

1 THE PRODIGY

Everybody hates a prodigy,
detests an old head on young shoulders.
—Desiderius Erasmus (23)

The opening pages of *A Most Imperfect Union* (2014), Ilan Stavans's graphic contrarian history of the United States, focus on immigration—"a vital part of the American fabric" (7)—and the author's own experience as a twenty-four-year-old immigrant from Mexico. Stavans exploits the opportunity for self-promotion with a cartoon panel depicting three of his own books—*The Hispanic Condition*, *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*, and *El Iluminado*. A sign advertises: "The Ten Thousand Books of Ilan Stavans," and another sign explains: "New titles added hourly" (8).

It is one of many metafictional moments scattered throughout the volume that interrupt the historical narrative to comment on the narrative itself. It is also a refreshing bit of self-mockery, one that pokes fun at Stavans's own image as the Balzac of contemporary American critics, a dynamo of maniacal productivity whom Carolyn See called "a powerhouse of energy," and Reynolds Smith, the executive editor at Duke University Press, described as "more ambitious than 10 men and a mule" (Richardson). In an essay on his experience reading Jewish literature, Stavans identifies himself as a writer of books and then drolly adds: "(perhaps I write *too many* books)" (*Singer's Typewriter* 160). In addition, for a reviewing prank, his Borgesian account of a nonexistent novel by Philip Roth, *The Plagiarist*, he appended a byline that caricatures himself with the claim: "He was described as using performance-enhancing drugs to keep up a frantic, absurd pace of writing. Stavans adamantly denied these allegations before a Congressional committee. His latest book is *My Life as an Insomniac* (Hyperactive Press, 2008)" ("Philip Roth's New Novel"). Stavans's own father teases him by exclaiming: "What you don't write about, Professor Profifico!" (*Return to Centro* 25).

Stavans is the author of more than forty books and the editor or translator of more than sixty others, in English and Spanish. In addition to his own titles, Stavans

has contributed introductions to dozens of books by other authors, including: Jorge Amado, Homero Aridjis, Mariano Azuela, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Nina Barragán, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, Calvert Casey, Cesar Chavez, Martin A. Cohen, Julio Cortázar, Euclides da Cunha, Paquito D’Rivera, John Gregory Dunne, Ricardo Feierstein, Alicia Freilich, Ernesto Galarza, Alberto Gerchunoff, Isaac Goldemberg, H. M. Hudson, Efraín Huerta, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Esther Kreitman, Peter Matthiessen, Octavio Paz, Teresa Porzecanski, Mauricio Rosencof, Domingo F. Sarmiento, Moacyr Scliar, Ana María Shúa, Jacobo Timerman, and César Vallejo. Nevertheless, portraying himself as a disciple of Flaubert and *le mot juste*, Stavans declares without irony: “I’m allergic to verbal excess” (*Disappearance* xi). He has been treating the allergy homeopathically, with a profusion of words.

As far back as 1995, very early in his verbal spree, Stavans began *Bandido*, his study of Chicano activist Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, with the prophetic words: “Excess. Nothing works like excess” (1). If, as William Blake proclaimed, “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom,” Stavans has, along with Stephen King and Joyce Carol Oates, paved his own path to enlightenment. He has also aroused suspicion, envy, and resentment. As John Updike observed about Oates, “The writers we tend to universally admire, like Beckett, or Kafka, or T. S. Eliot, are not very prolific” (Johnson 216).

Certainly, Samuel Johnson, whom Stavans—calling him “one of the most verbally sensitive, intellectually lucid minds ever to walk this earth” (*Knowledge and Censorship* 76)—reveres above all other lexicographers, might have been wary of such fecundity. “Sir,” observed Dr. Johnson to James Boswell, “I never desire to converse with a man who has written more than he has read” (Boswell 41). Stavans’s voracity as a reader does exceed his fecundity as a writer—“Being a passionate reader is more liberating, and thus more rewarding, than being a passionate writer,” he declares (*Knowledge and Censorship* 112). Nevertheless, he would not have escaped censure by Ben Jonson. “I remember the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare,” Jonson recalled, “that in his writing, (whatsoever he penn’d), hee never blotted out line. My answer hath beene, Would he had blotted a thousand” (Jonson 583). Stavans names Gustave Flaubert, who had the luxury to linger for days over a single sentence, as one of his favorite writers, but the blottable errors, calques, and other infelicities scattered throughout thousands of Stavans’s pages testify to Balzacian industry more than Flaubertian finesse.

