

Back to the Edges, the Center will not Hold: One Reason for the Emergence of a New Consciousness in American Jewish Literature.

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Critics of the Jewish literary scene in the United States, most recently William Novak in *Moment*, have expressed their chagrin that Jewish writers have “secularized” their Jewishness. Certainly, the Jewishness apparent in the works of our major writers—Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, Mordecai Richler, and Philip Roth—is a leavened ethnicity, if it exists at all. If we consider, however, the modifying element in the ethnic mix of many of these writers, we realize how little their “secularization” is a matter of choice. As such, that they lack “Jewish consciousness” becomes simply a descriptive rather than a critical evaluation.

Americans of the Jewish Persuasion

That special element in the makeup of the writers just mentioned is, of course, their presence in America. Although members of a minority, often disenfranchised group, the major Jewish writers in America have succeeded in moving from the fringes of society into its mainstream, largely by virtue of their art. As they achieved success, they became examples of the prevailing American dream—the notion of the melting pot—the belief that whatever one’s economic and religious identity, it is possible to become a new man, an American. Small wonder, then, that they became

believers in the dream, having had it proved to them in this most dramatic way.

The method by which they achieved acceptance was by expressing themselves in universal rather than in ethnic terms. Bellow's first success was *Seize the Day*, Malamud's *The Assistant*, Mailer weighed in with *The Naked and the Dead*, and Roth came to public attention with *Letting Go*. Only in *The Assistant* does ethnicity figure prominently, but it serves only to broaden the definition of what a Jew is ("All men are Jews."), until it is wrung dry of ethnic character. The method, however, was effective. More importantly, it actually expressed the philosophy of the novelists. The universal way was the only way. It made little sense, financially, artistically, or emotionally, for these novelists to turn ethnic. They believed in the American dream, adhered to its notions of egalitarianism, and achieved success by expressing themselves in universal terms. Secularize their Jewishness they did; they could hardly do otherwise.

So persistently has the Jewish writer in America clung to his notions of universality and his belief in the American dream that Jewishness in any but its most general form is difficult to discern on the popular scene. Black writers, never wholly convinced of the authenticity of the dream, abandoned it easily and turned quickly to ethnic writing. They began to examine the experience of Blacks within their own culture rather than *vis-à-vis* Whites, and the subsequent change in Black awareness has registered clearly on the consciousness of general culture. The scale of this influence is startling, particularly in comparison to the lack of effect the change in Jewish consciousness has had in the same areas. In the movies (*Shaft*, *Souther*, *The Learning Tree*, *Claudine*, *Uptown Saturday Night*, *Lady Sings the Blues*, *Mahogany*, *A Piece of the Action*, *Carwash*, *Greased Lightning*, *Which Way Is Up?*, as well as an ever increasing number of so-called, "Blaxploitation" films), on television (*Good Times*, *Sanford Arms* formerly *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *What's Happening*, *The Richard Pryor Show*, *The Redd Foxx Comedy Hour*, as well as specials with Flip Wilson, Cicely Tyson, and Lola Falana), and on stage (*Raisin*, *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men*, *The Taking of Miss Jane*, *Your Arms too Short to Box with God*, and the current *Bubbling Brown Sugar*, *The Wiz*, and *For Colored Girls*), we can see the im-

pact of the new Black awareness. These are not necessarily quality works. They are, however, works which consciously and deliberately utilize their ethnicity.

Think of the Jewish impact by comparison. In ethnic form, with the notable exception of Isaac B. Singer's *Yentl* recently on Broadway and *Hester Street* in films (though that film was as much about the immigrant experience as it was about the Jewish), we have had the (deservedly) short-lived *Brigit Loves Bernie*, a King James version of *Moses* during the summer off-season, a TV version of *Last Stop Greenwich Village* entitled *Busting Loose* where only the mothers are vaguely "Jewish," the lamentable film version of *Portnoy's Complaint*, and various Woody Allen sketches about bearded Chassidim. We might add the endless revivals of *Fiddler on the Roof* and two Canadian imports, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* and *Lies My Father Told Me*. What is there, in any of these, for those of us who care about authentic Jewish experience? Not one of these concerns itself primarily with the Jewishness of its characters. None addresses itself to the Jews in the audience, at least not in the direction of heart or mind. The call is to the wallet, if it is to any part. Ethnicity is merely backdrop, if it is there at all.

