



RUNNING FROM KLEIST: FRAGMENTS
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The Pleasures of the Exile:

“There are three good reasons for choosing an academic career, and they are: June, July, and August.” My regular jest, it turns out, has a wonderful fourth exception: the sabbatical year. Lucky bastard: while the Jewish state was collapsing in on itself, and the news reported heavy bombardments of cities in Ukraine I had never visited but whose names I heard in family stories from the old world, I was invited to spend my sabbatical at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. A collection of academic migratory birds, including some peacocks, flew to this strange corner of Berlin to enjoy chatting while chewing in front of each other. *Zivilisation* is another name for small talk next to an espresso machine.

George Lamming, the wise writer from Barbados, called it the Pleasures of Exile. I made a mistake earlier this year during a conversation with a board member who asked about my experience when I used the words “spa conditions” to express my appreciation of the cushioned environment provided to me by the Institute. I was showered with a long preachy sermon (“*How could we defend the humanities if we’ll describe them as luxury?!*”), during which all I could do was sip my coffee quietly while staring at my interlocutor’s Armani suit. I thought of Lamming, the outsider who got in, and compared himself to Caliban, challenging Prospero and his language. Perhaps I should have quoted Edith

Wharton: “There was something heroic in living as though one were much richer than one’s bank-book denoted.”

East and West:

Grunewald, it must be said, is an odd place. Isolated from the city, someone compared its relation to Berlin to a married couple who sleep in separate rooms. True. Yet such a statement is a product of an eastward-fixated gaze, an M19 bus way of appreciating the city’s geography. For me, the memorable moments of this year were spent looking west and south, staring at the enchanted forest that gave the place its name.

The nearby forest and lakes invite you in. I learned their names this year: Hundekhelesee, Grunewaldsee, the banana-shaped Krumme Lanke, and the long, slug-like Schlachtensee. Yes, yes, and it also includes *that* lake, Wannsee, whose name and its notorious villa were well known to me from before. *They* only needed ninety minutes to finish their meeting and decide on the next steps. Much shorter than the Wiko colloquium. Considerably shorter than an average faculty meeting back in the United States.

On Short vs. Long Runs:

Some go out jogging or running to burn calories. My runs are miserable attempts to replace the chaos in my head with something that might resemble order.

This bizarre academic career, with its merciless “publish-or-perish” ethic, forced me to be productive. Put your fecundity on display or otherwise: no one wants to see the flaming sword preventing mortals from re-entering the garden, החרב המתהפכת (literally: the sword turning itself). Productiveness is a slightly obscene word, however. In a not-at-all-miraculous metamorphosis, a vocation turned into a profession, and I turned myself into a well-oiled article machine: academic peer-reviewed articles, articles of the type that wins over an audience of about five readers, three of whom serve as editors of the journal to which you submit your paper... articles of the kind one needs for promotion, and articles that allowed me to run away, leave a position in Israel, and move myself and my family across the Atlantic. (I cannot stand the dry academic English prose of those articles. They made me a stranger to myself and to the Hebrew in which I grew up.)

The Israeli literary critic Yitzhak Laor called his collection of essays מולדת אותך מולדת – We write you, homeland. We write you, exile, too. Either way, we write too much.

The world is divided into long-distance runners and sprinters. Unfortunately, I am a member of that old order of academics who are expected to produce a “big book,” that

world-known grand thesis. For what makes one a full (“complete”) professor if he is not an author with *authoritas*. While I? I got accustomed to article-length short runs, short intervals. Bursting power that ends after a couple of hundred meters. I forgot what it takes to run a marathon.

It will be a longer run today, I’ve decided: a run to Heinrich von Kleist’s gravesite. That wild dead genius never left that one great novel behind him, “only” novellas, short stories, and plays. I was introduced to him in my freshman year at Hebrew University, translated into archaic Hebrew. The textbook described his short stories poetically: written at once, from beginning to end, in a single blow, out of a concentrated and intense effort. It is as if you read a single paragraph that gets longer and longer “until the reader feels short of breath but cannot stop reading lest he misses the point.” Most of these stories end with question marks, the haunting feeling that some detail that might solve the riddle was missed during the reading. I would like to be that kind of writer. A scrivener of short, bursty runs.