For Gary Saul Morson, a prominent Slaviciest at Northwestern University, the man’s astounding feracity is largely verbosity: “As Cervantes inserts tedious tales,” he says of Stavans’s book on *Don Quixote*, “Stavans seems to be filling as many pages as possible” (13). The translator Eliot Weinberger denounced Stavans’s short book on Octavio Paz as “unbelievably sloppy” (120). Raphael Folsom, a specialist in Latin American history, arrives at a similar assessment while reviewing two Stavans

works, *Art and Anger* and *Imagining Columbus*. “Stavans is an intelligent and learned writer, but not a very careful one,” Folsom writes, “and the many errors of fact and style found in these books combined with Stavans’s rash judgments and careless analyses to distract the reader from their merits” (361). Furthermore, Bryan Cheyette, a professor at the University of Reading, faults his edition of the *Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* for “critical sloppiness” and “editorial sloppiness” and berates the publisher, Oxford University Press, for having “forgotten the first principles of scholarly rigour.”

At twenty-four, Stavans, who was born in 1961, vowed that if he had not published “a major book” by age thirty-three, he would shoot himself (*On Borrowed Words* 6). He repeated that anecdote in Spanish, recounting that “alguna vez me dije que si al cumplir los treinta y tres años no había escrito algo de valor, debía usar la pistol que mi padre guardaba en una caja fuerte” (Stavans and Zurita 46). Though not major in comparison to its successors, his first book in English, *Imagining Columbus: The Literary Voyage*, a study of representations of the Genoese mariner, appeared just in time, in 1993, for its author to bite the bullet. Except for 2013, no subsequent year has lacked a new volume with the byline Ilan Stavans. Into his fifties, he continues to project the aura of enfant terrible, a prodigious generator of youthful energy and ideas who is extravagantly manic even in recreation. He reports that he watched all 64 games leading up to the 2014 World Cup. “It was an exuberant and exhilarating endeavor. An average of one hour and 45 minutes for each meant I was hooked to the TV screen for 112 hours, or 4.66 days” (“Languages of the World Cup”).

Acknowledging that he suffers from terrible fear in the face of death and the unanswered questions—“Suffro de un terrible temor hacia la muerte y ante las preguntas incontestadas” (*Prontuario* 138–39)—Stavans declares that he writes in order to be immortalized not in a pantheon but a library: “Si escribo, es porque no quiero terminar en un pantéon sino en una biblioteca” (*Prontuario* 139). He conceives of writing as defiance of mortality. I write, he writes, in order to challenge death, in order to know that time does not pass in vain: “I write in order to prove to myself that I’m not dead, that I’m still here, that every minute I have is mine and that I need to use it in the best possible way in order for the game not to be finished” (*Thirteen Ways* 70). Elsewhere, he writes, in Spanish, that he writes in order to confront death, in order to assure himself that time does not pass in vain: “Yo escribo para enfrentarme a la muerte, para saber que el tiempo no pasa en vano” (Stavans and Zurita 67).

Though he conceives of writing as an attempt to defy death, he also sees it as courting death. “Authors are born with a limited number of sentences to use in a lifetime,” he contends. “Once the amount allowed is exhausted, death settles in” (Sokol 194). Writers remain ignorant of the quota each has been assigned, but Stavans has already exceeded the allotment for most other writers—easily more than Emily

Brontë, Georg Büchner, Thomas Chatterton, Raymond Radiguet, and Arthur Rimbaud combined. In Balzac's 1831 novel *La Peau de chagrin* (*The Wild Ass's Skin*), a young man chances upon a magical piece of shagreen that possesses the power to grant any wish. However, each wish that is granted causes the shagreen to shrink, along with the life of the young man. Similarly, Stavans concludes his performance piece *The Oven* (2018) with a mathematical parable about how life is a matter of ergonomics, of deciding when to take the finite actions that are allotted to each of us: "We are all born with a number in our forehead. The number is the total amount of words we have been allocated. Every time we use one, we lose it too. Death is the arrival of zero" (25). With each new sentence that Stavans produces, he thumbs his nose at mortality.

He has frequently described how the loneliness of his first months in the United States was exacerbated by his primitive command of English. Ignorance of the local language meant condemnation to solitude. While wandering the streets of New York, Stavans dared not speak to strangers lest his halting language betray him as a fool. Believing that "el tamaño de nuestro mundo es el tamaño de nuestro vocabulario" (Stavans and Zurita 78), that the breadth of our world is the breadth of our vocabulary, he—already an accomplished writer in Spanish—must have been frustrated by the meagerness of his lexicon in English. It meant that his universe had contracted into the size of a pocket language primer. However, like Joseph Conrad, Aleksander Hemon, Ha Jin, and others, Stavans set himself to mastering the language. Eventually, he was able to anchor his career and his life in English. And, as if to compensate for the reticence of the new immigrant, he became a Niagara of surging words.

The man who admits, "I disliked books when I was a child" (*Art and Anger* 31), developed markedly different passions as an adult. In his study of Acosta, Stavans locates a moment at which the discovery of writing provided purpose to the self-dubbed Brown Buffalo's shiftless life; and the Cartesian motto he ascribes to Acosta could just as well apply to him: "*Escribo, luego existo*" (*Bandido* 48). He exists by and through writing. Stavans marvels at Pablo Neruda, who left behind six thousand pages of poetry, as "impossibly hyperkinetic" (Preface xiv) and, editing a huge selection of the Chilean's poems, puts himself in awe of the "astonishing output" (Neruda xxxix). Elsewhere, he discusses "the astonishingly prolific Argentine César Aira" (*Critic's Journey* 135). In his biography of Gabriel García Márquez, he characterizes the Colombian author as "astoundingly prolific" (*Gabriel García Márquez* 7). His verdict on the productivity of Octavio Paz, who published some 150 titles, is: "simply stunning" (*Octavio Paz* 71).

