

JEWISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE AND JEWISH-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The awarding of Nobel Prizes in Literature to both Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer has given the final stamp of approval to what may be the most significant and stimulating development in post-World War Two American writing: the emergence of a school of Jewish-American writing. When one considers the impact of writers like J. D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, E. L. Doctorow, and of course Bellow and Singer, one must recognize the size of the achievement. But to call such a disparate group of writers a "school" is perhaps stretching a point. In fact, to call Bellow and Singer "American" writers might seem to some to be stretching a point since the first was born in Canada and the second was born in Poland.

But, for better or worse, both Bellow and Singer may be considered "American" writers not only because they both came to the United States and have lived there for a long time but by virtue of what America has given to them and what they have given to American literature. In a sense, they belong at the opposite ends of the spectrum of their generation: Singer, the last major writer to write of the Jewish experience in the Old World in Yiddish, and Bellow, the first major writer to write of the Jewish experience in the New World in English. What Bellow and Singer share, and what they share with the other writers I have mentioned, is a common Jewish experience, an experience common to most Jews who have lived in America in this century. What I want to do now is to describe some aspects of this common experience and then suggest some ways in which it may be seen in the literature produced by these Jewish-American writers.

But what exactly was this common Jewish experience I have been talking about? Of what did it consist? To understand this, we will have to go back in time nearly a century to the great wave of immigration by east European Jews to the United States. In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth, more than two million Jews left Russia for the United States. Why did they leave? Well, they were not exactly welcome in Czarist Russia. (They still aren't exactly welcome in Soviet Russia for that matter.) Religious persecution, economic reprisals, periodic pogroms, murder, exile: these were normal conditions of daily Jewish life in Czarist Russia where Jews were restricted as to what they could do, where they could live, and what they could own. Thus one Russian Jew, Dr. George Price, wrote in his diary in 1882:

Sympathy for Russia? How ironical it sounds! Am I not despised? Am I not urged to leave? Do I not hear the word *zhid* constantly? Can I even think that someone considers me a human being capable of thinking and feeling like others? Do I not rise daily with a fear lest the hungry mob attack me? ... It is impossible ... that a Jew should regret leaving Russia.

The experience is similar to that of Morris Bober, in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, who recalls to Frank Alpine his early life and his escape from the army: "Morris told Frank

about life in the old country. They were poor and there were pogroms". A Russian sergeant tells him, "A dead Jew was of less consequence than a live one". One can understand, then, the desire to leave Russia. But why emigrate to a distant place like the United States? Part of the reason is simply that the United States was one of the few places that would take them and take them in such numbers. It was not only the New World but the underpopulated New World and it still needed immigrants to support its rapidly burgeoning industrial economy. Moreover, America represented to the immigrant imagination everything that Europe was not. As one woman, Mary Antin, wrote about the mystique of America in 1891:

America was in everybody's mouth. Businessmen talked of it over their accounts; the market women made up their quarrels that they might discuss it from stall to stall; people who had relatives in the famous land went around reading their letters for the enlightenment of less fortunate folk ... children played at emigrating; old folks shook their sage heads over the evening fire, and prophesied no good for those who braved the terrors of the sea and the foreign goal beyond it; all talked of it, but scarcely anyone knew one true fact about this magic land.

Some came for personal reasons, others came on idealistic grounds. One group wrote that America "... is the most civilized region, and offers the most guarantees of individual freedom, freedom of conscience, and security of all property ... and endows every one of her inhabitants with both civil and political rights". Many who came were to find that the reality did not fit this ideal. But, finally, we may say that the east European Jews came for the same reasons that other national and ethnic groups came. As one historian of immigration puts it:

The motives have been very similar from first to last: a mixture of yearnings for riches, for land, for change, for tranquility, for freedom, and for something not definable in words ... a readiness to pull up stakes in order to seek a new life.

So, on the one hand, it is fair to say that the patterns of Jewish immigration resembled those of other groups, But there is this difference: whereas other groups like the Irish, the Italians or the Scandinavians experienced the feeling of displacement upon coming to the United States, the Jews had already experienced this sense of displacement in Europe. They had never belonged but been marginal people wherever they had lived. Thus they were both more experienced in this sense of alienation and doubly displaced. One historian of Jewish experience describes it this way:

The need to adjust to conditions of life in a strange country first became a problem for other groups only in America; but for Jews it was a problem they had had to face for many centuries. Others came to their new country with one culture; the Jews came with two, and frequently more than two, cultures. One culture they carried deep *within* themselves, within their spiritual and psychic being. The other they bore *upon* themselves, like an outer garment.