But what was the Jewish writer in America to do? He could only follow the lead of American Jews in general, and ethnicity came to both only very recently. While Black Studies programs at various universities were in the vanguard of developing the ethnic identity of Blacks, Judaic Studies appeared later, often as an after-thought or in reaction. Americanization has been difficult to abandon for the American Jew; ethnicity a difficult concept to embrace. There has hardly been time for Jewish writers to produce "authentic" Jewish writing. There has been no time at all for the change toward ethnicity to register on American culture.

"Jewish Jews" and the "Old Guard"

Even as American Jews were changing, however, the writers that have represented them for a generation found themselves bound to the old faith of American Jewishness. The first group—Bellow, Mailer, Malamud, Richler, Roth—as well as the secondary group—Friedman, Gold, Markfield—were members of

a generation that shared with the rest of America the belief in "melting." It was not so much that one assimilated as that one became Americanized. The Old World, the History, were not denied. One could even be proud of it, provided that it had its place, somewhat in the manner of the bareheaded, smooth-shaven young man behind the counter of a "kosher style" butcher shop who points at the photograph of his bearded grandfather as proof of his own "kashruth." Jewishness had its place as clue, not as identity, as decoration, not as foundation, as source material, not as finished product.

The masthead of *Commentary* announces that it is the magazine of the "American Jewish Committee." So are the familiar writers *American Jewish* writers. The focus is on a particular Jew, declares the modifier. By contrast, a magazine such as *Moment*, which embraces the new ethnicity, declares itself to be the magazine for "America's Jews." In the first case, Jewishness in moderation, in the second, Jewishness in essence. *Moment* concerns itself with Jews; *Commentary*, more modest and more limited, with American Jews. If voice were to be given to the changing Jewish identity, it could not emerge from the throat of a writer bound to the notions of Americanization.

That the younger generation of American Jewish writers—Ozick, Cohen, Mirsky—has begun to focus on "Jewish Jews" is due largely to the liberating influence of the growing ethnocentrism of the decade. There are beauty and artistic merit in Ozick's argument for the narrow focus, but the more significant reason why more Jewish writers will follow "the lesson of the shofar" is the psychological necessity for doing so. As all other ethnic groups in America have done, Jews, too, are finally accepting the argument of self-preservation. "If I am not for myself, who is?" And Jewish writers in America have begun to act according to the instinct of self-preservation too. This is why they are turning, and must continue to turn, inward. Into community, into history, into racial spirit. Having grown up independent of the chains of all mankind, they are free to bind themselves within the boundaries of their own kind.

Not so, of course, for Bellow, Malamud, Richler, Roth, or, for that matter, for *Commentary*. It is not that they want to abrogate their responsibilities. They have neither sold-out nor copped-out.

They find themselves, instead, locked out. Committed to the spirit of their era which dealt with a movement toward the center, they could not help but examine and define Judaism in the broadest, most universal terms possible. Since they were committed to the world and were defined as men of broad vision by the standards of their society, it is only reasonable that they have channeled their energies into the examination of Jewishness mainly for its implications for Everyman, rather than for one man or for one kind of men.

Thus, when the *Zeitgeist* changes, as it has in the past decade, and Jews changed along with everyone else, this group of writers found themselves unable rather than unwilling to record the changes. Locked in by the spirit of an age past, they found it easier to be Jewish writers for all Americans than to be Jewish writers for Jews.

