and critics. Perhaps this is why a book which was so widely welcomed and purchased by the public is firmly ignored by literary critics. *Davita's Harp* is not a piece of fluff. It deals with

complex ideas and is worthy of serious attention. Why, then, have there been almost no critical articles written on it?

The conclusion that I come to is that people outside of the academy, when reading, are looking for something different from what modernist theorists were, and deconstructionist and postmodernist theorists are. Modernists, like Eliot, valued "objectivity," "disjunctive irony" (McHale, 21), complexity of form and style, a certain world-weary attitude towards life more than any rehabilitative vision.

Deconstructionists value fragmentating, proliferating symbols, texts that unmake themselves as quickly as they make themselves more than they value cultural unity or constructed knowledge. Postmodernists would prefer not to refer to meaning at all in their work, for to them, all meaning, all grand narratives are suspect. As a result, they prize a prose style which is cluttered with trivial, culturally specific details and references to pop culture. They value "suspensive irony" and novels where the characters are all half-laughing at themselves much more than characters who are engaged in the serious quest for personal and intellectual regeneration. Apart from a certain degree of objectivity, none of the elements so prized by these critics as the signature qualities of "good" literature are significant elements of *Davita's Harp*. It is not surprising, then, many contemporary deconstructionist and postmodernist critics do not want to tackle the novel. Why would they wish to

dissect a novel which does not support their central arguments about language, psychology, religion, art and culture?

Yet the public cannot seem to get enough of *Davita's Harp* or Chaim Potok's other novels. I know far more people who have read *Davita's Harp* than have read *The Waste Land* (although many people profess to know what *The Waste Land* is about, whether they have read it or not). Why is this? Unlike literary theorists, readers "foreground" holistic and rehabilitative visions. Unlike critics who deny or decry tradition, readers, by the very act of reading stories from the past, re-state the obvious, that through stories we come closer to knowing ourselves. People outside the academy are more interested in this self-knowledge, in ideas that nourish the soul than in experimental writing. And the idea that you can reconcile or balance the conflicting forces of the modern world, that you can act on the world and develop your own sense of self is a rehabilitative and nourishing one. It is also an unusual one, one not found in much of the fiction written this century. As I have stated previously, the central ideology of modernism, the idea that the Western world is collapsing, that the Western world is in a state of decay, that those of us who live in this world are at the mercy of forces larger that ourselves, like war, technology, apathy, or materialism, and must just sit around and take are medicine, has been absorbed into modern culture. The world-weary attitude of modernism has leaped out of books into society. It touches us all, and does so, from public school to University, as a "topic," something to be studied, almost memorized. Many more educated people believe

in or profess to accept the ethos of the jaded sophisticate, or the apathetic slacker than believe that they can do anything to change their lives. *Davita's Harp* and novels like it provide people with an alternate context through which to view the world. It is a context that people need and (judging by Chaim Potok's book sales) crave, escpecially after experiencing this century as Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, draws it.

This raises yet another question that the theories of modernism, deconstruction and postmodernism fail to answer. If novels like *Davita's Harp* are unusual in the current literary landscape, should critical theory not tackle them? It would perhaps not be profitable to subject *Davita's Harp* to modernist, deconstructionist or postmodernist analysis. If evaluated or judged by those who routinely employ these approaches to novels, *Davita's Harp* would likely be considered "sub-standard." However, it may be time to develop a renewed respect for authors like Potok, who write novels in the style of the traditional *bildungsroman*, who write in a clear prose style, who see meaning or theme the most important element of their novels, if these authors are also writing fiction which allows us to know ourselves better, to balance the conflicting forces in our own lives and move forward.

Deconstruction may have taught us that we are all social constructs, products of family and society. However, most people want to believe that we are, to some degree, still independent individuals, autonomous, free agents who are in charge of our own

destiny. And, surely, it is more constructive to believe so, to feel that one has some degree of control over one's life, over the choices one makes than to "foreground" anomie, ennui and indeterminacy. If we did not, all of us, believe this to some degree, we would never strive, learn or grow. Perhaps it is time to start having more respect for novelists who write to teach and inspire, and readers who read to learn and grow. Western secular writers can learn from a male, Jewish novelist like Potok, whose religions faith and belief in traditional "grand narrative" structure allows him to write this novel of a woman's personal, artistic and cultural replenishment. With faith in one or more of the world's grand narratives, we like Potok and Davita, would have a centre, an anchor, a stabilizing force in our lives which would allow us to admit the chaos of modern times into our lives, without being fragmented, made sterile, turned impotent, destroyed by change, left without a history, a present life of significance and a future of physical, spiritual and cultural possibility.

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