Yakov Malkiel

Author(s): David Justice

Proceedings of the Eighth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society (1982), pp. 1-9

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society is published online via [eLanguage](#), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

YAKOV MALKIEL

David Justice
U.C. Berkeley

As workmanlike biographic and bibliographic sketches of Yakov Malkiel are already available (1), I shall highlight only those facets of his activity that might particularly bear upon the concerns of those young scholars who participated in the recent conference in his honor. A definitive bibliography would in particular be premature; for though he has earned the right to rest on a lush bed of laurels, his impending change of status, unfortunately enjoined by university regulations concerned more with temps than with durée, promises to be in no substantive sense a retirement. Although, like many confronted with the inflexible arithmetic of years, he has lately taken to wondering whether the lost umbrella or the overdue library book--lapses youth commits and laughs off--may not betoken some falling-off of memory, those who know him are unable to detect the slightest decline in imagination, steel recall, or indefatigable enterprise.

Malkiel was born into an intellectual Jewish family of Kiev, 22 July 1914. The chaos of civil war forced the family to move to Berlin.

"I entered the German secondary school at sexta, at the age of nine and a half, and stayed for nine solid years," 1924-1933. (2) These courses, notably demanding in themselves, were supplemented at first by two hours a day of Russian instruction at the home of the illustrious Nabokov family, in case the winds of history should once again shift and a return to the homeland be made possible.

Recalling George Steiner's reveling in his own multilingual background, and feeling with some of my contemporaries that our own secondary education--consisting largely of skits and field trips, and book reports with a heavy emphasis on colored paper--lacked a certain intellectual sérieux, I asked YM to what extent he rejoiced in his intensive education and varied residence, given that he survived it, and received a surprisingly nuanced answer.

"I am for better or worse the victim of a polyglottic situation which I don't particularly cherish. ... It is not tragic, but there are moments ... when you are sharply reminded of the fact that you are a bit split." When, at the end of a 14-hour day of unremitting industry, he feels the need to relax, he settles into the Cyrillic script as into a warm bath.

As for the relentless education, it left him "less leisure and less freedom for social contacts ... than would today be recommended. ... I'm not sure that I would recommend it to others; I suppose that I--je me suis tiré d'affaire, one way or the other."

Malkiel's cousin Victor Žirmunskij, a founder of Russian formalism, spent much of his penniless stay in Berlin in the 1920's with the Malkiel household. It was he who overcame the objections of YM's parents and introduced him to modern literature. "My parents were very conservative. They felt I could read modern literature sometime past 20 or so, because it was so sinful." Their son proved headstrong. "For a while I was very strongly opposed to philology and linguistics; this was one of my many, what is it, rebellions? of my adolescence." He devoted himself to modern poetry, early publishing pieces on Valéry and Rilke.

The barbarism that showed its face in Germany in the 1930's, and the truckling to that barbarism by artists he had previously revered, "became quite repulsive to me." He turned away both from literature and from the modern period, from the "whole cultural radix" of the collaborators, seeking the apparent objectivity of linguistics. (His views of the role of subjectivity in our science have since become more subtly textured.)

This is a large, potentially penitential shift of perspective for a young student of letters to make. (His self-transformation on this score recalls that of Friedrich Diez, cf. RPh 26 (1972), p.5.) The linguistics to which he was exposed was based on the careful accumulation of data. "I did not see as yet very well how one can use imagination in linguistic analysis--free-flowing imagination... The ability to express one's personality through linguistic work at that time eluded me."

To one who is not merely following in his father's footsteps, nor indifferently choosing among the various money-getting schemes of the world, but who, like our subject, has the breadth to be aware of all choices, and the wit to succeed in many of them, selecting a specialty is a momentous, even chilling branch-point in one's earthly trajectory, for there the mutable human pupa decides as what species it shall become adult. The soul cries: "I have been nothing--I must be everything!" And reality answers: "You cannot. Butcher, baker, candlestick-maker: choose!"

The present generation of American university students, from those now entering college to those who have recently acquired advanced degrees, face this dilemma with especial poignancy, as they have been lifted on the wave of limitless possibilities, and dashed upon

the realities of withering cultural commitment and a baby-boom-crowded marketplace. They look with envy at those enjoying tenured success, and perhaps falsely imagine that it has been easy.