Stavans's own prolific output is astonishing, astounding, and stunning. It is easy to understand his fascination with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who dazzled her contemporaries in seventeenth-century New Spain with the brilliance of her numerous

writings in several genres. But he begins the extensive Introduction he wrote for the Penguin edition of Sor Juana's selected works with a discussion of her famous palinode, *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea (Response to the Most Illustrious Poetess Sor Filotea de la Cruz)*. Sor Juana, who had succeeded in overcoming the obstacles to a literary woman in a repressive, patriarchal society, was only forty-three when she composed her letter of renunciation. Though she had already produced a substantial oeuvre, she now dedicated her few remaining months to obedience and silence. Stavans is particularly attuned to how, in complying with her religious superior's demand that she cease writing, "she was signing her own death sentence" (Introduction to *Poems, Protest* xi). He himself was thirty-six and not yet ready for silence, not even about Sor Juana, about whom he would publish a monograph, *Sor Juana: Or, the Persistence of Pop*, in 2018.

"*Tenet insanabile multos scribendi cacoethes*," wrote Juvenal (Juvenal, *Satire* VII 140); many suffer from the incurable itch to write. Not many, though, are as hopelessly afflicted as Stavans is with *cacoethes scribendi*. "Everyone is mad," he observes, "the real question is what kind of madness each of us suffers" (*Quixote* 37). Stavans's benign madness is a compulsion to fill page after page after page. According to tradition, Thomas Aquinas said: "Hominem unius libri timeo"—I fear the man of one book. Aquinas would have had nothing to fear from Stavans, a man of dozens of books.

In *On Borrowed Words*, the autobiography he published at forty, Stavans attributes his verbosity to growing up in what was, except for his brother Darián, a garrulous family. Every gathering was a gab fest. "How exhausting it all was!" he recalls, as if he were a reader confronting the grown-up Stavans's copious bibliography. "How intimidating!" (141). More generally, Stavans suggests that Jews are genetically talky people. "I wondered," he asked himself as a child, "did G-d deliberately endow us Jews with a tendency not to stop shvitzing and schmoozing?" (141). "No" would have been the reply from Bontsha the Silent, the character in the I. L. Peretz story who, amid overwhelming misfortune, says nothing—if he would have replied at all.

The memoir presents Darián, his junior by only eighteen months, as a kind of inverted doppelgänger. Ilan and Darián grew up together sharing the same bedroom and attending the same school. They were, Stavans recalls, "simply inseparable—como uña y carne, as the Spanish popular saying goes, or, in its English counterpart: 'joined at the hip'" (*On Borrowed Words* 133). However, whereas his brother was a musical prodigy who had no taste or talent for literature or languages, Ilan would excel in both. Whereas Darián suffered from a debilitating stutter, Ilan would never be at a loss for words.

Stavans was hailed in the pages of the *Los Angeles Times* as "a polyglot master of many literary trades" (Tobar) and of the *Washington Post* as: "Latin America's

liveliest and boldest critic and most innovative cultural enthusiast” (Manrique). However, part of the price of prolificacy is a certain sloppiness. Homer might not have nodded if he had contented himself with a few haiku. But the abundant Stavans books are riddled with moot assertions and outright errata that might be the products of a hasty pace. It is likely not true that, as Stavans says of “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus: “It’s probably the most famous poem in the United States” (*Most Imperfect Union* 108). More famous than “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”? “The Waste Land”? “The Raven”? “Daddy”? “The Star Spangled Banner”? And it is simply wrong to claim, as Stavans does in *Resurrecting Hebrew* (19), that Old English is a Celtic language. Though he refers to “the endless amendments” to the United States Constitution (*Knowledge and Censorship* 41), there are only twenty-seven. His ecstasy over the figure of Don Quixote leads Stavans to point to “a single, shocking fact: in all of the Western canon, no other novelistic character has ever been adjectivized” (*Quixote* 81). What about *Pecksniffian*? *Gargantuan*? *Snopesian*? *Holmesian*? *Pickwickian*? *Pollyannish*?

