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0521792932 - The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature

Edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher and Michael P. Kramer

Excerpt

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HANA WIRTH-NESHER AND MICHAEL P. KRAMER

Introduction: Jewish American literatures in the making

“Try not to love such a country!” exclaims Mottel the cantor’s son, the orphaned Russian Jewish immigrant child in Sholem Aleichem’s only New World novel, when he discovers that in America “it’s not allowed to hit somebody smaller than yourself” (*Adventures of Mottel the Cantor’s Son*, 260). Mottel’s bittersweet Yiddish praise echoes – if unintentionally and somewhat ironically – a declaration made more than a hundred years earlier by the Sephardi banker Moses Seixas, warden of the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, in an address to George Washington, newly elected President of the United States:

Deprived as we hitherto have been of the invaluable rights of free citizens, we now . . . behold a government erected by the majesty of the people, a government which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance, but generously affording to all liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship, deeming every one of whatever nation, tongue or language, equal parts of the great governmental machine.

(Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews*, 79)

These two passages help chart an important theme in the history of Jewish life in America. For millennia, Jews had lived under the rule of many other peoples, both in the Land of Israel and in exile in Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. They sometimes enjoyed periods of tolerance, prosperity, and quasi-autonomy; often they suffered oppression, poverty, and violence. Throughout their history, in good times and bad, the Jews were considered to be different – religiously, ethnically, racially, and hence politically – a distinction, by the way, they did not always contest. When they came to America, however, they discovered – whether with unambiguous relief, or cautious optimism, or seasoned skepticism – that *America* was different. For many scholars, this theme gives coherence and distinctness to Jewish American history in general – and to Jewish American literary history in particular. “Without the opportunities, freedom, and openness found in this land,”

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writes the editor of the recent multi-volume history, *The Jewish People in America*, “American Jewry would not have been able to realize its energies and talents and become what it is today” (Feingold, *The Jewish People in America*, I, xi).

Those energies and talents are remarkably evident in the fields of literature and culture. Indeed, it would be hard to conceive of these areas in the twentieth century *without* Jewish artists and writers. Of the seven American Nobel Laureates in literature since the end of the Second World War, two have been Jews – Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer – and countless other awards (Pulitzer Prizes, National Book Awards, P.E.N./Faulkner Awards) have been garnered by Jewish American authors over the last century. Landmarks of modern and contemporary American culture are products of Jewish American experience (to name only a few): in drama, Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, David Mamet’s *American Buffalo*; in film, Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* and Steven Spielberg’s *E.T.*; in American musical theater, *Porgy and Bess* (George and Ira Gershwin), *My Fair Lady* (Lerner and Lowe), *West Side Story* (Bernstein, Sondheim, Laurents, and Robbins); in American song, Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America” and Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind”; in poetry, Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* and Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck”; and in fiction, Gertrude Stein’s *Three Lives*, Bellow’s *Herzog*, Philip Roth’s *Goodbye Columbus*, Nathanael West’s *Miss Lonely Hearts*, the stories of Cynthia Ozick and Grace Paley, and Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*. And any bibliography of the most significant works of American literary and cultural criticism would encompass the writings of Daniel Aaron, Sacvan Bercovitch, Harold Bloom, Leslie Fiedler, Susan Gubar, Geoffrey Hartman, Myra Jehlen, Alfred Kazin, Leo Marx, Walter Benn Michaels, Susan Sontag, Alan Trachtenberg, Lionel Trilling, among many others.

It is certainly tempting to tell the story of Jewish American literary history in this celebratory, appreciative tone – as a movement from trouble to triumph, darkness to light, slavery to redemption, cultural deprivation to cultural flowering. And it is difficult to deny that many Jews, among them many Jewish writers and scholars, have thought of the American experience in just this way. But the story conceals as much as it reveals. To begin with, Jewish creativity did not begin in America, nor has it ever been restricted to periods free from persecution and turmoil. The Jews did not need America in order to flourish creatively. But they did flourish differently there, and that story needs to be told.

