

Language, Identity, and the Scandal of American Jewry

Leon **Wieseltier**

The afternoons are sometimes very long when you are a graduate student, and there was one long afternoon, 20 years ago, when a few graduate students in Jewish history sat assembled around a seminar table in a long and musty room in Widener Library at Harvard and, half to amuse ourselves and half to make sense of the profusion of the forms of medieval Judaism, invented a field of inquiry that we called Comparative Diasporalogy.

Our study of Jewish history was teaching us to call into question one of the axioms of Jewish consciousness, which is that a Jew is a Jew is a Jew; that we are all in some essential way the same; that a Jew in 16th-century Fez had more in common with a Jew in 16th-century Cracow than with a non-Jew in 16th-century Fez. There is some truth, of course, to this axiom of the unitary nature of the Jewish people. Spiritually, certainly, we base our self-definitions on the same texts and the same myths and the same hopes. And from the standpoint of what we now call “Jewish identity,” the notion that a Jew is a Jew is a Jew is a necessary fiction, an indispensable foundation for our universal solidarity with each other. We must define ourselves in a way that provides a moral foundation for our assistance to each other.

But the requirements of identity are usually not the same as the requirements of history, and the study of Jewish history shows that different Jewries have different characters and different emphases and different tones. We are one, but we are also many; and our plurality is as much a strength, as much a cause of what we are, as our singularity. In certain critical ways, the Jewish culture of Fez in the 16th century was not at all like the Jewish culture of Cracow in the 16th century, and a similar diversity may be found in other Jewries in other times. In Spain, where the Jewry of the Middle Ages enjoyed its glamorous “golden age,” Jewish culture included courtiers and warriors and love poets and drinking poets and radical philosophers alongside its great scholars and jurists. In Ashkenaz, by contrast, there were no courtiers and no warriors, no love songs and no drinking songs, and only the dimmest traces of philosophy alongside the scholars and the jurists; there was mainly law and liturgy and an inflamed, ascetic pietism. But out of those austerities another sort of “golden age” was created. The comparative diasporalogist studied these similarities and these differences; the morphologies of Judaism, whose number was also an occasion for delight; the Judaisms that together comprised Judaism.

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It was not long before the comparative diasporalogists in the seminar room extended our inquiry into the Judaism of the modern world, of the present day. What, we asked, are the defining characteristics and the salient accomplishments of the greatest of the modern Diasporas, the Jewish community in America? An answer suggested itself, and it was not an altogether edifying answer. The achievements of American Jewry, we agreed, have been primarily communal, institutional, political, social, financial, organizational; but they have not been primarily spiritual, philosophical, artistic, or literary. To be sure, the American Jewish contribution to the thought and the art and the literature of the United States has been extraordinary; but that is not what we were asking. We were asking what Jews have done for Jews—how we have developed the resources of our tradition internally, for ourselves. Not how we will have mattered to America, but how we will have mattered to Judaism. And in this respect, as I say, our answer did not altogether please us.

The history of the American Jewish community offered some pretty clear reasons for this brilliant but stunted trajectory. For a start, the American Jewish community is an immigrant community, and an immigrant community cannot be relied on to develop an indigenous identity. It prefers instead to depend on the identity that it carried with it, and it will experience what it carried with it as especially vulnerable or especially oppressive. The objective of a displaced community is always to defend itself against a greater rupture. A transplanted culture will always have a powerful anxiety about authenticity, about demonstrating its fidelity to, and even its subaltern relationship to, its circumstances of origin. In some ways it will seek to reproduce its circumstances of origin, explaining (as the Jews have explained for many centuries) that *minhag avotenu b'yadenu*, “the customs of our ancestors are in our hands.”

