
German-Jewish Creative Identity in the Age of Lessing and Beyond: Berthold Auerbach's *Dichter und Kaufmann*

Helen Ferstenberg

Perhaps the central dilemma for the nineteenth-century German-Jewish community was the question of how to gain acceptance in German culture while still maintaining some form of Jewish identity. While this dilemma was played out in countless variations in all areas of Jewish life, the issue of how German Jews in the literary realm were to balance the demands of their dual identity was particularly problematic and intractable. The literary debates carried on in the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, one of the leading Jewish journals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bear witness to the struggle within the German-Jewish community to define a German-Jewish creative identity.¹ Although the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* was always strongly assimilationist, it also contained an ongoing debate about the need and potential for an authentically Jewish literature that would flourish in German culture and yet give expression in literary form to an identifiably Jewish identity.

Berthold Auerbach's successful career and prominence as a man of letters made him the darling of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, and he was often celebrated as proof that a Jewish and German identity could exist hand in hand (Horch 126). Nonetheless, beneath the praise in this journal of Auerbach as a classic German writer of enduring standing² runs an undercurrent of doubt over the nature of Auerbach's success. Auerbach's Jewish novels *Spinoza* (1837) and *Dichter und Kaufmann* (1840) are consistently seen as inferior in quality,³ and his real contribution to literature is seen as his village tales, the genre with which he also achieved popular success. Writing on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of Auerbach's birth, Ludwig Geiger reflects that Auerbach did much for the Jewish cause "durch sein Beispiel und durch seine Taten" but remains conspicuously silent on the legacy of his writing for Jewish issues (101-102). As

one critic laments, Jews play only a peripheral role in the village tales which made Auerbach famous and his plans to write a Jewish village tale came to nothing ("Literarischer" 240). Despite the consistent celebration of Auerbach's life and success throughout the history of the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums*, a doubt about his status as a model German-Jewish creative writer persists based on the sense that his success was bought at the price of a denial of his Jewishness (Horch 126-27).

In fact, an examination of Auerbach's early career suggests that the issue of a German-Jewish creative identity so central to the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* was one which preoccupied him deeply. After devoting himself to Jewish issues in his first two novels, Auerbach turned decisively away from Jewish themes for the rest of his literary career. Auerbach's second novel, *Dichter und Kaufmann: Ein Lebensgemälde aus der Zeit Moses Mendelssohns*, suggests some of the underlying reasons for his decision to avoid Jewish themes in the future. This novel is a fictionalized biography of the obscure eighteenth-century poet Ephraim Kuh (1731-1790), one of the first writers of Jewish origin to write in German, and as such is an extremely interesting meditation on the issue of Jewish creative identity in the German cultural sphere. Indeed, the title Auerbach originally intended for the novel, "Der jüdische Dichter: Ein Tableau aus der Zeit Friedrichs des Großen," suggests that one of his primary interests here was the status of the Jewish writer in Germany. The shift of emphasis in the title from "Der jüdische Dichter" to "Dichter und Kaufmann" hints at Auerbach's eagerness to avoid any paradigmatic significance being attached to the example of Kuh as a Jewish writer. Instead, it suggests a desire to put the focus on the more universal conflicting demands of spirituality and materialism. Yet the poet-merchant conflict is not well-developed in the novel. Auerbach's underlying concern with the status of the Jewish writer in Germany not only remains apparent but also constitutes one of the most interesting aspects of the book. In this novel, Auerbach explores the external and internal barriers to Jewish involvement in German literary culture and weighs the possibility of developing a distinctively Jewish voice against the desire for assimilation into the mainstream German literary environment. At this early stage of his career, Auerbach engages in an intense meditation on the identity of the German-Jewish writer.

Finding no workable definition, however, he comes to believe that the highest aspiration of the Jewish-born man of letters must lie in being indistinguishable in all regards from non-Jewish German writers.