In two books (*Latino USA* 40 and *Hispanic Condition* 141), he repeats the legend made famous by a *corrido* that Abraham Lincoln’s daughter asked the governor of Texas to pardon the Chicano outlaw Gregorio Cortez—without acknowledging that in reality the Great Emancipator had four sons but no daughter. More embarrassing is an error that shows up at a crucial point in *Golemito*, an illustrated children’s version of the Jewish Golem legend with a Latino twist. Two boys in Mexico City construct a champion to avenge themselves against bullies. What gives the creature its potency is the Hebrew word for truth, *emet*—אמת—inscribed on its forehead. We are told that the Hebrew word is spelled out “aleph, mem, and tet” (*Golemito* 14). However, the final letter of *emet* is not, in fact, *tet* (ט), but rather *taf* (ת). The truth (אמת) is inadvertently muddled as טמת.

Stavans reveres *Don Quixote*, which he considers one of only two masterpieces in Spanish (*Gabriel García Márquez* 2). (The other is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, about which he tweeted on February 22, 2017: “It’s easier for me to imagine the world without the colour yellow than without this novel!”). His enthusiasm for *Don Quixote* leads him to devote an entire volume to the novel as well as to write at length about Domingo F. Sarmiento’s *Facundo* as “el Quijote de América” (Introduction to *Facundo* viii), an idealist’s vision of how civilization jostled with barbarism in the Argentine pampa. It also sometimes propels him into making hyperbolic assertions. Exulting in the twenty different translations into English of Cervantes’s novel, Stavans proclaims, inaccurately: “In fact, other than the Bible, no book has been translated into Shakespeare’s tongue as often” (*Quixote* 176–77). Yet the *Divine Comedy* has more than ninety-five English translations, the *Odyssey* seventy. As Stavans reminds us: “Cervantes was not a meticulous craftsman” (*Quixote* 11). And perhaps his passionate contemporary champion ought not to be held to a higher standard.

The Stavans oeuvre has come into the world through some of the most influential publishing houses, including Basic Books, Duke University Press, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, HarperCollins, Houghton Mifflin, Library of America, New Directions, W. W. Norton, Oxford University Press, Penguin, Routledge, Schocken, University of California Press, University of Texas Press, University of Pittsburgh Press, and Yale University Press. In 2010, a particularly productive year, Stavans brought out nine new books, whereas the median number of books *read* by an American in a year is only four (“Mean and Median”). The Stavans engine, which has manufactured several best sellers, is fueled by its own success. Unlike more obscure authors whose book proposals pile up on the desks of jaded assistant editors, he is often solicited by publishers eager to suggest a project and offer a contract. In the case of *The United States of Mestizo* (2013), NewSouth Books was even willing to package a brief essay as a forty-eight-page, stand-alone volume. That same year, the same publisher brought out Stavans’s thirty-two-page illustrated children’s book, *Golemito*.

Stavans’s topics—including lotteries, music, Sephardi culture, travel, the Hebrew language, Cesar Chavez, machismo, Maimonides, dictionaries, food, eroticism, narcocorridos, the Kabbalah, selfies, detective fiction, Jewish gauchos, libraries, evil, Spanglish, picture books, immigration, and God—are dazzlingly diverse. A connoisseur of the subtleties of soccer, he moves deftly from a paean to Portuguese forward Cristiano Ronaldo’s performance in the 2018 World Cup to canny analysis of Telemundo announcer Andrés Cantor’s use of the future tense. In praise of Cantor, he observes: “His lexicon is immense, his mental reactions are quick, his capacity to describe human behavior is as good as Homer’s, his delivery of 22 last names always feels natural, and he inserts all sorts of pertinent anecdotes, historical as well as personal and linguistic, that help enliven the game” (“Sublime Goal”).

Stavans’s wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, combined with chutzpah, led to the creation of *The Ilan Stavans Library of Latino Civilization*, a series of essay collections he has edited for Greenwood Press “devoted to exploring all the facets of Hispanic civilization in the United States, with its ramifications in the Americas, the Caribbean Basin, and the Iberian Peninsula” (*Latina Writers* vii). The eleven volumes that have so far appeared in the series cover: *Béisbol*; *Border Culture*; *César Chávez*; *Fútbol*; *Health Care*; *Immigration*; *Latina Writers*; *Mexican-American Cuisine*; *Quinceañera*; *Spanglish*; and *Telenovelas*. In ambition, Stavans seems surpassed only by George Eliot’s Mr. Casaubon, who, though, never completed his *Key to All Mythologies*. In a conversation with Stavans, historian Iván Jakšić, echoing Isaiah Berlin’s famous zoological categories (borrowed from Archilochus, who observed that a fox knows many things, but a hedgehog one important thing), declared: “I am the hedgehog, and you are the fox” (Stavans and Jakšić 121).

With vulpine agility, Stavans has been prominent in a wide variety of roles—

critic, scholar, essayist, editor, publisher, translator, lexicographer, biographer, memoirist, fiction writer, TV host, performance artist, cultural impresario, and teacher. He is also an active blogger and tweeter whose communiqués trigger both adulation and calumny. Following his account of teaching Shakespeare to inmates at a Massachusetts jail, one reader commented: “This is a beautiful piece, and a refreshing reminder that the Humanities are not abstract or alien to the lives of students.” But another reader complained: “What a pompous, elitist, uninformed piece of garble” (“Gangsta’ Shakespeare”). Stavans is a very public intellectual in a way that belies his explanation for why he did not become an actor like his father: “I would rather live in the shadow than in the spotlight” (*One-Handed Pianist* 93). He inhabits bright shadows.