This ideal of the reproduction of the past holds even—or especially—in cases in which a community's circumstances of origin may not significantly resemble the circumstances in which it now lives. This disparity may cast a community into a strange sensation of dissonance, which it may then go to great lengths to deny. I believe this to be one of the central dilemmas facing the American Jewish community. One of the great challenges to the formulation of an indigenous Judaism in America, an American Judaism, is the magnitude of our good fortune. We are the luckiest Jews who ever lived—indeed, for a reason that I will presently suggest, we are the spoiled brats of Jewish history. To a degree unprecedented in the history of our people, our own experience is discontinuous with the experience of our ancestors: not only our ancient ancestors but also our recent ones. Their experience, particularly their experience of persecution, is increasingly unrecognizable to us. We do not possess a natural knowledge of their pains and their pressures. To acquire such a knowledge, we rely more and more on commemorations—so much that we are in danger of transforming American Jewish culture into an essentially commemorative culture. Owing to the magnitude of our good fortune, the third-person plural in our prayers gets stretched thinner and thinner, and the leap of imagination that is required for our identification with our ancestors grows harder and harder, until we are left to wonder just how the old resources may fit the new circumstances.

This is not the only obstacle to the creation of a Jewish tradition of our own that could match, in the rigor of its thinking and the richness of its learning, the

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Jewish traditions that preceded us. History may have saved the Jews of America, but it also distracted them. There were the great savage mid-century dramas of Jewish destruction and Jewish rebirth, which kept generations of American Jews far away from themselves—the Holocaust and Israel, the near-apocalypse and the pseudo-redemption of the 1940s. Confronted with events of such enormity, it was inevitable—indeed, it was also ethical—that the Jews of America came to formulate their Jewish feelings in the terms of Jewish existences utterly unlike their own. But that, too, is a reason for the sour conclusion that the comparative diasporologist draws about American Jewry. Until very recently, we lived off of the spiritual and historical resources of other Jews. This is changing, for reasons that are too complicated to go into here. Suffice it to say that for American Judaism the moment of truth has finally arrived.

There is still another reason for the relative thinness of Jewish culture in America. This impediment to our taking our rightful place in the chain of our tradition has everything to do with Jewish languages and Jewish books, and with the changing relationship of Jews to Jewish languages and to Jewish books.

Obviously, there are Jewish writers and Jewish writings wherever we look. Jewish culture in America is in some ways thicker than it has ever been. There is no denying it. But thicker compared with what? Surely the standard by which we must judge ourselves as Jews, and by which our children and our historians will judge us, is not an American standard, even if we are also Americans; and it is not even an American Jewish standard. It is a Jewish standard, *the* Jewish standard, the classical Jewish standard, the standard of our tradition. I take it to be a fundamental principle of Jewish life that it is by our tradition that we must measure ourselves. So the questions that we must ask ourselves are these: How does what we have created compare with what we inherited? Did we add to our tradition or did we subtract from it? Did we transmit it or did we let it fall away? Did we enrich it or deplete it? Among the great Jewries, what is our distinction?

Measuring ourselves by the standard of our tradition, we should note immediately, one distinction of the American Jewish community, and it is with this distinction that I have come here to trouble you. The distinction that I have in mind is the illiteracy of American Jewry. I mean, its Jewish illiteracy. The American Jewish community is the first great community in the history of our people that believes that it can receive, develop, and perpetuate the Jewish tradition *not* in a Jewish language. By an overwhelming majority, American Jews cannot read or speak or write Hebrew or Yiddish. This is genuinely shocking. American Jewry is quite literally unlettered. The assumption of American Jewry that it can do without a Jewish language is an arrogance without precedent in Jewish history. And this illiteracy, I suggest, will leave American Judaism and American Jewishness forever crippled and scandalously thin.

There are two ways in which we can educate our children, two instruments of identity with which we may equip them. One is conviction; the other is competence. I have no doubt that the future of Jewish culture in America will be determined more by Jewish competence than by Jewish conviction. We cannot teach our children what to believe, or rather, we can try to teach them what to believe, but we can never be certain of the success of our effort. They will believe what they wish to believe. We cannot control their belief. Indeed, we must be grateful for their freedom of mind. But it is not an illusion of control to think that

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we can permanently arrange matters so that our children will never be shut out of their own tradition, out of their own books.

If we cannot make sure that we will be followed by believing Jews, we certainly can be sure that we will be followed by competent Jews. Indeed, competence leaves a Jew favorably disposed to conviction. A competent Jew is not destroyed by his questions, because he can look for the answers himself. He, or she, has the tools. Ignorance, I think, is much more damaging than heresy.

