

Introduction



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New beginnings always occasion reflection on the past. This inexorable rule of human behavior applies especially to the cultural realm where innovation is in constant, and frequently creative, tension with what has gone before. Thus, the dawn of the new millennium is an appropriate moment to view two related literary genres, which have to a large extent shaped twentieth-century literature. Jewish American and Holocaust literature together have confronted, and reflected on, the meaning of being human, the place of tradition in modernity, the content of Jewish identity, the issue of memory, the nature of evil, and the role of God in history. Further, the questions raised by these genres have both particular and universal resonance. Composed against a tumultuous background of great cultural transition and unprecedented state-sponsored systematic murder, this literature addresses the concerns of human existence in extremis.

Despite frequent rumors of its demise, the Jewish American literary tradition shows every sign of healthy continuation at the turn of the new millennium. While Malamud is gone, Bellow's career is closing, and Roth seems to be at the peak of his powers, the grandchildren of the great twentieth-century "Bellow Malamudroth" nevertheless continue the tradition. Despite its ambivalent relation to the multicultural movement of the past thirty years, and recent academic critical preoccupation with various postmodernisms, young Jewish American writers have recently been the subject of an annual American Literature Association Symposium devoted to rereading the established tradition from new scholarly perspectives, as well as exploring contemporary writers. The 1997 November/December issue of *Tikkun* was devoted to the Jewish literary revival, while Andrew Furman reminds us in his *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma* (2001) that "we should rejoice that we had a Bellow, but read and enjoy young Jewish novelists on their own terms" (B9). In his feature article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 2001), "The Exaggerated Demise of the Jewish American Writer," Furman argues that Jews are still writing about their experiences in America. Most important, the vitality of Jewish

American letters has finally been acknowledged by the appearance of the new *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature* (2001).

The first phase of Jewish American presence in American literature begins with the arrival of Jewish immigrants on American shores in the eighteenth century. This literature of arrival continues up to the 1880s, to be followed by what the editors of the *Norton Anthology* call the “The Great Tide” from 1880 to 1924, which ends with the xenophobic slamming shut of the gates at Ellis Island. What follows is the steady advance of Jewish American writers on Broadway, in Hollywood, in radio, in the television industry, and into the American literary mainstream. In the eyes of the literary establishment, the Jewish American tradition comes of age with Roth, Malamud, and the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Saul Bellow in 1976. Around this culminating achievement, a rich scholarly critical discussion emerged regarding the phenomenon of self-meditation about Jewish identity in America. It includes a significant tradition of humor writing, scholarly commentary, literary criticism, contemporary religious commentary, Holocaust literature, post-Holocaust literature, and second-generation Holocaust literature.

The Holocaust is a watershed event that divides culture into a before and an after. Moreover, the Shoah stands as the defining mark of the twentieth century. Elie Wiesel observes that every age has produced a distinctive literary form. “If,” he writes, “the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.”¹ Holocaust literature, which for Wiesel is itself an oxymoron, is paradigmatic. Written in many languages, this literature underscores the fact that no field of human endeavor remains untouched by the extermination of the Jewish people. The flames of the Shoah revealed in a stark and irrefutable manner the fact that culture is no shield against murder. At first, in the early 1960s, a few survivors wrote about their experience. With the passage of time and the increase in historical documentation, novelists increasingly turned their attention to the manifold implications of the Holocaust. Literary critics then began discussing Holocaust literature and its radical challenges to assumptions about God, the meaning of language itself, and its impact on traditional teachings. As the essays in this volume reveal, the discussion of the meaning and message of testimonial is continuing and deepening.

Linking the Genres

Jewish American and Holocaust literature share several attributes that link them in surprising ways. For example, they share the misperception of being exhausted forms. The argument runs that not much of importance has

appeared since Bellow, Malamud, and Roth. Or, conversely, what has appeared is simply a reworking of the past. In terms of Holocaust literature, one frequently hears that too much attention has been paid the Shoah—that it is time to move on. Accusations, some well intended, others mean-spirited and self-serving, warn against remembering the Holocaust as the watershed event of Jewish and human history.