Grunewald’s Villas:

Before we enter the forest, the first kilometers should be galloped delicately along Grunewald’s cobblestone sidewalks. Elegant yet pesky, they make this part of the run inconvenient. The old stones remind you that this is not the hipster part of the city, neither the bustling Berlin of smoky cabarets of the 1920s nor that of the fashionable bars and techno music parties everyone was talking about in the 1990s. The atmosphere is more that of a sleepy bastion of the haute bourgeoisie. So is this where successful industrialists put their wealth on display, close enough to the city but at a safe distance from the masses? This assembly of villas, built one on top of the other too densely, with much too small backyards, as if they were competing by towering over each other? PP, who read the series of novels set in Berlin so systematically, omnivorously, found in Philip Kerr’s *Berlin Noir* trilogy a description of Herbertstraße as “an assemblage of old field-marshals and grand-admirals, in full-dress-uniforms obliged to sit on extremely small and inadequate camp stools.” (I laughed out loud. I once saw these old Russian veterans, with chests adorned with too many medals, huddled side by side, sitting on uncomfortable plastic stools.) Walter Benjamin (Delbrückstraße 23, the original mansion is no longer there) despised this atmosphere. He obviously preferred his Schöneberg and Paris apartments. Perhaps it was this excessive display of wealth that pushed Benjamin to mix Marxism and Kabbalah?

What can one do with such huge houses these days? Foreign flags, waving over houses that have been converted into consulates and embassies, provide a partial answer. Other villas have been purchased by oligarchs, while others have been made into nursing homes. Luxury cars with license plates from Russia and Ukraine add to my confusion. “Oh, so you’ve encountered the Monaco Battalion!” exclaimed one of the refugee researchers from Ukraine, not concealing her disdain. The flow of bad news turned into a muddy torrent these past months. It’s all too depressing. Newspaper cartoons resemble slides from history classes: the menacing Russian bear threatening *Mitteleuropa*. Only arms dealers are happy these days.

Sometimes *unlearning* is needed to acquire new knowledge, to gain a new appreciation. “Please completely forget, disremember, obliterate, unlearn, consign to oblivion any notion you may have had,” Vladimir Nabokov ordered his American students at the opening of his lecture on *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But he also warned them: “Do not pad ignorance with eloquence.”

On the Gradual Construction of Thoughts during a Run:

The chemistry here is quite simple, really. Athletes call this burst of endorphins “runner’s high.” Others talk of a state of mindless bliss. I think of my “mini-eureka” moments: you start running, and ideas start budding mysteriously, you sweat and the thoughts start flowing with them. The Latin root *discurrō*, I am told, literally means “to run to and fro, to roam, to wander.” In order to have “discourse,” you have to start running around.

Kleist, it seems to me, had little patience for pedantic and tedious philosophical modes of argumentation. He claimed that our thoughts are not readily available to us, but develop gradually and take form through an interaction, during a conversation or as we start our speech. “The French say: *l’appétit vient en mangeant* [with food comes appetite], and this maxim holds true when we add in a parodic joke: *l’idée vient en parlant* [ideas come with speech].”

Would Heinrich von Kleist go on field runs to help his thoughts take shape? He served for a while in the Prussian army. As I write this, I am reminded of the yellow cover of the Hebrew translation of Frederick the Great’s *Instructions for His Generals*, but I can’t recall anything about running there. Perhaps during his Rousseauian phase, attracted to ideals of proper “pastoral” life, Kleist went out to run in the woods? The Napoleonic occupation distanced him from such “French ideas” and turned him into an angry and resentful nationalist. Here comes the author of the “German Catechism.” Birth of a Monster.

Ich bin Caliban:

It was thanks to Lamming that I learned that the exiled writer is a universal figure. “We are made to feel a sense of exile by our inadequacy, in our irrelevance of function in society whose past we can’t alter, and whose future is always beyond us.” He altered the way I understood *The Tempest*, Shakespeare’s last play. Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan, is also an exile, a man who lost his city and home due to a treacherous brother. Shipwrecked, he found himself on a desert island in the company of the monstrous Caliban. Lamming’s English prose was magnificent, virtuoso almost. He felt at home in that language. But in the eyes of the English poets, his Caribbean origin and the skin color made him a Caliban. White magic versus black magic.