Or, better yet, *those stories*. Much more than a century separates Moses Seixas from Sholem Aleichem’s Mottel – differences in class, culture, and language; in genre, tone, and audience – substantive differences that should

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not be obscured by their common American theme and their shared religio-ethnic designation. The history of the Jews in America is not linear. It unfolds as successive, largely discrete waves of immigration – roughly speaking, Spanish–Portuguese (1654–1830), German (1830–1880), East European (1880–1924), and post-Holocaust (1940 to the present) – and different tales of accommodation and resistance. Each wave of immigrants brought along, besides a common but abstract sense of peoplehood, its own cultural baggage – e.g. its own language (Ladino, German, Yiddish), its own religious and cultural traditions (Sephardi, Reform, Hassidic, and Misnagdic), its own particular collective memories (expulsion, emancipation, pogroms) – and each produced a literature reflecting both its distinct heritage and its peculiar experience of acculturation.

Seixas was a well-to-do descendant of Spanish and Portuguese Jews; Mottel, the fictional representation of the poor, East European masses. And while these groups of Jews assumed a common bond, their differences were so deep that they often looked at each other with suspicion – if not with outright hostility. For example, when Abraham Cahan, future editor of the Yiddish *Daily Forward*, arrived at Ward’s Island (a forerunner of the more famous Ellis Island) from Lithuania in 1882, he observed there, contemptuously, “one wealthy young [Portuguese] Jewish lady who belonged to the cream of monied aristocracy,” whose visits to the immigrants “never undermined her status as an aristocrat” (Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, 354). The following year, that same young woman, a poet named Emma Lazarus, would write a sonnet about the Statue of Liberty in which she referred to Cahan and his immigrant cohorts, sympathetically yet condescendingly, as the “wretched refuse” of Europe’s “teeming shores” (Chametzky et al. *Jewish American Literature*, 106). Each wrote what might be called “Jewish American literature.” But it is problematic to say that they belonged to a common literary tradition. Although they (more or less) shared knowledge of sacred Hebrew writings, the poetry of Emma Lazarus looks back upon the works of the medieval Spanish Jewish poet and philosopher Judah Halevi, the German Romantic Heinrich Heine, and the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson, whereas the writings of Abraham Cahan reflect, for instance, the satires of modern Yiddish literature, the sermons of itinerant East European *maggidim* (preachers), the socialism of Karl Marx, and the realisms of Leo Tolstoy and William Dean Howells.

This makes the task of the literary historian difficult indeed. Ruth Wisse has argued that “modern Jewish literature is the repository of modern Jewish experience” and, as such, “the most complete way of knowing the inner life of the Jews” (Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, 4). Yet the phrase “modern Jewish experience” is hardly self-evident, and knowing “the inner life of the

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Jews” no simple matter, particularly in America. Not only were the experiences of Jews from various places and backgrounds different *before* coming to America, but Jews had widely different experiences *in* America as well. It is one thing to live in a small but closely-knit, well-to-do community of Sephardi Jews in Newport in 1790; another for a German Jewish immigrant in the mid-nineteenth century to become a peddler on the American frontier where few if any Jews lived; another yet to join a poor but established community of East European *landsleit* (compatriots) in the densely populated Lower East Side of New York in the first decade of the twentieth century; and still another to have endured the Holocaust and been transformed from a displaced person into a “survivor” in Queens or Short Hills, New Jersey.