One of Auerbach's ostensible purposes in writing this Jewish novel at the start of his career is to challenge the prevailing stereotypes about Jews. In *Dichter und Kaufmann*, Auerbach tackles prejudices which held that Jews were uncreative and unworthy to appear as serious figures in literature by frequently emphasizing the cultural and artistic sense of German Jews. The parenthetical explanations of Jewish words and customs in the novel reveal that Auerbach's intended audience consists of non-Jewish Germans. By depicting ordinary Jews who enjoy music and engage in spirited literary discussions on Lessing and Goethe, Auerbach makes an implicit plea to his Gentile readers to recognize the right of Jews to full participation in German cultural life. Auerbach's optimism about the potential for Jews to be accepted and thrive in the German cultural sphere is embodied in the relationship of Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn, who appear in *Dichter und Kaufmann*, and take a benevolent interest in Kuh's aspirations. The two men are described in the novel as "Eingangspforten der neuen Zeit" (12: 219),⁴ and their friendship stands as a symbol of hope that the Enlightenment has ushered in an era where the acceptance of Jews in mainstream German life is possible. Indeed, Auerbach's optimism is so insistent here that he deviates rather significantly from the known facts of Kuh's interactions with Lessing and Mendelssohn. In fact, Kuh formed a closer friendship with Mendelssohn than with Lessing, contrary to Auerbach's depiction. Kuh's biographer, Kayserling, states that Lessing had "weder Zeit noch Lust" to read Kuh's poems (27). Equally interesting is Auerbach's omission of Kuh's falling out with Mendelssohn over a poem which Mendelssohn reworked and published under his own name (Kayserling 30). Such changes suggest that Auerbach was anxious not only to pay tribute to the greatness of Lessing and Mendelssohn by avoiding any hint of ungenerosity of spirit on their part, but also to further the Jewish cause by showing that such an icon of German literature as Lessing can take Jewish creative aspirations seriously.

On another level, however, the portrayal of Kuh's active attempts at artistic production reveals a deep anxiety on Auerbach's

part about the status of the Jewish writer in German culture. In particular, the novel reveals his conviction that the creative person must be rooted within a community and his fear that the inadequately assimilated Jew will be unable to find such a community. *Dichter und Kaufmann* charts the struggle and failure of Kuh to find a place in society for himself at this time of tremendous change. The literary-philosophical circle of Berlin is one of the central loci of the novel, and other writers who appear suggest models for the German-Jewish writer. Finally, however, none offer a viable community within which he can thrive. Most strikingly, Lessing appears as the revered philosopher of *Humanität*. In a vivid and strong portrayal, Auerbach shows Lessing to be noble in his thought and harmonious in his personality and existence. Yet Auerbach makes him more than just a symbol of the Enlightenment: he is also light-hearted, dashing, somewhat flirtatious, and filled with youthful idealism. His activity as a writer is scarcely touched upon in the novel, although the power of his works is demonstrated through Kuh's sister, Veilchen, who falls in love with him on the basis of reading his play *Die Juden*. Kuh's disharmonious personality, eccentricities, and social clumsiness prevent him from being at home in the Lessing-Mendelssohn circle, and the *Lichtmenschen* who inhabit this circle are ultimately impossibly unattainable models for the troubled Jewish writer. The inadequately educated and assimilated Kuh stands as an observer of the highest promises of the Enlightenment, but these promises remain beyond his grasp.

While Lessing seems to inhabit a different creative sphere than Kuh, the struggles and eventual success of Anna Luise Karschin offer a closer parallel to Kuh's aspirations. Like Kuh, Karschin drifts around on the periphery of successful literary circles for much of the novel. Yet despite initial poverty and a deeply troubled personal life, she eventually achieves popularity with her poetry honoring Frederick the Great. This interesting kinship between the woman-outsider and the Jew-outsider in their creative endeavors also proves unfruitful for Kuh in the end, since he cannot tap into the patriotic fervor for Frederick which motivates Karschin.⁵ Unable to fit into German literary circles and encountering frequent anti-Jewish prejudices in broader German society, Kuh fails to find a viable community beyond the ghetto in which he can pursue his poetic aspirations.