Though obsessed with monsters, very few Jews read Shakespeare before the nineteenth century. Things changed during the previous century. In 1927, Arnold Zweig entitled his long treatise analyzing antisemitism *Caliban oder Politik und Leidenschaft (Caliban: or, Politics and Passion)* and dedicated it to Sigmund Freud, his cultural hero. Comparing the Jew to Caliban revealed Zweig’s deep sense of alienation. Six years later, he emigrated to Palestine, but this was not a simple love affair either. “In Palästina, in der Fremde” (“In Palestine, in a strange land”) read the last entry in the pocket diary for 1933. “Fremde” was not simply a technical “abroad.” It was a marker of a distant, foreign country, the unfamiliar elsewhere.

Zweig’s guru and friend mocked him. “Palestine,” Freud wrote, “has produced nothing besides religion, religious fanaticism and the obstinate attempt to change the outer shape of the world with inner wishful thinking.” Trying to make sense of his own predicament through the lens of psychoanalysis, Zweig penned an unconvincing, weak essay on “Emigration und Neurose.” He ultimately returned to East Berlin, appointed president of the GDR’s Academy of Arts. Around that time, on the western side of the city, Leo Löwenthal (Wiko Fellow 1984/1985) returned to Caliban. Invited to deliver a speech marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi book burning, he used Caliban to discuss libricide: instead of killing his nemesis Prospero, Caliban planned to burn the library the expelled humanist carried with him into exile.

In America, I am just one of those tens of thousands of Israeli immigrants. For most American Jews, I am an odd bird – yet another secular lefty academic who fled Bibistan, who does not attend our *shul* and doesn’t use words like *daven* or *frum*, but consumes hummus, Hebrew novels, and Israeli music instead. “Respect him and suspect him” – he is not ours. “Far too critical,” probably suffering from auto-antisemitism. I am reminded of that

New Yorker cartoon: the ancient Israelites crossing the Red Sea, led by Moses, and one of them whispers behind the leader's back: "He's all right. I just wish he were a little more pro-Israel."

What am I here, in Germany of 2023? How do *they* look at me? As a representative of a Middle Eastern banana republic? Or as a Jew whose very presence serves as a reminder of *that* thing? Am I Prospero in this story or Caliban? Or maybe I'm simply once again that *Ostjude*, drawn to the great European city to escape his Eastern roots?

The literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, another Eastern Jew, admired Prospero so much that he agitated his former teacher, Reinhold Knick:

Ich verstehe dich gut, aber du verkennst die Realität. Die menschliche Gesellschaft besteht nicht nur aus den Repräsentanten des Geistes wie Prospero mit seiner großen Bibliothek, dazu gehören auch solche Wesen wie Caliban, sowenig er dir gefallen mag. Das sind zwei Seiten derselben Sache, und beide sind wichtig. Paß auf – heute zumal –, daß du nicht nur die eine Seite wahrnimmst und die andere übersiehst. Ich glaube, du hast eine große Schwäche für die Intellektuellen. Dagegen ist nichts zu sagen, nur muß man diese Schwäche in Grenzen halten – und man muß sich hüten, alles andere zu übersehen.¹

(I understand you well, but you misjudge reality. Human society consists not only of the representatives of the humanities like Prospero and his grand library, but also of creatures like Caliban, as disliked as he may be. These are two sides of the same coin, and both are important. Be careful – especially these days – that you don't perceive only one side while overlooking the other. I think you have a great weakness for intellectuals. There is nothing to be said against that, only that one must be aware of this weakness and its limits and be careful not to overlook everything else.)

Zen and the Art of Running:

The forest grows denser. As I run toward the Havel, the flat biking paths curve upward and turn into hilly trails, leading me to Grunewaldturm. Running uphill is about finding an equilibrium between restlessness and shortness of breath. Stable climb. Don't think too much. Just breathe.

1 Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1999), 51.