If the American difference gives coherence to Jewish American literary history, it is a very incoherent coherence indeed. In fact, it may make more sense to talk about many Jewish American literatures – which is, in effect, what the contributors to this volume do. In America, Jews from different places, times, and backgrounds were confronted with a range of opportunities and challenges, and their literary responses were manifold. Not all Jews loved “such a country,” not unequivocally at least, and not as they found it. While many thought America so hospitable they deemed it a new promised land (as Susannah Heschel explains), others, like the Orthodox preacher Judah Leib Lazerow, judged such thinking short-sighted and self-deceptive, warning his audience, “If someone should whisper to you that . . . here, in the land of liberty, it is as if we were in our own land, the land of Israel . . . do not think thus!” (Lazerow, “The Staff of Judah,” 497). A great many remained ambivalent, as Priscilla Wald argues in her chapter on the East European immigrants, wavering between the rousing sentiments of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America!” and the popular ghetto adage, “a curse upon Columbus!” Some were happy to reconfigure Judaism in the American grain, as Michael Kramer explains, while others struggled to maintain their Judaism as their ancestors had practiced it, refusing to change their language, their names, or their dress. Some were disappointed to find that, sadly, America was all too often a place where it was allowed to hit those “smaller than yourself,” Jews and others, joining the left-wing circles that Alan Wald documents, or forging alliances with African Americans in the face of American racial politics, as Susan Gubar describes. Others, like some of the postwar intellectuals Ruth Wisse discusses, expressed their commitment to American democracy by veering to the right. Some embraced America passionately, assimilating as quickly and completely as they could. Others, like David Roskies’ Yiddishists, rendered the American difference in a language retained from a European past, reshaped on American soil, and accessible only to Jewish readers; or like Alan Mintz’s Hebraists, in a rehabilitated ancient language

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being readied for a Zionist future; or, like Hana Wirth-Nesher's multilingual writers, in polyglot traces and echoes that could serve as collective memory.

Nor were the worlds of the immigrants the same as those of their children, and certainly not of their grandchildren. What one generation feels keenly, another barely notices. What one appreciates (or dreads) another takes for granted. What is for one a lived past becomes for another a nuisance, a tale too-often told; for another, a matter of indifference; and for still another, legend, nostalgia, something to be mined in an effort to create a usable past.

Or, more precisely, usable *pasts*. Consider the case of Sholem Aleichem. On May 13, 1916, 150,000 Jewish Americans lined the streets of Manhattan to pay their respects to the writer whose voice they identified as their own, or rather, as their authentic *original* voice, the one that was already somewhat foreign to their children's ears. Sholem Aleichem's funeral cortege has often been cited as a defining moment in Jewish American cultural life as masses of Jewish immigrants mourned not only for the man who had enriched their lives in the sweatshops in which they worked and in the tenements in which they lived, but more significantly mourned for the world that he represented, the world that they had left behind in Europe.

In 1943, as Jews in Europe were being herded into concentration camps, Maurice Samuel published *The World of Sholem Aleichem* in New York. During those traumatic times, when the sons and daughters of immigrants feared for their European brethren as well as for their own social acceptance in America, Samuel took on the task of translating into American terms a Jewish culture that was being annihilated, to preserve it for non-Yiddish speaking second-generation Americans. Mourning the inevitable loss entailed in translation (he called one translation a linguistic pogrom), he nevertheless saw himself as a transparent medium for conveying a homogeneous Old World that needed to be cherished. He observed that American Jews required an "old country" and that Sholem Aleichem's characters, such as Tevye the Dairyman, served well as a "forefather" because he was simple and "primitive," because he was both Job *and* Charlie Chaplin, and because he represented the spirit of a language and the spirit of a people. Identifying Sholem Aleichem as closely linked with his characters and his world, Maurice Samuel labeled him an authentic folk voice, a usable past for American Jewry (Samuel, *The World of Sholem Aleichem*, 184).

Reviewing Samuel's book that same year, the writer Isaac Rosenfeld heard a different voice in Sholem Aleichem, one that he argued was far more characteristic of Jewish writing, namely that of alienation. Bringing the New York intellectuals' blend of Freud and Marx to the Yiddish author's fictional world, Rosenfeld described a Sholem Aleichem whose characters suffer from alienation "even from the class struggle, the alienation, when all