The second shared characteristic is that both genres are experiencing a renewal. Among the significant names that come to mind here are writers such as Max Apple, Gina Berriault, Rosellen Brown, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Helen Epstein, Ruth Feldman, Rebecca Goldstein, Allegra Goodman, Hugh Nissenson, Jacqueline Osherow, Marge Piercy, Tova Reich, Adrienne Rich, Jonathan Rosen, Thane Rosenbaum, Art Spiegelman, Steve Stern, and a host of others. These writers extend and enrich the genres in important ways.

Writing Our Way Home: Contemporary Stories by American Jewish Writers, the 1992 anthology edited by Ted Solotaroff and Nessa Rapoport, reveals the breadth and depth of both Jewish American and Holocaust literature. For example, the editors observe that “in rescuing the Holocaust from the banality of repetition, these stories from writers of diverse background provide another indication of the fresh winds of imagination that blow from various sectors of the Jewish scene” (xxiii).

Concerning the Holocaust, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes in *Zakhor* (1996) that more has been written on the Shoah than on any other historical event in Judaism. However, the image of the Holocaust, he writes, “is being shaped, not at the historian’s anvil, but in the novelist’s crucible” (98).² Memoirs, novels, poetry, and short stories dealing with the event and its aftermath continue to appear with great frequency. These literary works treat the experiences of survivors ranging from the theologically shattering writings of Elie Wiesel to the psychologically overwhelming stories of Ida Fink. Additionally, the memoirs of hidden children have begun to emerge with increasing frequency. These works raise crucial ethical, philosophical, societal, and theological issues. Moreover, novels by and about the second generation, that is, children of Holocaust survivors, form their own distinctive subgenre and are the subject of several scholarly studies including Alan L. Berger’s *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust* (1997), the first systematic study of American second-generation Holocaust novels and films. Berger observes that the writings of the present children of Job continue “to shape both contemporary memory of the Holocaust and late twentieth-century Jewish ritual” (190). Additional works dealing with second-generation witnesses include Alan L. and Naomi Berger (editors), *Second-Generation Voices: Reflections by Children of Holocaust Survivors and Perpetrators* (2001); Efraim Sicher (editor), *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory After Auschwitz* (1998), and Dina Wardi, *Memorial Candles:*

Children of the Holocaust, translated by Naomi Goldblum (1992). Their Holocaust legacy plays a vital role in the psychosocial lives and the imagistic realm of the second generation. Moreover, these works point the way to a reworking of old Judaic myths and to new rituals of post-Auschwitz Jewish identity.

The third resemblance between these genres is that, frequently, the works of a single author represent both types of writings. For example, one thinks of the writings of Nathan Englander, Allegra Goodman, Marge Piercy, Lynne Sharon Schwartz, Joseph Skibell, and Areyh Lev Stollman, among others. The extraordinary events of twentieth-century Jewish history continue to compel the literary imagination as literary critics and writers seek to confront the possible meanings of the bloodiest century in human history. Writers of second-generation Holocaust literature reveal both a means of coping with the enormity of the Shoah and a refusal to permit its becoming merely literature. Furthermore, this work displays the deep wellsprings of the Jewish imaginative capacity. These are challenges that will only deepen and mature in the new century.

