Acts of Assimilation: 
The Invention of Jewish American 
Literary History

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We all owe Irving Howe a debt of gratitude. Not only for his groundbreaking Treasury of Yiddish Stories, which almost single-handedly rescued the literature of Eastern Europe’s Jews for the postwar American audience, or the nearly epic World of Our Fathers, the sine qua non of Jewish American immigrant studies, or for his countless other books and essays—not only for these, each of which surely demands of us a grateful dayenu, and not even primarily for these.¹ Those of us who study and delight in contemporary Jewish American literature have to thank Irving Howe most of all for the meager two pages with which he closes the introduction to his 1977 mass market paperback anthology Jewish-American Stories, those few oft-referenced paragraphs in which he boldly predicts the impending demise of his subject:

There remains the question, worth asking if impossible to answer with certainty: What is the likely future of American Jewish writing? Has it already passed its peak of achievement and influence? Can we expect a new generation of writers to appear who will contribute to American literature a distinctive sensibility and style derived from the Jewish experience in this country?

My own view is that American Jewish fiction has probably moved

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past its high point. Insofar as this body of writing draws heavily from the immigrant experience, it must suffer a depletion of resources, a thinning out of materials and memories. Other than in books and sentiment, there just isn’t enough left of that experience. Even some of the writers, men and women of middle age or beyond, who have themselves lived through the immigrant experience now seem to be finding that their recollections have run dry. Or, that in their stories and novels, they have done about as much with those recollections as they can. The sense of an overpowering subject, the sense that this subject imposes itself upon their imaginations—this grows weaker, necessarily, with the passing of years. There remains, to be sure, the problem of “Jewishness,” and the rewards and difficulties of definition it may bring us. But this problem, though experienced as an urgent one by at least some people, does not yield a thick enough sediment of felt life to enable a new outburst of writing about American Jews. It is too much a matter of will, or nerves, and not enough of shared experience. Besides, not everything which concerns or interests us can be transmuted into imaginative literature.

With these few improvident paragraphs, the great man of letters unwittingly brought forth the field of contemporary Jewish American literary study, becoming at once its bogeyman and its raison d’être, his acknowledged status and his hubris conjoined in underscoring its integrity and legitimacy and, by extension, our integrity and legitimacy. With his arrogant après nous le déluge, he grants us all the self-gratulatory pleasure of saying, “Reports of our cultural death have been greatly exaggerated.” With those few imprudent remarks, the brazen critical narcissism of Howe’s generation gives way to the smug critical narcissism of our own. How could Howe not have seen, we ask in mock-disbelief, that their powerful if self-satisfied art of alienation would be replaced by our equally powerful if self-satisfied art of rediscovery? How could he not foresee how creative we would be, how Jewish we would be, that even in America, even unto the third and fourth generation, netsah yisrael lo yeshaker, that, mutatis mutandis, Jewish writing would abide? How could he not foresee what we now behold?

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4. “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a human being, that he should change his mind” (1 Sam 15.29).
To be sure, if Howe has been proven wrong, he himself sagely allowed as much, being circumspect enough in those two pages to cast his opinion as opinion, to note the estimation of those younger writers who disagreed with him, counseling us all “to be open and tentative (even if also skeptical).” So while it is certainly the right and perhaps the duty of a new generation to rewrite the story of Jewish American literature in its own image, as a tale of rising glory rather than a story of decline and fall, I think it is important as well that we take his advice and give Howe’s assessment a more sustained and serious look. I want to suggest that behind his flawed logic (if that is indeed what it is) there is something more than simple generational arrogance, that we need to treat it as more than a convenient truism—or, more accurately, a convenient false-ism.