Simultaneously, the Jewish community is shown to be an inhospitable environment for the aspiring writer. The expectations of Kuh's family are that he will become a rabbi or a merchant; no support for his creative ambitions exists. The restrictiveness of a Jewish upbringing means that imaginative endeavors are associated in Kuh's mind with guilt and division. The first mention of his poetic inclination in the novel is the pleasure he takes in retelling the story of his half-hearted youthful attempt at suicide with ample embellishments. Realizing that his imagination has caused him to tell "eine geflissentliche Lüge," we are told that "ein unversöhnlicher Zwiespalt" enters his soul (12: 72). Later, Kuh's friend Maimon reminds him of a Jewish legend "die da verbietet, Phantasiegebilde zu schaffen; denn in der Todesstunde kommen die Phantasiegebilde als Dämonen" (13: 185). The hostility of the Jewish community to creative aspirations is evident even at Kuh's burial. Kuh's sister-in-law, Rosa, places a laurel wreath on his head, but this is torn off by the Jewish grave-diggers, "denn das jüdische Ceremoniel duldet keine solche Zierde" (13: 225).

In this novel, Auerbach confronts the nightmare of a German-Jewish poet whose life and career end in utter dissonance. At home neither in the Jewish community, nor in wider German culture, Kuh's poetic achievement remains negligible and inauthentic. Yet, paradoxically, out of the failure and confusion of Kuh's life and career, Auerbach sees a clear path emerge for his own. At several points in the novel, Auerbach speculates on the conditions necessary for creative success, and posits that the successful writer must be able to draw from one of four streams of inspiration, identified as "Gott, Freiheit, Vaterland und Liebe" (12: 154). In addition, he emphasizes the necessity of a stable and harmonious self if the aspiring writer is to achieve creative success (12: 167 and 13: 212). While all of these wellsprings of creativity remain closed to the deeply troubled Kuh, Auerbach senses that through assimilation and self-cultivation, a Jewish-born writer of his own generation can be assured access to one or more of these sources of creativity. He fears that partial assimilation is tantamount to trying to operate in a void, and comes to believe that the way to literary success in his own career is to be found in his genuine patriotism for Germany. The fact that Auerbach puts the onus firmly on the Jewish writer to assimilate to German ways has displeased some modern critics,⁶ yet Auerbach's belief that creative

success depends upon assimilation is a pragmatic decision born out of the fear that beyond the German mainstream, no alternative community exists within which the Jewish writer may thrive.

The fact that this decision was not an easy one for Auerbach is shown by the evident desire in *Dichter und Kaufmann* to retain a Jewish identity in some measure even after the religious community has loosened. Addressing the problem of religious identity, Auerbach shows that the Jewish community is threatened both by adherence to orthodoxy and by conversions to Christianity. The example of Ephraim's boyhood tutor, Rabbi Chananel, demonstrates the dangers Auerbach perceives in orthodoxy. Reacting against the stifling restrictions placed on him by Jewish law, Chananel is driven to ever greater infractions of the Sabbath, sabotages Ephraim's education in Judaism, and finally self-destructs by starving himself to death. Auerbach's intended career as a rabbi was made impossible after he received a prison sentence for his involvement with the student fraternity Germania. Had he been able to fulfill his original intention of becoming a rabbi, he certainly would have been at the forefront of the Jewish reform movement in Germany (Sammons 63). Auerbach is equally clear that conversion is a major blow to the unity of the family and is beyond the limits of acceptable assimilation. Kuh's family drifts apart when two brothers convert after their father's death. As far as religion is concerned, Auerbach is clear in his belief that at least nominal ties to Judaism are essential for maintaining a Jewish identity.