Mainstream scholarly articles, journals, national newspapers, weeklies, and a variety of Jewish publications have published literally thousands of book reviews and articles devoted to the subjects of Jewishness in America and what constituted Jewish American literature in the twentieth century. This literature's principal lines of inquiry have always been celebration, self-recognition, and cultural self-awareness. However, new cultural assessments of the conditions of Jewish life for second-generation Holocaust witnesses and American Jews in the midst of plenty seem to have supplanted those dealing with Zionist politics, economic deprivation, and social alienation. In the postalienation era we find renewed emphasis on the life of a demographically dwindling generation of American Jews. This generation is largely unschooled in Jewish traditions, as a consequence of the returnee or *ba'al t'shuvah* phenomenon, renewed concern over the meaning and aftermath of the Holocaust for second- and now third-generation witnesses, and the resurgence of traditional orthodox Judaism. Critical assessments, biographical investigation, bibliographical mapping, theological commentary, and historiography continue apace. The liberal humanist critical perspective celebrating primarily the values of Jewish humanism is now joined by feminism, postcolonialism, postmodernism multiculturalism, men's studies, gay studies, and a newly reconstituted cultural studies. Hence, the current critical discussion on Jewish American and Holocaust literature negotiates the ethical issues emerging from the postmodern moment and the multicultural debate with their emphasis on identity.

This volume of essays is intended to further this critical metanarrative by showing how traditionally canonized Jewish American writers are being reread and reassessed through the lenses of contemporary critical theory, and

by extending critical assessment to the works of current Jewish American writers who comprise an ongoing vibrant contemporary tradition in the new millennium, and who continue to grapple with the legacy of the unmasterable trauma of the Holocaust.

Part One: Holocaust Literature

The essays dealing with the Holocaust are far-reaching and include a discussion of the writings of those who perished as well as a post-9/11 meditation on the relationship between aesthetics and grief by a son of Holocaust survivors. International in scope, three themes emerge from these studies: a focus on hiding, narrative strategies for remembering, and the emergence of the genre of Holocaust literature itself. Alan L. Berger's study of the literature of hidden children notes the complex psychosocial and theological legacy of their hiding experience, which constitutes an assault on their core identity. Were they Jews? Were they Christians? Whom could they trust? Why were they separated first from their Jewish birth parents and then from their Christian foster families? Berger cites the poignant comment of Robert Krell, himself a hidden child, who observes, "Liberation was not altogether liberating." During the war, hidden children had to embrace silence to survive. After the war, they had to learn to overcome this silence in order to bear witness and to begin working through their experiences. Among the lessons to be learned from the experience of hidden children, Berger writes, "perhaps the most important legacy will occur when people who hear their testimony seek to build a moral society which cherishes, rather than murders, children."

Ellen Fine's lucid analysis of Ida Fink's writing discusses the intimate connection between the survivor's focus on the "hidden witnesses" in *A Scrap of Time* and the subtext of relationships, especially those between parents and children. Fink's stories tell of the Germans' continuing attempt to sever intimate bonds. The Polish survivor seeks to bring the reader, who is an outsider, inside the event. "Fink's stories themselves," writes Fine, provide a "connection between the inner and outer, allowing the reader (the outsider) to gain an inside glimpse into the impact of the hiding experience upon ordinary men, women and children." Fink's tales offer "chinks" or points of contrast between inner and outer, reader and event, life and death, the living and the dead, author and reader. In spite of the limits of representation, Fink's work insightfully "creates narratives out of the lives [of the victims] and the dark universe they inhabited, the terror they courageously faced on a daily basis." Inevitably and tragically, the survivors feel guilty for having lived. Fink's narratives, Fine attests, "assure us that the traces [of their lives] will not vanish."

The late Harry James Cargas writes perceptively about a different dimension of hiding. Responding to a newspaper attack which claimed that

Jerzy Kosinski, the enigmatic Polish writer and Holocaust survivor, was not really the author of his own works, Cargas addresses the issues raised by the ensuing scandal. His conclusion? Kosinski was indeed the author of his own works. One of the major themes in Kosinski's books is the "attempt to hide identity." This is a type of hiding that evokes important questions for Holocaust literature. What, for example, is the nature of memory? What kind of identity do survivors possess? What constitutes truth in literature?