As a teenager, I was a fan of Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I cannot remember who gave me a copy of the book and don't think I understood why "An Inquiry into Values" was used as its subtitle. I probably did not notice it. What was clear, however, was that Pirsig, an engineer-writer, was in love with his toolbox. A wrench was emblazoned on the cover of his book, and his protagonist was aroused seeing gears and pistons at work. "Excellence" was some sort of metaphysical quality achieved through the proper use of mechanical tools and was about being tangled in the workings of the machine. While I? Well, I can hardly change a light bulb. Due to a pair of left hands, feet and legs had to step in instead.

Much of the pleasure I derive from running is related to its simplicity, to the fact it does not require more than a pair of shoes. In my case, these are not conventional shoes, actually, but Vibram FiveFingers, which look like rubber running socks. Races bring all the merchandise out. Sellers are coming to sell expensive shoes, thermal shirts and tight running pants, and packs of colorful energy gels. It makes sense, of course. There is something blasphemous about these festivities of consumerism, however. "Don't pretend you're not a MAMIL yourself," my daughter told me – a middle-aged man in Lycra.

The Absence of Running in Hebrew Literature:

Many like jogging, but there are very few novelists who have taken running seriously enough to write about it. Haruki Murakami, an ultra-marathon runner, is a notable exception (does this have something to do with the fact that his father was a Buddhist monk?). So is Joyce Carol Oates. "If writing involves punishment, at least for some of us, the act of running even in adulthood can evoke painful memories of having been, long ago, as children, chased by tormentors."

When it comes to running, Hebrew literature is a couch potato. Given the fact that constructing an assertive *Muskeljudentum* was such a central impetus of Zionism and early Israeli culture, the absence of running is conspicuous. Yes, yes, David Grossman did write a novel called *Someone to Run with*, but the only reflection on running by a Hebrew author I am familiar with is an essay by Dan Tsalka, who decided, after long hesitation, to substitute the rock music he used to listen to while jogging with classical music. He wrote beautifully about the panting of violinists that can sometimes be heard on recordings and his own panting while running and the way he discovered Scarlatti to be his best running mate. Is Hebrew literature stuck in place? The memoirs of Jewish pioneers and soldiers are rife with graphic descriptions of the body and its fluids, with emphasis on sweat and blood, but

there is something about running that they found unattractive. In a culture that yearns for “rootedness,” running was probably seen as an anathema, a running away from something.

We are on the other side of the forest now, passing near the elegant building of the American Academy in Berlin. The cultural life here, on the edges, is conducted in English. Even the neighboring Literarisches Colloquium hosted an evening with Berlin-based authors who write in English earlier this year. I attended it with a few friends, former Israelis, who write poetry and novels in Hebrew. What is the meaning of writing in Hebrew today? Can one write and publish in Hebrew outside Israel?

Kleist's Suicide:

I cannot say I was not warned. “Look for Kleist’s tombstone at the edge of the forest, by the lake called Kleiner Wannsee,” a German friend told me, to which he added: “You know, it’s a pretty creepy place.” He went on to tell me how Herr Kleist, a mad and tormented soul, put an end to his life, not before taking his female friend Henriette Vogel down with him. The sign on-site provided the full details: the couple rented a room at the nearby inn and wrote farewell letters throughout the night. The next morning they ordered one cup of coffee, which they shared. A few hours later they carried out their plan: Kleist shot his partner in the chest first, straight through the heart, then put the barrel of the loaded gun in his mouth.

Not a real literary site, so much as the crime scene of a double suicide.

The sweat beads of the dead dripping on our lives.

I promised my friend DM, an Israeli poet who relocated to Berlin, that I would think about the meaning of writing in Hebrew today on my next run. I thought that in the overtly Zionist Hebrew that I was brought up with, even a seemingly banal expression like “to run in the woods in Germany” (לרוץ ביערות גרמניה) brings up connotations of Holocaust movies dripping with kitsch. So how can I write about this in Hebrew? You can run in the woods but it is doubtful you’ll escape the semantic field. Or maybe I’m running to Kleist’s gravesite to overcome him? To run away from the little Kleist inside me?