The Jews, then, were in a special position because of their sense of marginality and this, as we shall see, created some special problems. But for now I want to convey the sense of crisis that this mass migration created in Jewish experience: the sense of upheaval and uprootedness. As one Yiddish writer has observed, "The first immigrant generation ... were Jews without Jewish memories or traditions ... They shook them off in the boat when they came across the seas. They emptied out their memories. If you would speak with disrespect, they were no more than a mob. If you would speak with respect, they were a vigorous people". The eminent critic, Irving Howe, summarizes the crisis for us in his book, *World of Our Fathers*:

The mass migration of the Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States signified not only the beginning of a major change in the physical circumstances of the Jewish people; it also brought an upheaval in their social existence that was at some crucial points similar to the Industrial Revolution of about a century earlier. Masses of people being forced out of, and then choosing to flee, the land; a loss of traditional patterns of preindustrial culture; the sudden crowding of pauperized or proletarianized human beings into ghastly slums and their subjection to inhumane conditions of work; a cataclysm that leaves people broken, stunned, helpless— these elements of the Industrial Revolution were reenacted, within a shorter time span, in the mass migration of Jews during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

The Jews who came to America faced a series of overwhelming problems. The first problem was making a living. The second problem was making a culture. But to a remarkable degree these two needs were perhaps contradictory. For, in contrast to what we are often led to believe of Jews, their culture was ethical and idealistic rather than pragmatic and materialistic. This can be seen in Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* when Morris Bober explains to Frank Alpine what it means to be a Jew. He says:

"Nobody will tell me that I am not Jewish because I put in my mouth once in a while, when my tongue is dry, a piece ham. But they will tell me, and I will believe them, if I forget the law. This means to do what is right, to be honest, to be good. This means to other people. Our life is hard enough. Why should we hurt somebody else? For everybody should be the best, not only for you or me. We ain't animals. This is why we need the Law. This is what a Jew believes."

But if Jewish tradition was idealistic then American practice was materialistic. Between the two the Jewish immigrant was caught much as Morris Bober is caught in *The Assistant*. One immigrant put the conflict very vividly when he explained:

"I was the victim of a severe conflict. If the American spirit would conquer, it would spur my efforts and energies and I could accomplish a lot. If the Russian spirit would conquer, I would become dependent and go around with a dream of forcefully bringing the Messiah ... who would free the world from slavery and exploitation. Then my hands would not be lifted to do business and the ambition to work myself up in the world would be stilled."

This conflict between Jewish ethics and American materialism was central to the Jewish immigrant experience. And the conflict between the Jewish vision and the American dream became a central theme in Jewish-American fiction, from Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* to Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*. As Orving Howe explains it in *World of Our Fathers*:

But the masses of Jews, those both a little Orthodox and a little agnostic, acted out of a deep, common impulse: America was different from all other countries, America— land of sweat and swinishness!— meant that the sons could find a path such as Jews had never before been able to discover. The fathers would work, grub, and scramble as petty agents of primitive accumulation. The sons would acquire education, that new-world magic the Jews were so adept at invoking through formulas they had brought from the old world. And even those Jews who looked upon this idea with repugnance found they had to acquiesce in it they thought of *their* sons.

In other words, the price of success for the Jew in America was often his ethnic and ethical identity. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the first major novel to treat Jewish-American experience, Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, published in 1917. Cahan, for many years editor of the most important Yiddish newspaper in America, *The Jewish Daily Forward*, provides an authoritative account of the immigrant journey from European rags to American riches. But in Cahan's account the journey had its costs. As he writes in the opening paragraph of this novel:

Sometimes, when I think of my past in a superficial, casual way, the metamorphosis I have gone through strikes me as nothing short of a miracle. I was born and reared in the lowest depths of poverty and I arrived in America—in 1885—with four cents in my pocket. I am now worth more than two million dollars and recognized as one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade in the United States. And yet when I take a look at my inner identity it impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. My present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at my command, and the rest of it, seem to be devoid of significance.