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else is restored, of being homeless on the earth" ("The Humor of Sholem Aleichem," 113). Suggesting that Samuel "might have devoted more attention to the individual stature of the man and the techniques of his craft" (111), Rosenfeld reclaimed Sholem Aleichem for Art, refashioned the Yiddish writer in the image of his coterie of second-generation New York Jewish writers and intellectuals who came of age in the 1930s and 1940s. Author of *Passage from Home*, the *Bildungsroman* of these self-consciously modernist writers, Rosenfeld enlisted Sholem Aleichem on the side of alienation: "his was the humor which loves the world from which it seeks to be delivered" ("The Humor of Sholem Aleichem," 112). By the 1960s, the enormously popular American stage and screen version *Fiddler on the Roof* portrayed a warm-hearted liberal Tevye whose devotion to tradition could coexist with tolerance for intermarriage and individualism. And Cynthia Ozick's 1989 excoriation of *Fiddler* echoes Rosenfeld: "That the sophisticated chronicler of a society in transition should be misconstrued as a genial rustic is something worse than a literary embarrassment" (*Metaphor & Memory*, 183). Samuel offered a folk voice in an elegiac spirit with his eye turned toward Europe, Rosenfeld constructed a Sholem Aleichem who could serve as a precursor for a young generation of American Jewish intellectuals for whom alienation was a transhistorical and cosmopolitan badge of honor, the Broadway musical combined nostalgia with American integrationism, and Ozick aimed to restore Sholem Aleichem's particular historical texture and artistic achievement for a generation even further removed from Yiddish culture, "university-educated, perhaps, but tone-deaf to history" (*Metaphor & Memory*, 184). And in yet another twist, Ruth Wisse has read Sholem Aleichem as a proto-Zionist, his work containing "the first genuinely autonomous Jewish territory to appear in modern Jewish literature" (*The Modern Jewish Canon*, 42).

Each generation – each group within each generation – invokes the Sholem Aleichem that it needs. In other words, just as different experiences or constructions of "Jewish" generate different kinds of literature, so they generate different stories *about* Jewish American literature, in which diverse authors play leading roles and the same author may be portrayed in various ways. The same may be said for notions of "American," the other conceptual component of Jewish American literature. The past few decades in particular have been, to borrow Sacvan Bercovitch's coinage, "a time of dissensus" (Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent*, 353) for American literary and cultural study. Mottel the cantor's son's heady exclamation – "Try not to love such a country!" – is no longer (if it ever were) the unambiguous rallying cry of Americanist literary scholars. (For some, it seems, it has even become a moral imperative of sorts.) "What is American literature?" has become a

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more difficult question to answer. Traditional notions of canon have been challenged, thereby breaking down oppositions such as “mainstream” and “marginal” literature or “popular” and “high” culture. New voices have begun to be heard, in particular of women and ethnic writers. The question of American exceptionalism has been reopened. Transnational and multi-lingual approaches to the culture of the United States turn away from an insistence upon the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the American experience to suggest that American culture has always and necessarily been interactive with other cultures, emphasizing the modification of shared features in an American setting. Such rethinking has resulted in more than a reopening of the canon to accommodate a greater diversity of voices than in the past; it has also exposed, as Werner Sollors has argued, that the very distinction between “ethnic” and “American” is flawed – that many traits and values ascribed to an ethnic American’s descent culture are actually not culture-specific at all but take on ethnic resonance only when contrasted with values to which one has consented in becoming an American. In his terms, we should move “beyond ethnicity” and recognize that such constructions are themselves expressions of American culture. And Sacvan Bercovitch has argued compellingly that the dissensus itself, for all its contestations and reformulations, is not so much a sign of the breakdown of the American ideology but a function of it, a way America has of transforming opposition into a mode of revitalizing itself.

Jewish American literary study has gained from these reformulations – and has much to offer. In this intellectual climate, more scholars than ever – indeed, more readers in general – are willing to listen to the accented voices of immigrant writers, both men and women, and ready to consider seriously and sensitively the cultures and languages the Jews brought with them and cultivated in America. We have grown more sensitive to the web of transnational filiations that pervade Jewish American texts and have learned to question parochial formulations of a literature that has itself 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. 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, Hispanic, and indigenous peoples: whereas once Jews were part of the triple melting pot of Protestant–Catholic–Jew, the demise of religion as a central feature of differentiation in America and the foregrounding of race relegate Jews to a dehistoricized and culturally vacant category