The question of how Jewish identity may find expression within the literary activity of the German-Jewish writer proves much more problematic for Auerbach. In his portrayal of Kuh's attempts to forge a career as a poet, Auerbach makes tentative moves towards claiming wit as a specifically Jewish aesthetic. Kuh achieves his greatest literary success with his epigrams, and he dreams of becoming a new Martial. In the novel, Kuh is encouraged to dedicate himself to the literary form of epigrams by no less a mentor than Lessing, since the epigram's brevity and snappiness is the ideal vehicle for what Lessing sees as the Jewish characteristic of wit. Indeed, throughout the novel, Auerbach associates the genre of the epigram with wit rather than regarding it as a classical form, as would be more usual. Lessing explains to Kuh "daß die Juden schon durch ihre Stellung einen Beruf

zum Witz, zur Satyre und zum Epigramm haben" (12: 130). He elaborates that wit is a natural reaction on the part of Jews to the difficult position which they occupy in society:

. . . der Witz ist im Geistesleben was der Blitz im äußern Naturleben, er reinigt die Atmosphäre, er entsteht wie der Blitz durch den Conflict zweier Elektrizitäten. Gerade die Contraste des Lebens, die sich dem Juden von selbst aufdringen, sind ergiebig für den Witz. (12: 130)

Through Lessing, Auerbach suggests that Jews have a distinctive voice, and tentatively posits that the Jewish gift for wit may represent a unique and positive aesthetic contribution to German literature.

Almost as soon as this suggestion is made, however, Auerbach retreats from it. Lessing's praise of Jewish wit turns out to be a double-edged sword, since he adds that wit is rather insubstantial: "Der Witz ist, wie das Salz, nicht sättigende Speise, aber es würzt die Nahrung und bewahrt vor Fäulniß" (12: 131). Even more damningly, Auerbach returns to the issue of wit in a later context in the novel, and in an explicit narrative aside he explains that "die kleinen Witzspiele in Sinngedichten und Epigrammen" are not equal to the task of expressing the complexities of important national issues (13: 2). He equates indulgence in wit with self-abandonment, succumbing to superficial pleasures, and allowing oneself to be exposed to a contagious disease. Despite the modest fame and popularity Kuh achieves in Berlin as a wit, Auerbach condemns his activities as "geistigen Selbstmord, der die tieffsten Erregungen gern für ein momentanes Aufsehen in ihr Gegentheil verkehrt und preisgibt" (13: 4).

Such strong language suggests that Auerbach is doing more than merely illuminating the mistakes his protagonist makes in his literary career. Rather, in his meditations on wit, Auerbach is weighing the thorny issue of whether the Jewish writer in Germany may have a distinctive voice without sacrificing the substantiality of his work and jeopardizing his claim to acceptance in Germany. In this novel, the answer he arrives at is that he may not. Auerbach's meditations on this issue take place at least in part under the shadow of Heine, easily the most prominent and controversial German writer of Jewish origin in the nineteenth century, and a writer who, what-