It seems to me indisputable, moreover, when we reflect on the development of Jewish culture, that the primary tools of Jewish competence are *linguistic*. Without Hebrew, the Jewish tradition will not disappear entirely in America, but most of it will certainly disappear. This gloomy premonition is owed not least to a proper understanding of the relationship of language to life. Our language is our incommensurable inflection of our humanity, our unique way of presenting, not least to ourselves, what is our unique way through the world. Our language is our element, our beginning, our air, the air peculiar to us. Even our universalism comes to us (like everybody else's universalism) in a particular language.

Now, I understand that the linguistic history of the Jews is a complicated story. A great and complicating work remains to be written about the history of the literacy of the People of the Book. Jews have always spoken and written and read many languages, Rashi keeps giving the *loazit*, the French equivalents of scriptural words, because the Jews in his community spoke French. There were spoken languages and there were (as Yehezkel Kauffmann explained) cultural languages: Cultures were sometimes formed in languages that were not spoken, *but in which the community was nonetheless competent*. Aramaic owes its near-canonical status in Judaism to an ancient Jewish indifference to Hebrew. The synagogues of ancient Judaism included among their officials a figure called the *meturgeman*, or translator, who rendered the prayers or the Torah reading into Aramaic (and also into Greek), so that the assembly would understand the meaning of the Hebrew words. In sum, there was almost always a problem of illiteracy in Jewish life.

The rage of the rabbis against the popular ignorance of Hebrew is recorded in many texts. Here is a typical example, from the midrash *Sifrei* on Deuteronomy, on the verse that was incorporated into the text of the *Shema*, "And ye shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house and when thou walkest by the way..." "*Speaking of them*": When a child begins to speak, the father must begin to speak to the child in the Holy Tongue [that is, in Hebrew]...and if he does not speak to his child in the Holy Tongue, then he deserves to be regarded as if he had buried his own child." Those are exceedingly harsh words, and they may have served Maimonides as the basis for an interesting remark in his commentary on the Mishnah. In the opening statement of the second chapter of *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Judah the Prince instructs, "Be as scrupulous in the fulfillment of a light commandment as of a weighty commandment." Which commandments are light and which are weighty? Maimonides gives examples: "It is right that one be careful about a commandment that people believe is light, such as the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the festivals and the teaching of the holy tongue, as with those commandments who[se] gravity has been made explicit [in the biblical text] such as circumcision and tzitzit and the Paschal sacrifice."

Maimonides' amplification is notable for two reasons: first, because it promotes the study of Hebrew to a very high level of ritual seriousness, by analogizing it with ritual obligations whose seriousness is beyond question; and second, because it provides a record from his own time about the low esteem in which the study of Hebrew was held. In the 12th century in Egypt, the duty to journey to Jerusalem on the festivals must have been deemed a *mitzvah qalah*, a light obligation: this was the exile, there was no Temple, and so on. Such a commandment would have been an occasion for historical inquiry and eschatological hope, but its practical import would have been none. Maimonides is reporting that the obligation of Jewish literacy was deemed to be equally irrelevant, and he is seizing on Rabbi Judah's statement in the Mishnah to admonish his contemporaries for what he believes is a terrible error. Exile, Maimonides seems to be implying, is not an excuse for ignorance. Knowledge is a form of sovereignty, and from this type of self-rule we can be banished by nobody but ourselves.

Complaints and castigations about the neglect of Hebrew, or about the low level of the knowledge of Hebrew, run throughout medieval and early modern rabbinical literature. I will give another example. In 1616, Leon da Modena composed a treatise called *Historia de riti hebraici*, an ethnographic exposition of the practices and the beliefs of the Jews of his time. It was one of the first books about the Jews written by a Jew in a non-Jewish language for a non-Jewish audience. The work was written at the request of Sir Henry Wotton, the English ambassador in Venice, who wished to present it to James I. It was published in 1637, and its first translation into English in 1650 may have played a role in the readmission of the Jews to England. The second part of the *Riti* includes a description of the levels of Jewish education, and it begins with a discussion of "what language they use in their ordinary speech, writings, and preachings":