Israel and the Holocaust

If the field now appears ready to be taken over by the younger group of writers, the vision is overly euphoric. Not only have major writers lagged behind in their recognition of the need for a new kind of Jewish writing, so have, with few exceptions, many publications in which the new voices would be expected to appear. While Cynthia Ozick's stories have appeared in a wide range of magazines; less established American Jewish writers have discovered the field closed to them. Not beaten off, mind you, by stories of the "Old Guard" as much as driven off by a new entrant. The Israeli story has appeared. It seems that the Jewish American editors of magazines like *Commentary* (where Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua have appeared), *Response*, and even college magazines such as Brooklyn College's *Riverrun* and *Nocturne* and City College's *The Source*, find the question of *mi hu Yehudi* as difficult to answer in regard to Jewish fiction as Israelis have found it in regard to Jewish people. As a result, rather than chance a "new consciousness" story or risk being passé with a "traditional American Jewish story, they print an Israeli story." And so we get stories about the kibbutz and about Meier Dizengoff, of bravery in the desert and courage at home, of brushing by an Arab or living with a Sephardic Jew.

Is this Jewish fiction? Hardly. It is a national fiction, the word "Israeli" as much a modifier and limiter as the word "American."* But the question of "Who is a Jew" seems to have been settled by editors to mean an Israeli. As a result, we have a talented Jewish writer like Hugh Nissenson display his Jewish consciousness by writing (and achieving success with) a collection of Israeli stories. And at the opposite end of the spectrum, a giant like Isaac Bashevis Singer, whose authenticity as a Jewish writer has never been questioned, fills *A Crown of Feathers* with English explanations (in parentheses) of Yiddish and Hebrew phrases. To make the work more Jewish? American? Universal?

A final word about Bill Novak's observation that American Jewish fiction seems to lack an awareness that "anything momentous had occurred in the 1940's, in Europe." Accurate as the observation appears to be, it is not clear that disappointment is in order. The absence of literature by American Jews that deals directly with the Holocaust can once again be explained by the circumstances that prevented the appearance of literature that dealt seriously with other Jewish themes. The Jewish writer was the American Jewish writer. He saw the war and the Holocaust as Americans did. Indirectly, by way of newspapers and eyewitness accounts, not directly, by way of his own flesh. The only way he could respond to it was by indirection as well. And of that kind of response we have several examples. Roth's "Eli the Fanatic," Malamud's "The Mourners," "Take Pity," and "The Last Mohican," as well as Richler's *St. Urbain's Horseman* and Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* all deal with the events in Europe by examining their impact on the natives, immigrants, and survivors that live on *this* side of the ocean.

Stark eyewitness accounts, even imagined accounts of the horrors themselves, were left to participants like Elie Wiesel and J. Kosinski, just as the tragedies of a previous era were left in the hands of Singer and I. Babel. This was, in many ways, an artistic decision as well, and a proper one. Even Arthur A. Cohen, one of

* *Golda* should be seen in the same context. The Hadassah groups that have made the play a financial success might have seen the show because it is about a Jew. Its producer and director have managed to bring it to Broadway, however, because Mrs. Meir was the *Israeli* head of state, because she is identifiable as the leader of a nation rather than of a people.

the new writers, deals with the events of the 1940's from this side of the Atlantic in his *In the Days of Simon Stern*.

That there are few enough serious novels on the subject may well be true. This may be why Mr. Novak, in a *Times* review, hailed *Anna*, a novel by Susan Schaefer, as a "Holocaust" novel. But Mrs. Schaefer herself does not see the novel as a Holocaust novel, and describes it as having come out of taped eyewitness accounts. She, like all American novelists, realizes the handicap their Americanization has placed on them in any attempts to deal in a direct fashion with the events of the 1940's. It would, after all, be fiction by a generation of writers that neither witnessed nor suffered those times. Even as the new Jewish writers move back to the edges, where authentic Jewish fiction and people lie, the subject of the Holocaust seems to remain outside of their domain.