ever else he may have been accused of, was never described as lacking in wit. In 1836, four years before *Dichter und Kaufmann*, Auerbach had published an essay entitled "Das Judentum und die neueste Literatur," a refutation of Wolfgang Menzel's attack on the Young Germans as Jewish in spirit. Yet, as Jeffrey L. Sammons notes, Auerbach's motive in this essay "is not to defend Young Germany against association with Jewishness, but rather to defend Jewishness from association with Young Germany" (66). Auerbach argues that the Jewish spirit, like the Christian one, is fundamentally opposed to the shallowness and sensualism characteristic of Young Germany. He is particularly scathing about what he calls Heine's "platter Sensualismus," arrogance and reckless disrespect for all institutions, so that everything becomes the "Zielscheibe seines Witzes" (*Judentum* 322). He criticizes Heine for being lost in a subjectivity so intense that it ends in "Witz- und Schmerzbankerot" (*Judentum* 321). In Auerbach's view, Heine's controversial person and writings lack any fixed base and are essentially empty exercises in wit. He is anxious to show that Heine is an anachronism, not a representative German-Jewish writer of the nineteenth century, and indeed he disputes Heine's right to speak as a Jew at all (*Judentum* 322).⁷ Acknowledging that wit is frequently considered a specifically Jewish characteristic, in *Dichter und Kaufmann*, Auerbach locates the origins of Jewish wit in the unconventional education Jews receive, the hybrid nature of Jews' language ("der eigenthümliche, mit Hebraismen versetzte Jargon"), and the effects of training in "Talmudischer Dialektik" together with the infiltration of Voltaire into Jewish circles (13: 3). Interestingly, all of these reasons for the existence of Jewish wit are ones which may be remedied in the nineteenth century by a healthy dose of *Bildung* and assimilation to German ways. Auerbach's clear sense is that any difference on the part of the Jewish writer is damaging to the Jewish cause, and that the proper aspiration of the Jewish writer should be conformity in literary style and theme.

Seen together, the novel *Dichter und Kaufmann* and the essay "Das Judentum und die neueste Literatur" constitute documentation of Auerbach's decision to forge his own career squarely in the mainstream of German literature. By nature, Auerbach was intensely anti-experimental in his literary style, but in this novel his rootedness in a realist aesthetic is justified and sealed.⁸ Moreover, *Dichter und*

Kaufmann marks the end of Auerbach's experiment with Jewish themes in his writing. In the early years of his career, he confronts both the nightmare of the unsuccessfully assimilated Jewish writer, Kuh, and the nightmare of the controversial Jew, Heine, and dissociates himself firmly from both. While remaining a lifelong believer in the need to retain a separate Jewish religious identity, Auerbach comes to the decision in the early years of his career that a separate Jewish creative identity is unacceptable.

It is a distortion to see Auerbach's decision to avoid being labeled as a Jewish writer as an example of Jewish self-hatred, as Sander Gilman argues.⁹ Auerbach does not turn away from Jewish themes out of a fear that he, as a Jewish writer, has a tainted discourse, but rather out of a genuine conviction that the best way to further the Jewish cause is to show that the Jewish writer is an equal partner in German culture.¹⁰ In fact, Auerbach's private identity remained very much that of a Jewish-German writer, as evidenced by a letter written to Ferdinand Freiligrath in the wake of the tremendous success of his first village tales. In it he writes: "Ich muß Dir auch noch sagen, daß es mir besondere Freude macht, daß es mir, einem Juden, gelungen ist, etwas aus dem Innersten des deutschen Volksgeistes zu offenbaren" (Bettelheim 161).¹¹ As David Sorkin argues, the role of Jewish artists is central to the debate over the position of Jews in Germany, since the idea of culture plays such a crucial role in the emancipation bargain (100). As a highly public figure, the Jewish writer is among the most visible manifestations of the involvement of Jews in German culture, and Auerbach formed the opinion that as such, the wisest contribution of the Jewish writer is to make himself indistinguishable from his non-Jewish colleagues in his creative activities. Auerbach's own successful career seemed to bear out his decision until near the end of his life, when the rise of political anti-Semitism proved a demoralizing blow (Kaiser 417-18). A petition with a quarter of a million signatures demanding restrictions on the rights of Jews and a two-day long debate in parliament on the subject led Auerbach to make his well-known despairing comment in a letter: "Vergebens gelebt und gearbeitet!" (Bettelheim 376).¹² Although hindsight shows us that Auerbach was naive in his faith in assimilation and education as the keys to Jewish acceptance in Germany, his underrated novel *Dichter und Kaufmann* shows that this faith was not unthinking, but was rather

the hard-won product of a difficult confrontation with the problems of the Jewish writer in Germany.