For a person of Malkiel's native gifts, the road will certainly have been smoother than for most (other things being equal), but even here the fatal choices were not free from a measure of the contingent.

"I was as a ... university student between the years 1933 and '38 not quite sure just what [would] emerge as my principal interest. ... My official subjects so to speak at that time were Romance literature, Romance linguistics, Slavic philology, and even Semitic philology with Hebrew and Arabic. ... As regards specialization in Spanish, it emerged rather slowly. My doctoral dissertation dealt with French, Old and Modern. I had no intention of ever really switching to Spanish--I don't think I have switched to Spanish irreversibly--however there were several factors favoring an emphasis on Spanish. One of them was that in Europe, as against the United States, Spanish is a little-known language. It is not taught at the secondary school level or anything of that sort. It's a university language, comparable perhaps in status to, say, Swedish or Polish in the United States... Suddenly there developed a great demand for it. The demand developed in the ... middle and late 1930's, on account of the prospects of immigration to Latin America. I was immediately offered, while I was a student, possibilities to engage in adult education... Both Spanish and, especially, Portuguese ... were my major assets when I was in my early twenties."

His arrival in the United States, in February 1940, "coincided with the collapse of France, an event which immediately lowered rather dramatically American interest in French culture--temporarily of course; so much so that people who were employed as tenured members of American colleges ... teaching French, simply to survive had to switch to other subjects, for instance Spanish or Latin...

"Equally important, it was a subject which had not been exhausted. ... Finally, this was the period when Spain was very much in the news, through the dramatic impact of the Spanish civil war, and...the enormous accomplishments of Menéndez Pidal and his school. ... A reason which was superadded later was when I married a very brilliant scholar from Argentina," María Rosa Lida.

Lacking from this list of motivations for choice of specialty is the sort of semi-mystical Sprache und Weisheit der Indier-style xenophilia that is not in-

frequently in play when a scholar makes the leap to another culture. And the early exposure that may tinge later sentiment was rather to French--in the cultivated Russian milieu in which YM grew up, "it was inconceivable that anyone above ten should not know French adequately." (Peoria please copy!)

*

We live in strange times. Most of the perquisites of empire are still in place, yet everywhere one hears expressions of astonishing pessimism. But surely nothing now matches that time when Malkiel was obliged to make his start in life, a time whose horror even the word genocide does not quite capture, as it was also the near-suicide of an entire civilization. He began his university studies in Berlin in that grim year 1933. To survive emotionally required a kind of stoicism which remains his philosophy to this day. Physical survival followed from the fact that "I was a foreigner, according to the technical classification ... so I was not so to speak under observation,"--on condition that he refrain from every student activity. The doctorate was granted in 1938.

Finally the international crisis forced him once more westward, this time to New York. This terrain was already crowded with refugees, some of whom enjoyed world reputations as thinkers, and available resources were stretched thin. From 1940 to '41, YM lived from hand to mouth, translating, ghostwriting, tutoring. Then Pearl Harbor yanked America out of its daze. Men of all walks of life signed up, and employment opportunities opened. Even so the Eastern universities were replete with foreigners, and YM was obliged to trek west again, this time to Laramie, Wyoming.

The Wyoming period was short--less than a year--but poignantly emblematic of the predicament of the intellectual treasure which European storms had washed up on our shore. This now thrice-displaced savant labored amid the sagebrush, assigned to teaching 'languages' as though, having taught one, you can teach them all. (He taught six in that short period.)

He had traveled from danger to danger and suddenly he was out of the line of fire entirely, at risk now only of being forgotten, unnoticed in a barely populated province of a young land whose brilliant potential the immigrant additions had not yet had time to catalyze into intellectual first rank. The dynamics of this state of affairs have been well described by V. Nabokov, a figure who repeatedly returns to one's mind when contemplating Y. Malkiel.

Finally an invitation came from the University of

California at Berkeley, where he entered the department of Spanish and Portuguese with the modest rank of lecturer. His Wyoming chairman had written him a glowing recommendation--"pour s'en débarrasser", as YM tells it.

He had now traveled as far west as one can go without crossing the ocean to Siberia--a locus he would probably have found by a more direct eastern route had he remained in Russia. And here amid the palms and short-shorts, the antipode of all his previous environments, he was to flourish in a manner that is given to few.

