

The Changing Landscape of Jewish American Literature

Presented by Rabbi Ben Resnick

America at 250: Jewish Ideas and the American Experiment

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When we define a national literature like German literature or English literature or French literature, we are basing our classification on language. Other people write in French and others write in English, and for those we add the ethnicity, but I would say that language is more important than ethnicity. Carver and Melville are both American writers, regardless of immense difference in their content or aesthetic—it is all American. Saul Bellow told me many times that first and foremost he was an American writer.

In terms of Jewish literature, it is also about language. Jewish languages, such as Hebrew, Yiddish or Ladino, for me are the most important when defining Jewish literature. This may be provocative, but when an Arab writes in Hebrew, like Sayeed Kashua, he is participating in Jewish writing through the language. Kashua is part of Jewish literature because, by writing in Hebrew, he is utilizing the context of classical Jewish writing.

Can we define the writings of Jews in a European language as Jewish? Jews who write about Jewish matters or have Jewish protagonists can be classified as Jewish writing. However, when non-Jews write about the same Jewish themes I would not consider the result Jewish literature. Jews writing about non-Jewish topics is not classified as Jewish—but it would be Jewish if it were written in a Jewish language. If a writer is Jewish but not writing on Jewish subjects, the work is not Jewish literature. With all our desire to include Kafka as a writer of Jewish literature, in my mind he is not, although in his world there are symbols and metaphors that are taken from the Jewish heritage. Of course all these definitions are narrow and stupid, as there are many writers who are on the borders or margins of these worlds. But you asked for a definition, and this is my answer.

Moment Staff. "Is There Such a Thing as Jewish Fiction?" *Moment Magazine*, 31 Mar. 2012, <https://momentmag.com/is-there-such-a-thing-as-jewish-fiction/>.

Cynthia Ozick:

At that time Philip Roth said: "I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew." I do not know whether he would hold this view today. Nevertheless Philip Roth's words do not represent a credo; they speak for a doom. I will come back to them shortly [...]

One can move through history from culture to culture and discover equal dooms. In the Italy of the Renaissance, cultivated Jews, like others, wrote sonnets in Italian in imitation of Petrarch.

They did not endure even in a minor way, not as a minor note in Jewish culture, not as a minor note in Italian culture. In the so-called Golden Age of Spain, which as Richard Rubinstein pointed out at an earlier Dialogue is considered Golden only by Jews, was there not some gifted Jew of Toledo who wrote verses in Spanish? If so, try to find his name. So if Philip Roth still wants to say "I am not a Jewish writer; I am a writer who is a Jew," the distinction turns out to be wind; it is precisely those who make this distinction whom Diaspora most determinedly wipes out. [...]

Whenever we in Diaspora make a literature that is of-the-nations, relying on what we have in common with all men, what we fashion turns out to be a literature of instinct, not of singularity of culture; it does not deserve perpetuation [...]

The fact is that nothing thought or written in Diaspora has ever been able to last unless it has been centrally Jewish. If it is centrally Jewish it will last for Jews. If it is not centrally Jewish it will last neither for Jews nor for the host nations. Rashi lasts and Yehudah Halevi lasts: one so to speak a social thinker, the other a poet: they last for Jews. Leivick [Halpern] will last, and Sholem Aleichem: for Jews. Isaac D'Israeli did not last for Jews or for anyone; neither did that putative Jew of Toledo who wrote good Spanish poetry; neither will Norman Mailer. "Our cultural account in the Diaspora," Bialik said, "is all debit and no credit." [...]

By "centrally Jewish" I mean, for literature, whatever touches on the liturgical. Obviously this does not refer only to prayer. It refers to a type of literature and to a type of perception. There is a critical difference between liturgy and a poem. Liturgy is in command of the reciprocal moral imagination rather than of the isolated lyrical imagination. A poem is a private flattery: it moves the private heart, but to no end other than being moved. A poem is a decoration of the heart, the art of the instant. It is what Yehudah Halevi called flowers without fruit. Liturgy is also a poem, but it is meant not to have only a private voice. Liturgy has a choral voice, a communal voice: the echo of the voice of the Lord of History. Poetry shuns judgment and memory and seizes the moment. In all of history the literature that has lasted for Jews has been liturgical. The secular Jew is a figment; when a Jew becomes a secular person he is no longer a Jew. This is especially true for makers of literature. It was not only an injunction that Moses uttered when he said we would be a people attentive to holiness: it was a description and a destiny. When a Jew in Diaspora leaves liturgy—I am speaking now of the possibilities of a Diaspora literature—literary history drops him and he does not last.