Here at this time very few among them are able to discourse perfectly in the Hebrew or Holy Tongue, which they call lashon ha-kodesh, wherein the twenty-four books of the Old Testament are written; nor yet in the Chaldee [Modena is referring to Aramaic], which is the language of the Targum, or Chaldee Paraphrase of the Bible, and which they commonly spake before their Dispersion; because they all generally learn and are brought up in the Language of the Countries where they are born: so that in Italy they speak Italian; in Germany, Dutch [Deutsch]; in the Eastern parts and in Barbary they speak the language of the Turks and Moors; and so the rest.... So that the Common people everywhere conform themselves to the Language of the Nations where they inhabit; only mixing now and then a broken Hebrew word or two in their discourse with one another: although the Learned sort among them are somewhat more perfect in the Language of the Scripture, and have it, as it were, by heart. Notwithstanding it is a very rare thing to meet with any among them, except they be their Rabbis, who are able to maintain a continued discourse in Hebrew, Elegantly and according to the Properities of the Language.

The *Riti* was an apologetic work. Its portrait of Jewish practices was designed to reassure Modena's Christian readers that the Jews were not entirely alien, not entirely unassimilable into European life, and that therefore they deserved to be met with greater sympathy. Yet Modena's observations of the sad linguistic state of his brethren extended beyond his apologetic purpose. When he

discussed Jewish literacy in writings that were addressed to Jews, his tone was more astringent, more the tone of a social critic. He raised the unpleasant subject of linguistic ignorance frequently in his works. In 1612, for example, in the introduction to *Galut Yehuda*, a Hebrew-Italian dictionary that he composed, Modena sharply bemoans the decline of Hebrew and describes it as one of the characteristic features of exile. And he adds this bitter note: "It was initially my plan to print the Italian equivalents [of the Hebrew words] in Hebrew characters; but experience dissuaded me from this course of action, when I showed my work to eight or ten Jews who said: 'we cannot read this.' The exile has made us forget not only our Holy Tongue, but even our linguistic competence."

In America, the first evidence of Jewish illiteracy occurs as early as 1761 and 1766, when Isaac Pinto published his translations of the liturgy into English. He was acting out of a sense of crisis, out of his feeling that Hebrew, as he put it, needed to "be reestablished in Israel." Of the American Jewish community of his time, Pinto recorded that Hebrew was "imperfectly understood by many; by some, not at all." In 1784, Haym Solomon found it necessary to address an inquiry in the matter of a certain inheritance to Rabbi David Tevele Schiff of the Great Synagogue in London, but the renowned Jewish leader could not write the Hebrew epistle himself, and so he enlisted the help of a local Jew from Prague. In 1818, at the consecration in New York of a building for the Shearith Israel synagogue, Mordecai Emanuel Noah observed that "with the loss of the Hebrew language may be added the downfall of the house of Israel." Linguistically speaking, then, the beginnings of the American Jewish community were not glorious, and we have lived up to our beginnings.

Of course, I do not mean to deny the validity or the utility of translation, which was also a primary activity of Jewish intellectuals throughout the centuries. Very few of us have studied *The Guide of the Perplexed* in the Judeo-Arabic in which Maimonides wrote it. It is the Hebrew version by Samuel ibn Tibbon with which we have wrestled. Translation has always represented an admirable realism about the actual cultural situation of the Jews in exile. Whatever the linguistic delinquencies of the Jews, their books must not remain completely closed to them. Better partial access than no access at all, obviously.

Moreover, we are *American* Jews; that is to say, we believe in the reality of freedom, and we are prepared to pay its price. The requirement that a Jew know a Jewish language is not a requirement that a Jew know only a Jewish language, and it is certainly not a requirement that a Jew express only one belief in only one means of expression. An American Jewish writer is free to write Jewishly or un-Jewishly. He or she is free to write anything that he or she wants to write, and in any language in which he or she wishes to write it. My question to the Jewish writer in America is not, what language can you write? My question is, what language can you read?