In 1946, with no prior editorial experience, he single-handedly founded the journal Romance Philology, at the ripe age of--just 32, in that cultural cross-roads of Old World learning--California. This act of hubris perfectly matched the expansive mood of America at that juncture, and recalls the birth in 1877 of the only other journal in that field which now matches RPh in prestige and cosmopolitan coverage, the Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie, founded by Gustav Gröber in the same modest fullness of years. "We had the great problem in the early volumes, that the editor was the youngest contributor," he recalls: today the situation is almost the reverse.

It was an auspicious time socio-politically. San Francisco had been chosen as the site of the post-war world conference, with a favorable effect on the cosmopolitanism of the whole area. But from an academic standpoint, the founding of the journal was almost quixotic, given the local level of interest in Romance linguistics. "Romance Philology was created at an all-time low, with the idea of drumming up interest." Many of the displaced Europeans were dubious, feeling that it was the wrong thing for the New World.

From the very beginning, YM performed a gamut of functions to make the journal work, even down to re-typing manuscripts. His linguistic articles, book reviews, and obituaries frequently appear under his own editorship, to the extent that he could be accused of running a one-man show, reminiscent of the 1873 escapade of Ascoli, were not the product so splendid, and indeed so relatively free of narrowness or dogmatism (cf. Posner op.cit., 435). Of particular interest are the wide-ranging "Editorial Comments", which help lend a continuing personality to the journal, further guarding against the danger of its becoming a mere depository for atomistically separate contributions. Comparisons with The New Yorker come to mind. (See for instance Leo Spitzer's stunning remembrance of Elise Richter in the very first volume of RPh, which shows the best features of a short story.)

In 1952, Malkiel attained the rank of full professor, and in 1966 he accepted an invitation to join the linguistics department, a move that reflected his ever-broadening areas of scholarly activity. In addition, he continues to donate his energies to the extremely select independent Romance Philology program.

An increasingly important sphere of his activity has been the history of our complex of disciplines, which he has explored in particular in a number of graduate seminars, such as "History of Linguistics", "History of Romance Linguistics", and "From Dialectology to Sociolinguistics". I recall with especial affection the second of these, offered in the evening as befits reflection and retrospection.

A political cartoon of the 1970's showed an exhausted Henry Kissinger stumbling into his hotel room, where a spruce and vibrant Henry Kissinger, his double, waited to take on the evening shift and continue with the business of astonishing the world. As one browses the monographs and the ten volumes of collected articles with which YM has provided the reading room of the Berkeley linguistics department, as one takes in their range, their never-failing polish, and considers the enormous, often irksome duties involved in putting out a first-rate journal, one wonders whether "Malkiel" might not be a pen-name covering a whole group of contributors. But as one grows familiar with the modus operandi of the man, it becomes apparent that, if anything, more flows from that one pen than is explicit in the literature. Anyone who has written for Romance Philology can attest--and some do so testily (Hall 1975, p.189)--to the unusually detailed editorial scrutiny given personally to any manuscript YM decides to publish, from which no hyphen or digraph is exempt. Seasoned Malkiel-watchers trace the trickle-down of his vigorous and spicy favorite terms--gropings boldly flanked by prongs, slanted towards tone-setting playfulness--some of which, in cold and sober fact, get rather more exercise than need be. (At its best, though, his is a splendid style, blending the inkhorn dexterity of Nabokov with the wry elegance of Quine.)

A scholarly assessment of Malkiel's contributions must be left to those more competent and widely read, but I may here mention some broad traits that strike the non-specialist.

Most notable, because frequently appearing in a sub-field with so grey a reputation as morphology, is an attitude which I should describe as "dialectical" were that not a buzz-word. Everywhere there is an emphasis on the clash and synthesis of non-homogeneous factors; on language as a system evolving upon the spur of its

own internal contradictions, and that in a direction of greater precellence (this latter criterion being itself multifarious: æsthetic, communicative, structural); and on voluntarism, the ability of humanity to affect the course of its own linguistic evolution, within the larger limits imposed by history. One repeatedly comes across phrases like "to cast into bold relief the actual forces locked in constant struggle" (Malkiel 1968, p.112), "internecine homophony" (Malkiel 1979, p.5), or "la tendencia del prefijo de- de perder terreno ante el ataque de su rival des-, infinitamente más agresivo" (Malkiel 1978, p.718). The world of words takes on a personality; as chess experts may describe some arcane variation in the algebra of their game as "treacherous" or "witty", so this reconstruction, that survival, some bland-looking phonological equation becomes "exciting" or "shocking" beneath the philological lens. (3)