Stavans is personally courteous, amiable, and deferential, though in interviews, lectures, and even his own TV show, he basks in the spotlight. Born Ilan Stavchansky, he adopted Stavans, the stage name of his father, Abraham Stavchansky, as his own. And though he has not followed his father into a career as star of Mexican soap operas, he does regard teaching as improvisational performance. From 2001 to 2006, he hosted a TV program, *La Plaza: Conversations with Ilan Stavans*. Produced by WGBH-TV in Boston and syndicated by other PBS stations, it placed him in front of the camera beside such prominent Latina/o and Latin American luminaries as Isabel Allende, Rubén Blades, Junot Díaz, Ariel Dorfman, Oscar Hijuelos, Elena Poniatowska, Jorge Ramos, and Piri Thomas. In 2015, New England Public Radio began broadcasting a series of interviews called *In Contrast with Ilan Stavans* that has included guests such as lexicographer Peter Sokolowski, political pundit Bill Kristol, illustrator Barry Moser, poet Wendy Barker, novelist Junot Díaz, physician-poet Rafael Campo, biographer William Taubman, journalist Masha Gessen, foreign correspondent Robin Wright, and novelist Min Jin Lee. The spunky intellectual entrepreneur even exploited his passion for *Don Quixote* to lead Dreaming in La Mancha, a group tour of Spain organized by a travel outfit called Scholarly Sojourns.

A current event, such as the anniversary of Cervantes’s death or of the bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, often inspires newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV to seek Stavans out for a comment. In January 2014, when Argentine Jewish poet Juan Gelman died, the *New York Times* turned to Stavans for a fitting obituary quotation: “He is a gigantic voice in the constellation of Latin American poetry of the 20th century” (Weber). When Pablo Neruda’s body was exhumed to determine whether he was murdered by the Pinochet junta, Stavans wrote a piece for the *Times* that is both an elegy for the poet and a denunciation of Latin American tyranny. Bothered by the bombast that passes for contemporary public rhetoric and has made ours “una época del énfasis,” he published a column in the *Times* in Spanish that not only complains about the overuse of exclamation points but calls for elimination of the redundant inverted punctuation mark that introduc-

es exclamations in Spanish (“¿Son necesarios los dos signos de exclamación?”). ¡Ay, caramba! In another *Times* column published in that language, Stavans demands more rational orthography and, *de hecho* (in fact), calls for the elimination of the silent “h” in Spanish (“Adiós a la ‘h’”). Would readers of José Maria Heredia, Oscar Hijuelos, and Vicente Huidobro consider this an impoverishment of their *herencia*? In 2017, he began writing a weekly column for the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, a newspaper with a circulation of 16,000 that was founded in 1786. His topics have included terrorism, teaching, aging, Israel, and Catalonia. He is also frequently invited to give public lectures in the United States and abroad.

Moreover, in 2015, in the tradition of monologists such as Eric Bogosian and Spalding Gray and in conscious flirtation with his father’s profession as actor, Stavans even transformed himself into the unlikely author and star of a one-man show called *The Oven* that he concocted in collaboration with director Mathew Glassman and other members of the Massachusetts theater troupe Double Edge. Before publishing it with the University of Massachusetts Press, Stavans performed *The Oven* on stages throughout New England and at the University of Oxford and the University of Chicago. In the piece, he recounts how, visiting Bogotá, he is invited by a shaman of the Putumayo tribe to undergo a mystical experience. He is driven for many hours to a remote rural setting, where, ingesting the psychotropic substance ayahuasca, he finds himself metamorphosed into a jaguar.

Despite his cynicism about organized politics, Stavans has increasingly spoken out on public issues. Early in his career, in 1992, he tried to adopt an apolitical stance, writing: “Después de todo, soy un escritor, un esteta y no un polemista” (*Prontuario* 93)—After all, I am a writer, an aesthete and not a polemicist. However, his mature commentaries usually do not isolate the literary from the political. The point of departure for his academic career is a chapter titled “Punto de Partida” (Point of Departure) in his dissertation for Columbia University. And that point of departure in his doctoral study of the detective novel in Mexico is October 2, 1968, when the military massacre of hundreds of students and other civilians in Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco, Mexico City, precipitated a revolution throughout Mexican society.