Hugh Nissenson's articulate piece discusses the works of six major European writers who experienced the Holocaust. Linking aesthetics to content, Nissenson writes that these six—Tadeusz Borowski, Anne Frank, Ety Hillesum, Jacob Presser, Primo Levi, and Emmanuel Ringelblum—are the best stylists on the Shoah. Further, these writers shared a common theme, a "vision of the Holocaust as a new historical reality." Nissenson pursues his thesis in contending that these writings, for all their emphasis on bearing witness, are also important because their authors had a love of both language and of the specific form being worked—frequently the diary or literary journal. Nissenson concludes his essay by observing that the enduring prose of these writers marks a major contribution to twentieth-century European literature, the genre of "Holocaust literature—with its unprecedented subject matter, modern Europe's volitional descent, back through its own Dark Ages and the chaos preceding its creation—into the pit."

Gerhard Bach's concern is with narrative strategies against forgetting employed by both older and younger writers. He discusses how American writers Cynthia Ozick and Saul Bellow, and European authors Martin Amis and Irene Dische, reveal a different way of communicating the Holocaust. Ozick's *The Shawl*, attests Bach, exemplifies Irving Howe's demand that "Holocaust fiction communicate to the reader both the external Auschwitz (factual events and experiences) and the internal Auschwitz (individual suffering, coping with memories)." Bellow's *The Bellarosa Connection* shifts from story to storyteller. Bach notes that this "implies a shift from objectifying testimony to subjectified witness." Amis and Dische, for their part, reflect the postmodernist impetus by deconstructing the historicity of the Holocaust. Their narratives in, respectively, *Time's Arrow* and *Pious Secrets*, Bach argues, "make an appeal to the reader to serve as implicit—and to a certain extent even complicit—*collaborateurs* in the mental reconstruction of Holocaust realities." Consequently, for second-generation writers the demand is not for empathy. Rather, the writer—and reader—are called upon to activate their own strategies against forgetting and to construct meaning out of memory. Bach asserts that contemporary strategies against forgetting are "stringently forceful antidotes to an otherwise rampant culture of obliviousness."

Marianne M. Friedrich, Gila Safran Naveh, and Susan E. Nowak deal with specific case studies of Holocaust memory, images of the Shoah, and

the role of fiction in representing the Holocaust. Friedrich discusses Ozick's *The Shawl*. Unlike Bach, however, she views the novella as exemplifying both an ancient and a modern form of literature. Thus, Ozick's work simultaneously establishes a "midrashic intertextuality in particular . . . based on an ancient oral tradition" and addresses "a very avant-garde international trend in fiction pointing toward an increased emphasis on 'secondary orality' in an Ongian sense." Further, Friedrich sees a connection between *The Shawl* and Paul Celan's *Todesfugue* in that both works treat a "deeply troubled mother-child relationship, overshadowed by the problem of Jewish identity." Friedrich views both works as embodying Ozick's vision of haggadic fiction as "liturgical literature." Consequently, and in the face of the destruction of the European Jewish community, this fiction recalls—even as it relates the horrific loss of—European Judaism.

Gila Safran Naveh focuses on the aesthetics of representation. How, she inquires, can the Holocaust be made real to us despite its "lack of presence"? Naveh asserts that rather than attempting to expunge the Shoah from ordinary life, writers and filmmakers such as Aharon Appelfeld, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Claude Lanzmann bring the Holocaust into everyday life, creating what Ozick terms "a mind engraved with the Holocaust." For Lanzmann, the situation is one of antimemory; "the transmission is the knowledge." In the case of the writers, Appelfeld's use of the term a "grain of wheat" and Singer's "speck of dust" are, argues Naveh, unique signifiers that "cause the signified rather than being caused by it." "Grain" and "speck" are terms that resonate with the Jewish historical experience. For example, they conjure God, Jewish literature, biblical statements, and Jewish prayer. Annihilation is read as "turning into dust." God's promise to Abraham is to make the Jewish people more numerous than grains of sand on the shore.