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of “whiteness” (Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 30). 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. For instance, 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 fleeing pogroms from the Pale of Settlement to which they were restricted did not consider themselves to be Russians, and to conflate German Jews with non-Jewish Germans is to invoke a historical irony too tragic to accept silently. Besides, Jews have for millennia understood their ancestral homeland to be not in Europe but in the Middle East – a fact of which Europeans were more than willing to remind them. Moreover, Jewish identity is itself constituted of both descent and consent models, of genealogy and of performance, of ethnicity and religion. The fascinating and variegated forms of Jewish identity in modern America may even be undermining conventional oppositions, as that inscribed in the title of sociologist Steven Cohen’s 1988 study, *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?*. Some are even willing to argue that assimilation itself be reconstrued as a form of ethnic art. 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.

We hope this volume will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Jewish American literature and of American literature in general. The questions and counter-questions inherent in any discussion of this field have made editing this volume daunting. Decisions about what to exclude proved far more difficult than what to include. Perhaps our most significant decision was to incorporate discussion of major authors in broad conceptual chapters rather than in the traditional format of devoting whole chapters to individual writers. This organizing principle has meant that the same writer may be discussed in several different contexts, for example Mary Antin as immigrant writer, as woman writer, and as multilingual writer, and it has also enabled our contributors to introduce new or neglected authors and works. As a result, the chapters in this volume provide both a general history of Jewish American writing and an introduction to its current and developing modes of study. And yet, in a longer volume, we would have included areas that we were regrettably not able to address here, such as full chapters on drama and theater, on representations of Israel, on autobiography, on translation, on Rabbinic literature, and on mixed media (such as cartoons). Although we begin before the massive waves of East European immigration and their Yiddish culture, our chapters primarily focus on Ashkenazi culture because

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it constitutes the bulk of Jewish American writing. In recent years, however, Sephardic American voices have begun to be heard, and they deserve critical attention (see Tresa Grauer's chapter), as well as Canadian Jewish literature, which falls outside the parameters of our collection.

We believe that this volume can serve two complementary purposes. First, it addresses those genres, topics, and authors that are widely read and taught and have become (or are rapidly becoming) the "standard" areas of Jewish American literary study; for instance, the East European immigrant experience (Roskies, Priscilla Wald), the "renaissance" of Jewish writing in the 1950s, including the fiction of Bellow, Malamud, Roth, and Singer (Wisse, Gubar); the ethics and aesthetics of representation of the Holocaust (Budick, Gubar); Jewish writing and gender (Gubar, Shreiber, Grauer); poetry and popular culture (Weber, Wolosky, Roskies, Mintz). Second, and just as important, we have mapped out subjects that are of significance to Jewish American culture but are only beginning to receive the literary-critical attention they deserve: the writings of Sephardi and German Jews which predate the mass immigration from Eastern Europe (Kramer); the vast and fascinating body of Yiddish and Hebrew writing produced in America (Roskies, Mintz); theological and literary-critical writings considered as imaginative literature (Heschel, Wolosky); literature that addresses the race question in America (Gubar); multilingualism and transnationalism in Jewish writing and reading (Wirth-Nesher).

It was also clear to us at the outset that we should not aim to be encyclopedic, but rather provide the groundwork for further study of a rich and growing field by casting a wide net – historically, thematically, linguistically, and generically. The field of Jewish American literature is not restricted to one relatively short, well-defined period: it extends over two centuries and is open-ended, continuing to develop in interesting and important ways. In recent years scholars in the field have employed a variety of critical approaches in their readings, such as ethnic studies, feminism, and post-structuralism, all represented in this volume. We have been guided by the principle of diversity, in period, genre, theme, style, and approach. But no net is ever wide enough. Tresa Grauer, in her chapter on contemporary literature that closes this volume, reminds us that twenty-five years ago Irving Howe predicted that Jewish American writing found "its voice and its passion" at exactly the moment that it approached disintegration. "The flourishing of Jewish American writing in the quarter century since Howe's publication," argues Grauer, "attests to the limitations of any single definition of Jewish American literature" (see p. 269 below). To underscore this point and to emphasize the debates around the very concept of Jewish American writing, we have entitled this introduction, "Jewish American literatures in the making."

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