In 2001, Stavans published an open letter to President George W. Bush pleading for the life of Gerardo Valdéz Mota, a Mexican national who, convicted of murder, awaited his fate on death row in Oklahoma. Instead of trying to make a case against capital punishment, which he recognizes that Bush will not cease to support, Stavans argues that Valdéz Mota was not informed of his right to obtain legal counsel from the Mexican consulate and was therefore denied equal justice under law guaranteed to all defendants regardless of nationality. Valdéz Mota had been convicted of killing a man who made a sexual advance toward him; in an impulsive homophobic reaction, he had in effect othered his victim. Accusing the criminal jus-

tice system of othering Valdéz Mota, demonizing him as an alien, Stavans—who must have been particularly moved by the mistreatment of a fellow Mexican—calls for empathy, a faculty nurtured by experience in other cultures. “To the best of my knowledge,” he chides Bush, “you have never lived abroad for a sustained period of time. This fact disturbs me deeply. Your travels to foreign countries, even as a tourist, have been very few” (“ . . . and justice for all” 359). For Stavans, multilingualism and extraterritoriality make one—even and especially the president of the United States—a mensch.

A later president, Donald Trump, who announced his campaign for the White House on June 16, 2015, with an attack on Mexican immigrants as “rapists,” has, not surprisingly, aroused Stavans’s ire. In an op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, he denounced Trump’s disdain for Latinos and his attempts to disparage and suppress the use of Spanish, noting that, unlike his predecessors, the forty-fifth president of the United States is “nefariously monolingual” (“Trump, the Wall and the Spanish Language”). He notes that one of Trump’s first acts as president was to expunge Spanish from the White House website. Elsewhere, he has bemoaned the fact that “the nation is commanded by a Latin America-styled tyrant who not only doesn’t read (the book he wrote was concocted by someone else) but whose lexicon seems to consist of 750 words” (“Friday Takeaway: Teaching”). He stressed the importance of independent publishing as resistance to Trump, whom he reviled as “the most anti-literary US president in history, in addition to being among the most racist, sexist, and xenophobic” (“Against Narrowness”).

Yet, despite his unequivocal opposition to the Trump presidency, it is notable that, for a seminar he taught at Amherst during the fall 2017 semester, Stavans characteristically framed the subject in dialogic terms. Titled “Trump Point/Counterpoint,” the project is presented as conversation rather than indoctrination. By his own description:

This course looks at the Trump Administration from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives—political science, race and ethnicity, gun rights, culture and the media, religious affiliation, global and local labor trends, gender and reproductive rights, internationalism and foreign relations, linguistics and the arts—offering a forum whereby to ponder, in civil fashion, the clashing liberal and conservative viewpoints that define the United States and the world today. The framework will rotate around the legacy of the Enlightenment as well as theories of individualism, free enterprise, First Amendment rights, American exceptionalism, and neoliberalism, among others. In conjunction with the course, a series of prominent national speakers of both sides of the ideological divide will be brought to campus to share their views in lectures and colloquia to enrolled students and the larger College community.” (“Trump Point/Counterpoint”)

For “Globalism and Its Discontents: Point/Counterpoint,” a seminar he offered at Amherst in fall 2018, Stavans took a similarly dialectical approach. Though he is himself a fervent champion of cosmopolitanism, an émigré appalled by nativism, his course description promises to take “a balanced view of the debate, using the Socratic method to explore its pros and cons without prejudice” (“Globalism”).

Seeing in Cesar Chavez a fulcrum by which to leverage “a more elastic understanding of the Civil Rights Era” (*Cesar Chavez* 12), Stavans has edited a volume of the Chicano leader’s speeches and compiled and annotated a collection of Chavez photos. At a time when Latinos were supplanting African Americans as the nation’s largest minority group, he was concerned that Americans of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Salvadoran, and other Latin American backgrounds were still excluded from the national conversation. The lingering effects of slavery and Jim Crow and the election of a black president, Barack Obama, would, understandably, perpetuate a binary view of American identity, but Stavans, as an immigrant from Mexico and a champion of Latino literature, was intent on applying dyes to the duo-chromatic portrait. “The United States has long perceived itself through a black-and-white prism” (*Cesar Chavez* 11), he contends. His mission is to introduce some complicating colors. Seizing on Chavez as a parallel to Martin Luther King Jr., he attempts to remind his readers not only that Delano deserves to be remembered along with Selma, that El Movimiento was perhaps as significant as the struggle for racial equality, but, more generally, that Latinos must not be erased from American history or excluded from American culture. So he appropriates Chavez, the most influential of Chicano figures, as his paragon, “a model in the larger fight against poverty and corporate abuse” (*Cesar Chavez* 12). Though he concedes that Chavez was “human in his defects” (15), he never specifies any of those defects except for Chavez’s opposition to immigration. Earlier, in *The Hispanic Condition*, Stavans had antagonized many admirers of the farmworkers’ leader by describing him as “a good Hispanic dictator, intolerant, undemocratic authoritarian” (81). However, unlike several studies that examine the complexities of Chavez, Stavans’s hagiographic *Cesar Chavez* ignores his hero’s authoritarianism and inconsistencies that sometimes undermined the struggle of the Chicano farmworkers he was leading.