By "last" I mean, very plainly, *sub specie aeternitatis*. If it is enough for any novelist or poet to have the attention of three decades and then be forgotten, I am not speaking to him. But no committed writer seriously aims to be minor or obscure. I offer a tragic American exemplar of wasted powers and large-scale denial. Why, for instance, does Norman Mailer, born in the shtetl called Brooklyn, so strenuously and with little irony turn himself into Esau?

Ozick, Cynthia. "Toward a New Yiddish." *Art & Ardor: Essays*, Knopf, 1983, pp. 154–177

Irving Howe:

...To live with this problem in a state of useful discontent was perhaps what it now meant to be a Jew.

There remains the question, worth asking if impossible to answer with certainty: What is the likely future of American Jewish writing? Has it already passed its peak of achievement and influence? Can we expect a new generation of writers to appear who will contribute to American literature a distinctive sensibility and style derived from the Jewish experience in this country?

My own view is that American Jewish fiction has probably moved past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning-out of materials and memories. Other than in books and sentiment, there just isn't enough left of that experience. Even some of the writers, men and women of middle age or beyond, who have themselves lived through the immigrant experience now seem to be finding that their recollections have run dry. Or, that in their stories and novels they have done about as much with those recollections as they can. The sense of an overpowering subject, the sense that this subject imposes itself upon their imaginations, this grows weaker, necessarily, with the passing of the years. There remains, to be sure, the problem of "Jewishnessness," and the rewards and difficulties of definition it may bring us. But this problem, though experienced as an urgent one by at least some people, does not yield a thick enough sediment of felt life to enable a new outburst of writing about American Jews. It is too much a matter of will, or nerves, and not enough of shared experience. Besides, not everything which concerns or interests us can be transmuted into imaginative literature.

I find confirmation of these views in a recent essay by Ruth Wisse, who writes about the problems of the younger Jewish novelists and storytellers: "For those who take Judaism seriously as a cultural alternative, and wish to weave new brilliant cloth from its ancient threads, the sociological reality of the present-day American Jewish community would seem to present an almost insurmountable obstacle. Writers who feel the historic, moral and religious weight of Judaism, and want to represent it in literature, have had to ship their characters out of town by Greyhound or magic carpet, to an unlikely shtetl, to Israel, to other times and other climes, in search of pan-Jewish fictional atmospheres."

Others think differently. Younger Jewish writers grow impatient and irritated with the view I have expressed above. They suspect that people like me are trying to monopolize American Jewish writing for the experience of my generation and the one just before it. They would argue that there is a post-immigrant Jewish experience in America which can be located in its own milieu, usually suburbs or middle-class urban neighborhoods; that it has virtues and vices distinctly its own; and that it offers a body of experience which a serious writer can draw upon in creating fictions. Is not their phase of Jewish life in America as authentic and interesting as that of the earlier immigrants? Do they not have a right, also, to make of their involvements and confusions with Jewishness the foundation for stories and novels?

Perhaps these younger writers are in the right, I hope so, though I doubt it, since what seems to me at issue is not so much the intrinsic importance of the post-immigrant Jewish experience as its usability for the making of fictions, Does that experience go deep enough into the lives of the younger, "Americanized" Jews? Does it form the very marrow of their being? Does it provide images of conflict, memories of exaltation and suffering, such as enable the creating of stories?

About all this we need not be dogmatic. Far better to be open and tentative (even if also skeptical). But what can be said with some assurance is that by now, entering the last quarter of the century, there have appeared a significant number of Jewish writers in this country who have made of their memories, largely of the immigrant years, the material for valuable works of fiction. Their stories and novels have already enriched American literature, even, to a modest extent, transforming it as other risings of new Americans have transformed it in the past.

Howe, Irving. *Introduction. Jewish-American Stories*, edited by Irving Howe, New American Library, 1977.