DEFINING JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE WITHIN THE MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

The present paper is intended to contextualise Jewish American literature and to define it against mainstream literature and against other ethnic groups´ literary productions. Another aim is to point to several attempts to set criteria for including litrary works within this literature.

Jews have played a central role in defining ethnic themes and introducing them into American literature. Thus, Emma Lazarus's poem *The New Colossus* (1883), as well as Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* of 1914, represent "two early attempts to introduce ethnic issues into literature, with the addition of a pronounced political agenda: to place emphasis on the social equality and the immigrant past common to all Americans; to keep the ´golden door´ to the United States open for immigrants from Eastern Europe; and to reaffirm loyalty to the ´American creed´ and stress the willingness of all Eastern European immigrants to fully integrate into the mainstream of white Anglo-Saxon protestant American society" (Spevack , 32).

However, in the eighties it was questioned "whether Jews are still to be considered a socially oppressed minority in America, similar to blacks and other people of color, or whether they should justly be considered part of a precisely delineated social and political as well as artistic and literary 'establishment,' and as fundamentally different from those who are still to some degree excluded from it" (Eisen 21).

The situation and the position of the Jewish-American writer has always been different from that of the other ethnicities in America and still remains so until today. One difference is highlighted by a comparison with the African-American writers. The "marginal" position of black authors has disappeared on the book market in the United States, but the themes of alienation and anger will not vanish as readily from their works. Instead of integration into the literary and artistic mainstream, black writers and artists wanted, especially since the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, to arrive at their "own" forms of literary expression which would have direct relevance for their lives. They wished to answer the question of their relationship to white mainstream culture by implementing a multicultural strategy: their literature is not that of assimilation, but in many ways that of establishing difference, separatism, and cultural resistance. While with the African-American writers there is no sense of the success or even desirability of social and cultural integration into the predominantly white mainstream of American society, many Jewish-American authors felt it as necessary and desirable, and as a result even managed to acquire it.

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Indeed, a great number of contemporary Jewish-American writers such as Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud, Arthur Miller, Philip Roth and others have had literary success. The language employed by these writers is standard American English, they are socially accepted, and their works are read by a wide Jewish and non-Jewish audience. For this reason it is widely considered that their texts form part of a recognized literary canon, and belong to the American literary "center" or "mainstream," as far as this may still be defined today.

As much as we agreed to this idea we cannot ignore several facts which underline the necessity to view Jewish American literary productions as shaped by strong ethnic forces, and Jewish American literature as both belonging to and standing out in the multicultural American landscape.

There are two main reasons why American Jewish cannot be successfully identified with the culture of the establisment. First if all, it is a fact that, as much as they tried to ingratiate themselves with the white mainstrem majority, Jewish Americans just like any other ethnic writers have an acute "sense of doubleness, a double consciousness" (Sollors, 243) and they confront an actual or imagined double audience, composed of 'insiders' and of readers, listeners, or spectators who are not familiar with the writer's ethnic group, from both of whom they must have felt alienated at times. This sense is widely pervasive in their work and differentiates them from other mainstream writers who are "single-consciousness".

Secondly, just like in many other ethnic communities there is a stong tendency to resist assimilation into the mainstream.Werner Sollors points out to the fact that: "Americans perceive themselves as undergoing cultural homogenization" (245), that is Americans of different backgrounds share larger and larger areas of an overlapping culture. To fight against this tendency there have been made efforts to maintain symbolic distinctions, a process known as 'ethnicization'. The Jewish American community is very active in this respect. One such effort belongs to Dean J. Franco. In his book published in 2006, *Ethnic American Literature: Comparing Chicano, Jewish, and African American Writing* he tried to provide a strong corrective to the tendency of other minority traditions to dismiss Jewish literature as being "of the center", drawing from border theory as well as diasporic and postcolonial theorists and pointing to the acute social vulnerability, painful histories, and cultural anxieties that inform much of the Jewish literature of the past century.