It is impossible to deny that a calamitous decline in Jewish competence has taken place in our time. There are many ways to measure this decline. Consider a quantitative measure: In 1965, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem established the Hebrew Paleography Project, for the purpose of recording the significant codicological features of all surviving Hebrew manuscripts. This massive undertaking produced a very striking result. In the words of Malachi Beit-Arie, "The systematic recording and analysis of almost all the extant manuscripts with colophons

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[a colophon is an inscription at the end of a manuscript identifying its scribe or its owner], some 4,000 in all, indicate that at least *half* the medieval Hebrew manuscripts were personal, user-produced books.... Such a high rate of non-professional, personal copying certainly reflects the extent of Jewish literacy and education.” Beit-Arie is referring to a very long period in Jewish history: to all the medieval and early modern centuries. So it seems entirely uncontroversial to maintain that, the complicated history of Jewish literacy notwithstanding, there has occurred a truly precipitous decline in the linguistic abilities of the Jews, a decline by orders of magnitude—almost a free-fall. To put it mildly, we are no longer our own scribes. We are a community whose books and whose treasures—our books are our treasures—are accessible almost *entirely* in translation. Have we forgotten that every translation is also a conversion? In every translation something is lost even as something is gained, and it is hard for me to imagine that more is gained than is lost.

In the modern period, of course, attempts were made to correct this awful inadequacy. But a look at the remedies for the problem affords little comfort. Indeed, it only sharpens one’s sense of the loss. In the late 1770s and early 1780s, Moses Mendelssohn produced his momentous and notorious translation of the Pentateuch into German. It became known, for its exegetical portions, as the *Biur*. It was a remedial enterprise for what he called “the common man,” or the ordinary Jew of his day. In the prospectus to his project Mendelssohn wrote, “We, God’s people, who are dispersed in all the lands of Greater Germany and grew up under the impact of the language of the dominant peoples ‘came down’ and there is ‘none raising us up.’ [Those are phrases from Lamentations and Jeremiah.] For the ways of our holy tongue have been forgotten in our midst; the elegance of its phrases and its metaphors eludes us; and the loveliness of its poetry is hidden from our eyes.” Mendelssohn set out “to render the Torah in the German tongue as it is spoken today among our own people.” He did this, as he wrote in a letter to the philosopher Herder, not least for the purpose of educating his own children.

When Mendelssohn’s translation appeared, it was bitterly condemned, by important rabbis in Central Europe, as a surrender to German culture, as an expression of defeatism. But here is the rub, I mean for American Jews. Mendelssohn’s revolutionary translation was not produced in German, strictly speaking. It was produced in what became known as *Judendeutsch*. That is, the Torah was translated by the great thinker of Dessau into a German that was published in Hebrew characters. Which is to say, Mendelssohn’s translation may have been conceived as a response to a crisis of Jewish literacy, but it was premised on a degree of Jewish literacy that we, the Jews of the United States, no longer possess. Were a contemporary translator in America to render the Torah into English as Mendelssohn rendered the Torah into German, on the correct assumption that the ways of our holy tongue have been forgotten in our midst, such a translation would be useless to the vast majority of the Jews for whom it was designed. They simply could not read it.

Illiteracy is nothing less than a variety of blindness, and the vast majority of American Jews are blind. The extent of this blindness—and it is a willed blindness, a blindness that can be corrected—can be illustrated anecdotally. Here is a tale. Some years ago, the exiled president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, was traveling around the United States in the hope of enlisting sympathy for his

cause, and he went to New York for a meeting with the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. Now, in his youth Aristide had studied at a seminary in Jerusalem, and he happens to be fluent in Hebrew. It seemed entirely natural and right, in his view, to address the assembled representatives of the Jewish community in what he took to be their own tongue, or at least one of their tongues. And so he began to speak to our leaders in Hebrew. After a few minutes, the *negidim* rather sheepishly asked their distinguished non-Jewish guest if he could make his remarks in English, because they could not understand what he was saying.

And here is another tale. At a conference of Jewish and Israeli writers that was held in Berkeley in 1986, the writer Anton Shammas—a Palestinian born and raised in Israel who writes a Hebrew that startles Israelis by its beauty—proposed that Hebrew should be stripped of its Jewish features so that it may become the neutral language of a democratic state of Israelis and Palestinians. It was a foolish proposal, for many reasons; it was based on a total misunderstanding of the relationship of language to culture, though it was offered, as I say, in a genuinely democratic spirit. After Shammas spoke, a prominent American-Jewish writer whom I will not name rose to denounce him. What Shammas was proposing to do to Hebrew was an outrage, she thundered. How dare he think of de-Judaizing Hebrew? Hebrew, she rightly insisted, is the supreme instrument of the Jewish spirit. And she sat down. Then the Israeli writer Haim Be'er rose to defend Shammas from some of the charges that the proud and indignant American Jew had leveled at him. But Be'er spoke English poorly, and so he made his intervention in Hebrew. At which point the proud and indignant American Jew reached for her headset, so that she could receive the Hebrew in translation and understand what the Hebrew speaker was saying.