Second, one encounters an astounding erudition, which may even daunt that majority among us whose labors more resemble those of Sisyphus than Hercules. Baldinger 1968 speaks of a "manchmal erdrückende Fülle an Material und Bibliographie", and Gsell (op. cit., p.14) wonders à propos YM's "Tentative Typology of Historical Grammars" "ob von ihm eine mehr anspornende oder mehr abschreckende Wirkung auf prospektive Nachfolger ...ausgeht." For those who have had the good fortune actually to work with Malkiel rather than simply to confront his monumental finished œuvre, the influence is certainly anspornend: he is well known for supplying his Romance Philology students with do-able thesis topics that do not require a lifetime, and for tossing out extremely piquant general ideas that await empirical investigation by young researchers.

Finally, although YM has scrupulously avoided the sort of extended polemics that mar or enliven certain currents in linguistics, he has a critical-analytical attitude which, based upon unsurpassed bibliographic command, sometimes verges upon the critical-censorious. This frankness, usually fair, but inevitably sometimes idiosyncratic, is most startling when it appears in a genre normally noted for its euphemism, the necrological essay, where Malkiel's tack is that dubbed by his colleague Leo Spitzer (4) de mortuis nil nisi vere. Whether this is in the best of taste, others may judge; but it does mean that, instead of celebratory ephemera, he contributes pieces that are of permanent value to the historian, as well as being literary gems.

Malkiel's life is more than a CV of scholarly accomplishments, but presents a picture of doggedness, cour-

age in the face of adversity, patience combined with an ability to seize the proffered forelock, ability to charm, and the cool-headedness to refrain at times from charming. It is an instructive and bracing example to contemplate, while this decade's Varangians and Visigoths, now not jack-booted but business-suited, try to supervise the discomission of humanism.

Notes

(1) See Rebecca Posner in I.Jordan/J.Orr An Introduction to Romance Linguistics (University of California Press: 1970), pp. 434ff.; O.Gsell, "Das sprachwissenschaftliche Œuvre Yakov Malkiels", Iberoromania 13, Neue Folge (1981) with further references there; and the poignant autobiographical and bibliographic note in the Anuario de Estudios Medievales VI (1969), pp. 610-639.

(2) Quotations are taken from tapes, essentially untouched save for indicated ellipsis.

This lion, whom some approach with trepidation, proved curiously easy to interview. The tough and ticklish questions I had saved till last he touched on spontaneously. With age comes mellowness and a calmer wisdom: his long and checkered odyssey of a life now seems to stand before him in glistening synchronicity.

(3) Lest I be suspected of riding a hobby-horse, compare the similar summary by Gsell 1981, p.23: "Man hat M. als 'Neotraditionalist', seine Forschungshaltung als 'dialektisch' charakterisiert, was gewiss nicht unrichtig ist." Baldinger 1968 so qualifies not only YM's view of linguistic evolution, but YM's own evolution as a scholar: "Malkiel ist in der Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft schwer einzuordnen, da er selbst ständig seinen eigenen Rahmen sprengt. ... Seine Widersprüchlichkeit korrigiert sich dauernd selbst und hebt sich damit auf."

(4) "Mes souvenirs sur Meyer-Lübke", Français Moderne 6 (1938), p.213. Spitzer's characterization p.216 of that earlier giant of Romance philology, applies mutatis mutandis to Malkiel.

References

- Baldinger, Kurt. 1968. Review of Malkiel 1968.
Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie 84, p.636f.
- Hall, Robert. 1975. Stormy Petrel in Linguistics
 (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services).
- Malkiel, Yakov. 1968. Essays on Linguistic Themes
 (University of California Press).
- Id. 1978. "Español antiguo <<Des(de)>>, <<Fa(s)ta>>,
 <<Fazia>> y <<Fascas>>". In Homenaje a Julio Caro
Baroja (Madrid).
- Id. 1979. "Problems in the Diachronic Differentiation
 of Near-Homophones." Language 55, pp.1-36.