Stavans is the narrator of his own recorded books—*The Novel That Invented Modernity* (2014) and *God: A History* (2014). Nevertheless, though a talented soliloquist, he enjoys staging conversations, in print and in person. “You’re famous as a *conversador*,” exclaims one of his interlocutors, Frederick Luis Aldama (Stavans and Aldama, ¡Muy Pop! 88). Stavans even invented a fictive coauthor, Zuri Balkoff, for his novella *Talia y el cielo* (1989). “I am a passionate lover of the dialogue as a revealing form of intellectual engagement” (Stavans and Gracia 2), he explains. Despite the deft use of dialogue by Plato, Denis Diderot, David Hume, and other Gentile writers, Stavans claims that there is something distinctively Jewish about the form. He

notes how Argentine novelist Ana María Shua's *The Book of Memories* "pays tribute to a recognizable device in Jewish letters—more specifically, in Yiddish literature: the unfolding of the story while two guys talk" (Stavans, Introduction to *Book of Memories* xi). As examples, he mentions Mendele Mokher Sforim's *Fishke the Lame*, Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, Chaim Grade's "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynner," and Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Cafeteria." He notes: "This device opens all sorts of possibilities: Jewish life is approached as a debate, a clash of opinions, an encounter" (xi-xii).

An expression of delight in exchanging and contesting ideas, Stavans's own use of dialogue is both Socratic and Midrashic. He explains his attraction to the form by noting the discoveries it engenders: "What I love about a dialogue is the interaction it fosters, the encounter of two minds who, through words—words in the present and words that hopefully will last—discover something new about themselves and the other. The encounter provokes all sorts of reactions. Those reactions are serendipitous: they are the result of accident and cannot be replicated. Internal and outside circumstances come together in this mano a mano encounter. And they trigger fresh, spontaneous ideas" (Stavans and Gracia 3). Even when offering a seminar at Amherst on a monolingual, xenophobic president he obviously opposes, Stavans conceives of it in dialogic terms, titling it "Trump Point/Counterpoint" and conceiving it as collective examination, not exhortation. In contrast to Trump, the autocrat who fires and maligns dissenters, he praises Cesar Chavez as "a true duelist" (Foreword to *Sal Si Puedes* xxxviii).

In a zestful double metaphor, Stavans likens a book-length conversation in Spanish that he begins with Juan Villoro to a jazz duo and to pairing off a roomful of socks of varied colors: "Me gustaría que estas conversaciones fueran como el jazz: espontáneas, como si los dos estuviéramos ambos en un cuarto oscuro repleto de calcetines en el cual nuestro objetivo es buscar pares del mismo color" (*El oja en la nuca* 3). Driven by a dialogic imagination, he has been unusually collaborative, sharing the bylines of his books with Verónica Albin, Lalo Alcaez, Frederick L. Aldama, Harold Augenbraum, Marcelo Brodsky, Mordecai Drache, Joshua Ellison, Jorge J. E. Gracia, Iván Jaksic, Adál Maldonado, Steve Sheinkin, Neal Sokol, Juan Villoro, Roberto Weil, Xiao Hai, Miguel-Angel Zapata, and Raúl Zurita. He is remarkably generous in exchanging ideas and inspiring others. Though they seem conversational and even desultory, his book-length dialogues are usually carefully contrived and edited written exchanges. It is unlikely, for example, that, during the course of a meandering chat with Verónica Albin, Stavans would have come up with this precisely phrased bit of erudition: "Dr. Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755 calls attention to the Latin root for 'dictionary,' *dictionarium*, then states: 'A book containing the words of any language in alphabetical order, with explanations of their meaning'" (*Knowledge and Censorship* 56) or that he would be able, off the top

of his head, to recall that “the OED defines the word *kiss* thus: “To press or touch with the lips (at the same time compressing and then separating them), in token of affection, or greeting or as an act of reverence” (*Love & Language* 48).

Stavans is so taken with the possibilities of dialogue that he concludes *Dictionary Days* with an imaginary conversation that he stages with the “Great Cham of Eighteenth-Century Literature,” Samuel Johnson. In addition, near the climax of the psychotropic experience he recounts in *The Oven*, he beholds two theologians, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, who appear to him to be twins and take opposing sides on fundamental philosophical issues. According to Rabbi Eliezer: “The universe is full. No matter what humans do to it, it will always be full. It depends on us to find its fullness.” Responding to a vision of the universe as broken vessels, which, contrary to the teachings of Kabbalah, can never be repaired, Rabbi Yehoshua offers the opposing view: “No, the universe is broken. It has always been broken. We can’t fix it even if we want to” (*The Oven* 27). The back and forth between the two is yet another example of how Stavans gropes his way toward truth through dialectic.

However, when he is not able to organize or fantasize dialogues with others, he is conversing with himself. He published *Talia y el cielo* in Mexico under the twin bylines of Ilan Stavans and a fictive collaborator, Zuri Balkoff. He had earlier signed the pseudonym Zuri Balkoff to radical leftist pieces he wrote for the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, at the same time that he was publishing less clamorous, more measured pieces in other newspapers under the byline Ilan Stavans. It was a kind of personal psychomachia that Stavans was conducting by projecting himself onto two contrasting personalities.