A third aspect, supporting distinction from both mainstram literature and other ethnic literatures, is that Jewish literature has "always been the fruit of a culture of exile, diaspora, homecoming; of a literary world in which Jewish authors from one country read and interact with Jewish authors from other countries; of a community in which Jews from America are intimately concerned with the European Holocaust and with the fate of the State of Israel" (Wirth-Nesher and Kramer 7). Jews have an entirely different notion of country of origin from European Americans. After all, not all Jews (including Jewish Americans) trace their ancestry to Europe, and even when they do, immigrants did not consider themselves to be Russians, Germans or Polish. Besides, Jews have for millennia understood their ancestral homeland to be not in Europe but in the Middle East And for these very reasons, "some scholars have become increasingly skeptical of the specific reconfigurations of America's multicultural map around what David Hollinger has called 'the ethno-racial pentagon' of European, Asian, African,

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Hispanic, and indigenous peoples […] [this] foregrounding of race relegate Jews to a dehistoricized and culturally vacant category" (idem). Between the dominant position of the white majority and the marginal position of peoples of color (having been perceived as such for most of America's history), American Jews have no clearly designated place on America's multicultural map which acknowledges their difference.

In view of all the arguments brought so far, we conclude by quoting Wirth-Nesher and Kramer's verdict in their "Introduction" to *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*: "Given that the Jewish American experience cannot easily be assimilated into existing models of multiculturalism, it poses a challenge to them—a challenge that has not as yet been satisfactorily answered"(8).

These contrasts between American Jews and other minority writers, on the one hand, and between Jewish American culture and the mainstream culture, on the other, highlight the fact that the Jewish may be regarded in their roles as contemporary novelists in the United States as "the minority writer as majority," a concept to which the critic Sidney Richman pointed out in 1966. According to Richman, in the 1960s Jewish writers left behind their theme of alienation from the mainstream and instead turned to an attempt to assimilate their personalities and writing styles as much as possible into this same American literary mainstream. Even though they were thus forced to give up a large part of their own identities, they themselves had not only accepted the "majority" as binding, but they had on the other hand been accepted by the mainstream and become part of the recognized literary canon.

According to Robert Alter, the author of "The Jew Who Didn't Get Away: On the Possibility of an American Jewish Culture", a chapter in *The American Jewish Experience*, there are three basic approaches in **defining American Jewish culture**. Minimalists look first to language. Anything not written in a Jewish language like Hebrew or Yiddish is to their mind automatically excluded as not truly Jewish. Maximalists, by contrast, include under "American Jewish" anything created by an American of Jewish extraction, whether it has a Jewish theme or not. In between are those who search for certain defining commonalities in American Jewish culture. American Jewish culture to them involves Jewish ideals, the universal application of Jewish experiences, and the employment of what may be seen as a distinctive American Jewish style-shaped by immigration, urbanization, Yiddish culture, and rapid social mobility. Robert Alter, professor of literature at the University of California at Berkeley, argues here that American Jewish culture, to be true to its name, must display authentic continuity with the Jewish past as well as distinctive American qualities: "works of serious Jewish content, informed by Jewish tradition, and distinctively American in methodology, orientation, and mode of expression" (268).

In 1977, one of the most outstanding critics of Jewish American literature, Irving Howe, introduced his collection, *Jewish American Stories*, by declaring that Jewish American writing had "probably moved past its high point, " having found "its voice and its passion at exactly the moment it approache [d] disintegration" (16, 3) and he identified as the trademark of writers of "the immigrant Jewish milieu": "the judgment, affection and hatred they bring to bear upon the remembered world of their youth and the costs exacted by their struggle to tear themselves away…the vibration of old stories remembered and retold… [and] the lure of nostalgia" (3).

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These terms by which Howe characterized such writers as Henry Roth, Bernard Malamud, and Saul Bellow have largely determined what has come to be known as the Jewish American literary canon, in other words have served as definition for the essence of American Jewish literature.

But Tresa Grauer, in her chapter on contemporary literature that closes the *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, argues that "[t]he flourishing of Jewish American writing in the quarter-century since Howe's publication thus not only refutes his belief that "younger, 'Americanized' Jews" would lack the depth of experience required for fictionmaking (17), it also, even more significantly, attests to the limitations ofany single definition of Jewish American literature. Whereas for Howe, Jewish American literature was that which drew upon the immigrant experience, other critics have identified other criteria for inclusion, measuring Jewishness variously by such categories as "blood" (is the author the child of a Jewish mother?), "language" (is the text written in Hebrew or in Yiddish?), "religiosity" (does the author or the character live according to Jewish law?) and "theme" (does the text reflect, for example, the legacy of the Holocaust?). Each of these individual attempts to delimit the boundaries of Jewish American literature tends to raise more questions than it answers, and the stakes in the discussion are high." (269-270)

In accordance to Grauer's argument we conclude that there is no consensus nor is it likely that there ever will be one as far as an acceptable definition of Jewish American literature is concerned. To define such a literature is similar to the attempt to define who is a Jew.

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