Yale University

Notes

¹See Horch.

²See, for example, L. Levi's report of Auerbach's funeral in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 46 (1882): 136-139.

³See, for example, E. Grünebaum's assessment of *Dichter und Kaufmann* as *mangelhaft* in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 19 (1855): 125 and Ludwig Geiger's discussion of Auerbach's Jewish novels in *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 76 (1912): 101-102.

⁴All references to *Dichter und Kaufmann* are from Berthold Auerbach's *Gesammelte Schriften*.

⁵Indeed, there are several critical remarks about Frederick in the course of the novel. See Di Maio 272. These views are Auerbach's own; in reality, Kuh was a great admirer of Frederick (Kaysersling 11).

⁶See, for example, Gilman 224.

⁷As Lothar Kahn and Donald D. Hook show, Auerbach was one of a group of writers concerned with showing that Jewish writers "are indeed deserving of the German label" and "to dissociate themselves from [Heine], while looking upon him as a dire threat to their continued well-being in Germany" (53).

⁸In addition to distancing himself from wit, Auerbach condemns *Empfindsamkeit* (13: 107), the *Genie* cult (12: 164), and *baccantische Übermuth* tinged with cynicism (13: 70) as false approaches to literary production in the course of this novel.

⁹Auerbach's novel does not simply establish a "paradigm of the 'good' and 'bad' discourse of the Jew" as Gilman states (224), but rather addresses the complex issue of how the Jewish writer can build a career in a society which is largely hostile to his aspirations.

¹⁰As Jeffrey L. Sammons writes: "Auerbach was an assimilationist, not out of opportunism or convenience but out of conviction" (72).

¹¹Letter from 24th November, 1843, (Bettelheim 161).

¹²Letter to Jakob Auerbach, November 23, 1880, (Bettelheim 376).

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Berthold. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 20 vols. Augsburg: Cotta, 1858.
- . "Das Judentum und die neueste Literatur." 1836. *Politische Avantgarde 1830-1840. Eine Dokumentation zum "Jungen Deutschland"*. Ed. Alfred Estermann. Vol. 1. Frankfurt a. M.: Athenau, 1972. 305-329.
- Bettelheim, Anton. *Berthold Auerbach. Der Mann - Sein Werk - Sein Nachlaß*. Stuttgart: Cotta, 1907.
- Di Maio, and Irene Stocksieker. "Berthold Auerbach's *Dichter und Kaufmann*: Enlightenment Thought and Jewish Identity." *Lessing Yearbook* 19 (1987): 267-85.
- Geiger, Ludwig. *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 76 (1912): 101-102.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986.
- Horch, Hans Otto. *Auf der Suche nach der jüdischen Erzählliteratur: Die Literaturkritik der "Allgemeinen Zeitung des Judentums" (1837-1922)*. Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1985.
- Kahn, Lothar and Donald D. Hook. "The Impact of Heine on Nineteenth-Century German-Jewish Writers." *The Jewish Reception of Heinrich Heine*. Ed. Mark H. Gelber. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1992. 53-65.
- Kaiser, Nancy A. "Berthold Auerbach: The Dilemma of the Jewish Humanist from *Vormärz* to Empire." *German Studies Review* 6 (1983): 399-419.
- Kaysersling, M. *Der Dichter Ephraim Kuh*. Berlin: Springer, 1864.
- "Literarischer Wochenbericht." *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* 28 (1864): 240.
- Sammons, Jeffrey L. "Observations on Berthold Auerbach's Jewish Novels." *Orim: A Jewish Journal at Yale* 1.2 (Spring 1986): 61-74.
- Sorkin, David. "The Invisible Community: Emancipation, Secular Culture and Jewish Identity in the Writings of Berthold Auerbach." *The Jewish Response to German Culture from the Enlightenment to the Second World War*. Eds. Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg. Hanover: UP of New England, 1985. 100-119.