And here is another tale. In 1993, Philip Roth published a novel called *Operation Shylock*. The novel has an epigraph, which appears, written in cursive Hebrew script, on its own page at the beginning of the book: “*va'yivater Yaakov levado v'ye'avek ish imo ad a lot hashachar: And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the break of day.*” The epigraph plays a role late in Roth's farce; when he, the character Philip Roth, or the writer Philip Roth, or whoever he is, regards the Hebrew words on the blackboard of a classroom in which he is being held, he has this to say:

No foreign language could have been more foreign. The only feature of Hebrew that I could remember was that the lower dots and dashes were vowels and the upper markings generally consonants. Otherwise all memory of it had been extinguished.... Perhaps they weren't even words. I would have [been] no less stupid copying Chinese. All those hundreds of hours spent drawing those letters had disappeared without a trace, those hours might just as well have been a dream, and yet a dream in which I discovered everything that was forever thereafter to obsess my consciousness, however much I might wish it otherwise.

Roth's confession, if that is what it is, perfectly illustrates the complacency of American Jews, their bad faith toward their own identity. For the vast majority of American Jews, the sight of Hebrew will suffice. Its opacity does not interfere with the sensation of authenticity that it provides. Roth's talk about this particular obsession of his consciousness is empty, because this particular obsession does

not seem to impose any obligation on him. This writer whose novels sometimes suffer from a surfeit of smartness is, in this matter, quite content with an admission of stupidity. As usual with American Jewry, ignorance is no impediment to pride. Quite the contrary. Pride will make up for ignorance and hide it behind the ferocity of tribal expression. The ignorance of his tradition leaves the writer not ashamed; it leaves him sentimental.

When I first read Roth's passage, it put me in mind of a remark by Bahya ibn Pakuda, a Spanish-Jewish philosopher of the early 12th century:

The Law is composed of words and sentences, and men are divided into ten classes according to their understanding of them. The first of these classes [and the lowest] consists of those people who are able to read the texts and stories of Scripture and are satisfied with their literal meaning, ignoring their deeper meaning and the precise explanation of words and the usages of language. These people are like asses bearing books.

The ignorance that Bahya describes as the lowest level of Jewish ignorance in his time is a level of knowledge much higher than the American Jewish norm.

American Jews are truly asses bearing books. In their noisy professions of their identity, American Jews (in Modena's words) may be heard only mixing now and then a broken Hebrew word or two in their discourse with one another, and no more. All this is not justifiable. It represents a breathtaking community-wide irresponsibility. Between every generation, not only in circumstances of war but also in circumstances of peace, much is always lost. Only a small fraction of the works of the human spirit ever survives the war against time, but the quantity of the Jewish tradition that is slipping through our fingers in America is unprecedented in our history. And it is the illiteracy of American Jewry that makes it complicit in this oblivion.

I say complicit, because we are, after all, people of energy, of almost diabolical energy. We accept almost no limits on our ambitions or on our will. We do not agree to live passively in almost any other precinct of our lives. Instead we build, and build, and build, and so we have become the model in America of what a people can accomplish by the free and unfettered use of its powers. We have a genius for commitment, but there is one commitment that we stubbornly refuse to make. Our right hand is losing its cunning, because we have forgotten something even greater than Jerusalem. We have forgotten our letters and our words. We are full of speech, and yet we are mute. Pride cannot do the work of knowledge. Enthusiasm cannot do the work of knowledge. Sentimentality cannot do the work of knowledge. If the Jews of America do not make the commitment to replete ourselves by recovering our language, to bring to an end, if not in ourselves than in our children, this absurd helplessness before our own tradition, then we may dream of only a limited greatness, not only in our literature but also in our lives.

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