Susan E. Nowak deals with the theological implications of the Holocaust on the writers Norma Rosen and Rebecca Goldstein. For both of these authors, explains Nowak, Holocaust fiction is a "self-reflexive, dynamic, and transformative genre." Rosen and Goldstein are therefore concerned not with simply mirroring the remains of a vanished world, but rather in engaging the insistent, haunting presence of the Shoah in a manner that seeks a *tikkun*—repair or mending of the world—even if in an imperfect and fragmented manner. Consequently, each of these writers is convinced that to glimpse a repaired world is simultaneously to "bear responsibility for creating it." Nowak thus views the task of the post-Holocaust writer as being morally responsible for creating a better world while instructing her readers on how we can live in a post-Holocaust universe.

Part One concludes with Thane Rosenbaum's profound meditation "Art and Atrocity in a Post-9/11 World." A second-generation Holocaust witness, Rosenbaum explores the complex relationship between art and aesthetics.

“Murder,” he reminds his readers, “is not a work of art, but rather a moral crime.” How is one to respond to this crime? On the one hand, it assumes the proportion of a gigantic struggle between the imagination of writers and the imagination of terrorists. Yet, on the other hand, silence—at least initially—may be the most appropriate response to the moral outrage of terrorist mass murder. Rosenbaum emphasizes the fact that September 11, 2001, was not the Holocaust. However, the attack revisits the question of the proper role of memory in the aftermath of atrocity. Both for the Holocaust victims and for the victims of 9/11, “sitting with the sadness and listening to the silence”—anathema in a culture seeking instant closure—are necessary pre-conditions to any attempt at an aesthetic of atrocity. Let us listen, Rosenbaum pleads, to the ghosts.

Part Two: Jewish American Literature

Essays treating Jewish American literature in this volume range from a focus on particular authors such as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Jonathan Rosen to an exploration of what constitutes a Jewish writer. The concluding three essays in this section specifically concern themselves with Jewish feminism and its contemporary challenges.

Gloria Cronin, using the “whiteness studies” theoretical model from postmodern postcolonial theory, urges renewed ethical consideration of how we read the work of canonized Jewish American authors. Examining the racial architecture of Saul Bellow’s fiction, she points out that in Bellow’s novels degeneracy, cultural collapse, barbarism, and the deterioration of Western culture are very often troped black and African, and that such tropes of African barbarity and moral corruption escalate with increasing animus throughout the Bellow canon until contemporary animality, urban desolation, and the inner city itself become a true heart of darkness or Africanized ancient forest. She also points out how Africanity becomes a device through which Bellow meditates on a forbidden and feared white shadow self, filled with physical terror and internal loneliness. Hence, it would appear that Bellow is recirculating Conradian tropes of blackness from the old colonial archive in a self-serving double move in which he conceives of himself as “civilized” and therefore “not nigger,” while simultaneously reinforcing and perpetuating the “niggerhood” of those behind its veil.

Sarah Blacher Cohen revisits Bellow, now in the twilight of his career, and lauds his lavish talent as a comic writer who expresses a preference for the use of comedy rather than complaint as an antidote to despair. Throughout his career, she argues, he uses comedy to interrupt, resist, reinterpret, and transcend diversity. While in the earlier novels he uses comedy to stave off mistrust and melancholy, in the later novels it becomes a tonic, “a com-

passionate shield," "a flashing saber," "a balance and a barricade," "a counter to depression," "a satiric glass," and a "defiant even militant irony." In an analysis of several works, she demonstrates how he spans the full range of highbrow and lowbrow vaudevillian Jewish humor "to dull the progressive illness of mortality." Given how little has been published on humor in Jewish American literature in the last twenty years, this essay points to the need for further such humor studies.

Bonnie Lyons uses Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* as an illustration of how contemporary Jewish American writers increasingly draw upon European texts, American mythos, and Jewish preoccupations with time, memory, loss, and history as they develop their fiction. Through her explication of *American Pastoral*, she illustrates the sheer postmodern variety and complexity of Jewish life at the turn of the millennium in a rapidly evolving American culture.