What makes *David Levinsky* such a rich novel is Cahan's ability to connect two fundamental themes. The first is the hollowness of the American dream of material success which we find in such works as Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The second is the precarious survival of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. In connecting the two, as Isaac Rosenfeld has pointed out, Cahan cut to the core of both Jewish and American experience: "He was writing an American novel par excellence in the very center of the Jewish genre". In this sense, *The Rise of David Levinsky* stands at the beginning of the Jewish-American literary tradition which we recognize today.

Thus, as Cahan first showed, the Jewish success story in the United States is not without its ironic shadows. The historian Stephen Thernstrom tells us that "popular folklore concerning the mobility achievements of the Jews is indeed well-founded. ... The Jewish rate of upward mobility was double that of other groups". In merely three generations a large part of the Jewish community moved from the *shtetl* to the suburbs. But the price of this success was assimilation and the cost of assimilation was often seen as the loss of old ethical and cultural values. Irving Howe explains the process:

America—the full significance of which no Jewish thinker could yet take into account—imposed its own decision. Once past initial barriers, the Jews were allowed entry into social and economic life on terms more favorable than any they had dreamed of. But America exacted a price. Not that it "demanded" that the immigrant Jews repudiate their past, their religion, or their culture; not that it "insisted" they give up the marks of their spiritual distinctiveness. American society, by its very nature, simply made it all but impossible for the culture of Yiddish to survive. It set for the east European Jews a trap or lure of the most pleasant kind. It allowed the Jews a life far more "normal" than anything their most visionary programs had foreseen, and all that it asked—it did not even ask, it merely rendered easy and persuasive—was that the Jews surrender their collective self. This surrender did not occur dramatically, at a moment of high tension. It took place gradually, almost imperceptibly, and with benefits so large and tangible that it would long remain a question for legitimate debate whether Jews could have tried to resist the process of absorption. That they could have succeeded, hardly anyone supposed.

The Jewish-American writers who I mentioned at the outset are almost all products of the Jewish-American experience I have been outlining here. Almost all were the children of immigrants who made the journey from the European *shtetl* to the American ghetto and so they have themselves participated in the long march from the ghetto to the middle class. Thus it should not be surprising to find in their works a dominant theme of American assimilation and a dominant question of Jewish identity. In Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*, for instance, the hero Neil Klugman must ask himself how far he is willing to go to catch and keep his rich girl friend, Brenda Patimkin. The Patimkins are Jews who have "made it" in America but at a terrific cost to their identity and their character. Even Brenda's nose is not her own since she has had it "bobbed"— or straightened. The same conflict occurs in Saul Bellow's novella, "Seize the Day", where Tommy Wilhelm has changed his name to make it sound less «Jewish» in his pursuit of the American dream. In Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, on the other hand, Morris Bober retains his ethical identity even at the cost of his material success. What is interesting is that in so many of these stories the terms of the American dream of success are rejected. Morris Bober is heroic because he has refused to succumb to the terms of the dream; Neil Klugman is admirable insofar as he is willing to choose another standard than that the Patimkins; and Tommy Wilhelm is pathetic because at the end he recognizes that in his pursuit of the dream he has lost more than he has gained. Just as in *The Rise of David Levinsky* so in more recent Jewish-American fiction, the pursuit of the American dream takes an ironic twist; as Saul Bellow's hero, Moses Herzog, puts it: "the story of my life— how I rose from humble origins to complete disaster".

But the problem of assimilation is only one aspect of contemporary Jewish-American life and literature. "In this period", writes Leslie Fiedler, "Jewish self-consciousness in America has endured certain critical readjustments under pressure from world events: the rise and fall of Hitler; the consequent dissolution of virtually the whole European Jewish Community; the establishment of the State of Israel, and the need to redefine the allegiance of American Jews as Jews and as Americans. Other less spectacular developments have exercised an influence, too: the closing off of mass immigration and the slow disappearance of Yiddish as a spoken language; the elimination of the 'greenhorn' as a typical Jewish figure— all this accompanied by an increasing general prosperity for the majority of American Jews". But the success of the Jews in America together with the correspondent destruction of the Jews in Europe has placed a particular psychological burden on second— and third-generation Jewish-Americans which combines elements of the guilt of the survivors, the self-hatred of the victims, and the aggressive pride of those who have endured. A poem by Kadia Molodowsky expresses one aspect of this situation vividly:

O God of Mercy
 For the time being
 Choose another people.
 We are tired of dreath, tired of corpses,
 We have no more prayers.
 For the time being
 Choose another people.