In his ambitious novella *Talia in Heaven* (whose English translation is included in *The One-Handed Pianist and Other Stories*), a Canadian Jew named Talia Kahn journeys to a country called Paranagua, where she becomes involved with two men who seem to be halves of a split personality. One, a professor of medieval and Renaissance philosophy at the Universidad Autónoma de Paranagua, is named Ilan Stabans, while the other is a Marxist revolutionary named Igal Balkoff. Stabans, who embraces an “introspective, pacific, humanist and blessed ideal” (*One-Handed Pianist* 108) is at odds with Balkoff, who dedicates himself to militant collective action for social justice. When Stabans invites Talia to the movies, it is, appropriately, to see Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the 1920 adaptation directed by Victor Fleming and starring Spencer Tracy and Ingrid Bergman. However, that 1920 movie was, in fact, directed by John S. Robertson and Nita Naldi, whereas it is the 1941 version that was directed by Fleming and featured Tracy and Bergman. In any case, the Jekyll/Hyde references underline the dialogism that is central to this fiction and to Stavans’s career in general. “In order to make the fictional account tangible, the two sides of my self needed to have a role as authors” (Sokol 17), he explained. The Stavans oeuvre is a continuing conversation not only between

Stavans and others, but between Stavans and other versions of himself, including Zuri Balkoff. He explains: “I have always had the feeling of living somebody else’s life” (*One-Handed Pianist* 191), and much of his writing is an interior dialogue with his imaginary doppelgänger. Two selves—Mexico and the United States; Jewish and Latino; Spanish and English; outsider and insider—collide, converse, and concur.

Reading a Stavans book often creates the sensation of eavesdropping on *Conversations with Myself*. Detractors might substitute Norman Mailer’s title *Advertisements for Myself*. But it is remarkable how frequently the pronoun “I” appears in Stavans’s prose, how often he incorporates himself into his discussions. He has not been shy about including his own work in collections of Latin American fiction, Latin American essays, and Jewish stories that he has edited. And he has stepped forth as the most visible—and maligned—champion of the validity of Spanglish, dubbed by Holly R. Cashman as “Spanglish’s ambassador to the Spanish-speaking world, its faithful defender and its successful agent” (219). Pairing his own keyboard with that of a Nobel laureate, he immodestly titled a collection of essays on Jewish culture *Singer’s Typewriter and Mine* (2012). And, tracing the history of the United States, in *A Most Imperfect Union*, he audaciously and flippantly inserted himself into key moments of its development. A generally positive review of Stavans’s book *The Hispanic Condition* contends: “This book manages to be worthwhile despite the obtrusive ego of the author” (Stevens-Arroyo). Reviewing *On Borrowed Words*, Carolyn See points out: “It might be that instead of ‘autobiography,’ this memoir concerns the yearning of a man who has yearned for much of his life—in four languages—just to be the center of attention.”

Though Stavans might seem to have little in common with the raffish Chicano rebel Oscar “Zeta” Acosta, he was drawn to write about his life precisely because of the opportunity to examine himself through the lens of an inverted doppelgänger. “He was the embodiment of what I’ve tried repeatedly to leave out of my life: the cult of the body, life as a bohemian trip through altered states of consciousness,” Stavans explains. “His tics are an open encyclopedia of sixties Chicanismo. What I detest in him is obviously what I’m most afraid of in myself: excess in politics, excess of self-pity, excess of self-glory” (Heller). He coyly named a key character in *Talia in Heaven* “Ilan Stabans.” And he even made himself the principal character in a graphic murder mystery, *El Iluminado* (2012), a detective caper that is set in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and playfully characterizes itself as “*The Da Vinci Code*, with matzo and salsa picante” (Stavans and Sheinkin 39). While trying to tie an unsolved death to the history of New Mexico’s crypto-Jews, he is chided by a rival professor for having “already done enough damage with Spanglish and your comics and the rest, mister polymath” (Stavans and Sheinkin 170).

It seemed inevitable that Stavans would devote a book to the excessive phenomenon of selfies, the fad for photographic autoportraits facilitated by the ubiquity of

cell phones, and title it *I Love My Selfie* (2017). He includes several of his own selfies, including an unflattering image of him recumbent, his paunch exposed. Obsessed and repelled by the self, Stavans subjects it to unrelenting scrutiny. In another book, Stavans recounts a recurring nightmare throughout his life in which he is tormented by mirrors. “To this day, I don’t like looking at myself in photographs because I always find something bizarre about myself” (Stavans and Gracia 9–10), he confesses. Through dozens of books, many of them dialogues that serve as intellectual mirrors, Stavans tries to subdue the terror of his self-regarding gaze. All of his writing is speculative, a journey through the looking glass, a confrontation with the dreadfully revealing speculum.