Evelyn Avery addresses the issue of what distinguishes a Jewish writer by tracing the respect and interest Cynthia Ozick and Bernard Malamud shared for one another during Malamud's lifetime, as evidenced through their personal correspondence and interviews. Despite Malamud's secular orientation and Ozick's orthodox life, she argues, both writers shared the values of *Yiddishkeit*, compassion for the underdog and outrage against injustice. She compares several key works and characters by both authors, and concludes with a moving account of Cynthia Ozick's recognition of Malamud's essentially Jewish soul by her reciting of the *Shema*, the holiest prayer in the Jewish world, at his secular funeral.

Suzanne Lundquist provides a postmodern and ethnographic reading of Jonathan Rosen's *Eve's Apple*, which she reads as a disquisition on the relationship between the forbidden fruit of the book of Genesis and the contemporary human body, its mystery of hunger and denial, connection and acceptance. She describes Rosen's ability to connect the contemporary condition of anorexia to current spiritual hunger and a whole complex of Judeo-Christian cultural constructions of the human body, hunger, addiction, femininity, masculinity, human intimacy, family dysfunction, bodily malconception, and eternal hunger, and to our concept of God.

S. Lillian Kremer provides a comprehensive overview of the ideological shift in Jewish women's writing of the last thirty years. In opposition to the tendency of Jewish male writers to portray Jewish women as noisy and pushy, manipulative mothers or lovers, spoiled daughters, or castrators of husbands and sons, she demonstrates contemporary Jewish American women writers writing against this grain by portraying Jewish women with a concern for ethical, social, and political justice. Female protagonists are often more complex and show concern for the pull between Jewish languages, history, religious philosophy, and tradition. Intelligent, assertive women, strongly

influenced by Judaism and feminism, are fashioning new paradigms, seeking entrée into religious life, reevaluating traditional Judaism, grappling with secular feminism, and generally displacing male experience as normative. This newest generation of Jewish American women writers are at ease with Judaism and Western high culture, portray the Holocaust from a female perspective, often use a midrashic narrative mode, and engage in text centeredness, redemptive writing, and *tikkun* (healing) themes.

Miriyam Glazer provides a valuable updated map of twentieth-century Jewish women writers by exploring (1) earlier fiction featuring pursuit of the American quest-romance of the prefeminist era; (2) more recent fiction describing the cracks in the overall structure, where Jewish women refuse to look for gentiles over their shoulders and become assertively Jewish; and (3) a mostly secular fiction in which Jewish women fail to find their places. Provocatively, she invokes postmodern hybridity theory, in asking whether Jews are white or not, and at what point Jews do or do not become what Homi Bhabha calls a “reformed, recognizable Other” who embodies an “authorized version of Otherness.” Are Jews half-breeds who understand everyone because they belong completely to no larger society, she asks? Such questions take the twentieth-century debate on issues of Jewish identity and the identity of the Jewish writer into the twenty-first century.

Janet Burstein focuses intensively on women’s filial narratives of parents, children, and women, which sidestep the typically male Harold Bloom-style “anxiety of influence” filial narrative of priority, competitiveness, and status. She traces the Oedipal family romance with all its aggressive scenarios through fiction and criticism and shows how filial stories written since the late 1960s by Jewish American women transform these parental stories through staging patterns of engagement rather than rupture, continuing dialogue rather than guilt and nostalgia. She also examines fiction that reveals the mixed effects upon daughters of the frustrations of their mothers’ lives, and what they carry forth of the precursor’s story even as their own narratives reverse it. She credits this new generation of Jewish women writers with producing a “matrix of generous influence” which Harold Bloom called “illusory,” instead of the usual masculine agonistic androcentric model.

Notes

1. Wiesel, Elie, “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration,” in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 9.

2. One now needs to expand Yerushalmi’s observation to include cinematic representations of the Holocaust. For insightful studies of Holocaust films and their societal impact, see Judith E. Doneson, *The Holocaust in American Film*, Second Edition, Syracuse University Press (2002), and Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust* Third Edition. Cambridge University Press (2002).