Another aspect is expressed by Irving Howe when he describes a kind of Jewish schizophrenia. He writes:

During the postwar years the life of American Jews was inherently "schizoid". At home: improvements in social and economic conditions, a growing sense of ease, comfort, security. Abroad: the greatest horror in the history of mankind, the destruction of six million Jews for reasons no mind could fathom, no intuition

penetrate. How were these two elements of Jewish experience to be reconciled? The only honest answer was that they could not be: it was a division which anyone who retained even the faintest sense of Jewish identity would have to live with as best he could.

Given the "schizoid" nature of their experience, it is not surprising that much recent Jewish-American fiction involves some form of psychological splitting. One such theme concerns the confrontation between the Jew and his own Jewish identity. In Philip Roth's story, "Eli, the Fanatic", an assimilated Jew living in an integrated suburb encounters his Jewish identity in the form of some orthodox European refugees from the Holocaust. Similarly, in Cynthia Ozick's story, "Bloodshed", a modern Jew confronts his identity when he visits a new hasidic community. In both stories, the protagonist is forced to accept a part of his Jewish identity which he has previously denied. The same theme appears in several of Bernard Malamud's stories where Jews pay a price for their own self-denial.

Still other works treat the theme of Jewish identity through the relationship between Jew and Gentile. In fact, just as Jean-Paul Sartre observed that «if the Jew did not exist, the Anti-Semite would have to invent him», so it may be that if the Gentile did not exist, the Jewish-American writer would have to invent *him*. In Saul Bellow's novel, *The Victim*, Asa Leventhal learns what it means to be a Jew from his encounter with an anti-Semite named Allbee. In Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant*, Morris Bober teaches the Gentile, Frank Alpine, what it means to be a Jew.

The difference between the two novels is instructive. In Bellow's novel, all men are victims: Leventhal discovers that his identity as a Jew does not insulate him from accepting the responsibility for his actions. As one character tells him, "Good acting is what is exactly human. And if you say I am a tough critic, you mean I have a high opinion of what is human." In Malamud's novel, all men are sufferers: Frank Alpine learns that his identity as a Gentile does not exempt him from suffering. As Morris Bober explains to him, "I suffer for you. ... you suffer for me".

It would be tempting to simplify and say that the difference between the two writers is that for Bellow to be Jewish is to be human while for Malamud to be human is to be Jewish. But that would be to see suffering in Malamud's work as something static and passive. This is what Frank Alpine believes at the beginning of the novel. "That's what they live for, Frank thought, to suffer. And the one that has got the biggest pain in the gut and can hold onto it the longest without running to the toilet is the best Jew". But in Malamud's world, suffering is never an end in itself; it is an activity that leads to an end. In Malamud's first novel, *The Natural*, a character observes, "We have two lives ... the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us to happiness. It teaches us to want the right things". This is the central theme in Malamud's fiction: men may not be able to transcend their fate but they can accept it and shape it. Similarly, one of Saul Bellow's characters "liked to think 'human' meant accountable in spite of many weaknesses— at the last moment, tough enough to hold".

If the theme of suffering seems central to contemporary experience in this most violent and tragic of centuries, we can understand how the Jew may appear to be the representative man in the modern world. But the other theme to emerge from our encounter with the death camps is the theme of individual responsibility: accountability in spite of our many weaknesses. In "Letter to the Front", the poet Muriel Rukeyser brings the two themes together. She writes:

To be a Jew in the twentieth century
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
Wishing to be invisible, you choose
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.

But the fact of the Holocaust does not give Jews any special dispensations, as Jewish writers like Philip Roth have made clear. Yet it may give him a special place in our imagination. As Roth observes:

I have always been far more pleased by my good fortune in being born a Jew than my critics may begin to imagine. It's a complicated, interesting, morally demanding, and very singular experience, and I like that. I find myself in the historic predicament of being Jewish, with its implications. Who could ask for more?

