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## ***The Last Happy Occasion (review)***

Elizabeth Klein

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REVIEW

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### **In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

148 SHOFAR Spring 1998 Vol. 16, No.3 If it receives the attention it deserves, Rosenthal's book can help to prevent Celan, who in a speech during his only visit to Israel said that he had come to understand "jiddische Einsamkeit" (Jewish loneliness), from ending up completely in Heidegger's camp. It would be difficult to imagine a lonelier place than that for Paul Celano Jerry Glenn German Department University of Cincinnati The Last Happy Occasion, by Alan Shapiro. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. 229 pp. \$22.95. The poet Alan Shapiro has written a book about "the transformative power of art" (p. 2), examining how poems both illuminate and are illuminated by the reader's experience. But transformation does not always mean remediation. "Poems don't necessarily make us better spouses, parents, citizens or friends. The ... changes ... are often morally ambiguous" (p. 3). In the prologue to The Last Happy Occasion, he meditates on the irony that although poetry is pleasurable, it often brings us face to face with painful truths. Just as he values a good poem, Shapiro loves a good joke, particularly those which use rhetorical devices to "transform into pleasure experiences that otherwise would terrify or repel." People telling jokes can acknowledge "their worst fears and anxieties" (p. 184) and, with humor, overcome them. To explore the ways

poetry, to which Shapiro has devoted his life, and jokes, which he grew up hearing as part of his family's most intimate exchanges, affected him, he offers a memoir of times in his "past [when] art and life ... intersected in powerful and illuminating ways" (p. 6). In six autobiographical essays, he tells stories as well as outright jokes, funny enough to make this reviewer laugh out loud, even as he takes up the most serious of personal issues: his ambivalent feelings toward his family members both collectively and individually, and his changing relationship with Judaism. In most of the essays he examines in some depth at least one poem that has stirred him, mentions many others, and reflects on his passion for his work. The first essay starts with a twelve-year-old Shapiro who has lost track of time. Already late for the shabbat meal on erev Rosh Hashanah, he stops to carry packages for an old Jewish woman in order to claim his good deed as an excuse for being late. Once she realizes he too is Jewish, she scolds him for working on the sabbath, but his ruse calms his furious parents. The public praise he receives for his mitzvah from the rabbi in temple the next day while his parents beam heightens his sense that the rituals his family practices are empty, and the incident comes to represent "everything [he] Book Reviews 149 detested about the Judaism of [his] childhood" (p. 21). He terms it "surprising" that a poem which helped him "bring ... into focus" (p. 24) the issues of how his traditional Judaism failed him should be "Church Going" by Philip Larkin. Although the speaker acknowledges the human need for ritual and form, he feels an "emotional and intellectual distance from ... Christian faith" (p. 26). Shapiro's need for order during the late 60s prevented him, despite the enticements of Woodstock, from disappointing his family, especially his father, who had already disowned his daughter Beth for embracing the counterculture. While Shapiro managed to resist the seductions of the Age of Aquarius, he was attracted by the work of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and, on graduation from Brandeis, took off for Dublin to search for what he found in Heaney's poetry, leaving behind his life as a "middle-class urban Jew in the American diaspora" (p. 89). Ironic, he later feels, since "the very poetry in whose name I rejected my own family was reminding me that in rejecting them I was rejecting life itself" (p. 190). In Ireland he met his first wife, a nice Irish girl, "every Jewish mother's nightmare" (p. 126), but they did not marry until he had returned to Stanford to study writing on a Stegner Fellowship. Married by a judge, his bride wept for a "proper Catholic wedding" (p. 112), but he did not seem to...

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Just as he values a good poem, Shapiro loves a good joke, particularly those which use rhetorical devices to "transform into pleasure experiences that otherwise would terrify or repel." People telling jokes can acknowledge "their worst fears and anxieties" (p. 184) and, with humor, overcome them.

To explore the ways poetry, to which Shapiro has devoted his life, and jokes, which he grew up hearing as part of his family's most intimate exchanges, affected him, he offers a memoir of times in his "past [when] art and life . . . intersected in powerful and illuminating ways" (p. 6). In six autobiographical essays, he tells stories as well as outright jokes, funny enough to make this reviewer laugh out loud, even as he takes up the most serious of personal issues: his ambivalent feelings toward his family members both collectively and individually, and his changing relationship with Judaism. In most of the essays he examines in some depth at least one poem that has stirred him, mentions many others, and reflects on his passion for his work.

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