We need to remember that Howe’s ill-fated prediction is only a fraction of his introduction, an epigraph to an understanding of Jewish American literary history that, in fact, he had been developing for at least a quarter-century before the anthology appeared. Preceding and underpinning Howe’s frank skepticism about the future of Jewish American literature, there is a highly specific and nuanced vision of the history of that literature. It is a vision whose general assumptions he shared with his cohort—with Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, Isaac Rosenfeld, and others—and it constitutes the first serious and sustained critical attempt to define the field of Jewish American literature and sketch its contours. I want to suggest that before we condemn Howe for his assessment of where Jewish American literature was headed we ought to look carefully at whence he thought it came.

When I look at Howe’s remarks in this way, what I find more striking, and ultimately more significant, than his failure to predict the future of Jewish American literature—to imagine the panoply of talented and overtly Jewish writers from (for instance) Max Apple, Melvin Jules Bukiet, Rebecca Goldstein, Allen Hoffman, Mark Jay Mirsky, and Steve Stern to Elisa Albert, Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer, Ehud Havazelet, Dara Horn, Rachel Kadish, Sana Kraskov, Nicole Krauss, Michael Lavigne, Joan Leegant, Austin Ratner, Jonathan Rosen, Gary Shteyngart, Joseph Skibell, Dalia Sofer, Aryeh Lev Stollman and so many others—is his restricted view of the Jewish American literary past. Many have noted that Howe’s version of the story of Jewish American literature ends with his generation, but none have

remarked that it also more or less begins with his generation. In short, I am suggesting that, if we want to make sense of Howe’s infamous formulation, the focus should not be on what Howe thought would come next but on what he thought came before. It can hardly be disputed that the immediate postwar years—and the emergence on the American literary scene of Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth—were unprecedented in the history of Jewish American literature, but even unprecedented events are preceded by something. (Only one Jewish story begins ex nihilo.) So my opening question is this: How did Howe and the members of his cohort imagine their own provenance?

Before I address this question directly, however, let me briefly try to put it into relief. Previous to this period, Jewish literary historiography in the Anglo-American world was a Wissenschaft-style affair, a promiscuous, inclusionary, transnational enterprise that culminated at the turn of the twentieth century in the Jewish Encyclopedia and, later, in Meyer Waxman’s History of Jewish Literature (1930), as well as in such omnium-gatherum anthologies as Joseph Leftwich’s Yisroel: The First Jewish Omnibus (1933) and Leo Schwartz’s The Jewish Caravan: Great Stories of Twenty-Five Centuries (1935). Its purpose, if I can risk a generalization here, was to document and celebrate in broadest terms the creativity of the Jewish people as a whole over the entire course of their history, to affirm by sheer numbers and variety, to Jews and non-Jews alike, the place of the Jews in the whole expanse of universal art and culture. Plenitude was the central theme of their scholarly work.

But something different, narrower, and distinctive emerges at midcentury in America. The postwar period, as we all know, was a turning point


for American Jews. It was a critical time as well for Jewish American historiography, literature, and also (I would argue) for Jewish American literary historiography. With the destruction of European Jewry and with the State of Israel still in its swaddling clothes, a budding appreciation of, and confidence in, their privileged place in democratic America emerged among American Jews. They recognized that they were now, willy-nilly, the center of world Jewry. Historians responded. “Writing and teaching of American Jewish history was but sporadic before the Second World War,” wrote Salo Baron, but the postwar period was a time of “growing awareness [by American Jews in general] of their historical heritage” and it found its ultimate expression in a groundswell of professional activity. By their historical heritage, Baron meant not simply their heritage as Jews but specifically as American Jews. The 1954 tercentenary of the arrival of two dozen Dutch Jews in New Amsterdam took on a particularly important resonance; the relatively insignificant event was reinfused with paradigmatic significance, and a tradition was invented that linked the children of East European immigrants to the early Dutch refugees. To celebrate the tercentenary was to proclaim, first of all, that Jewish American history spanned three centuries—its trajectory coincident with that of American history itself—even if one’s own family had been in America barely three decades. Narratives of that history began to appear with increasing frequency. To name a few of the broader studies: Lee M. Friedman’s Pilgrims in a New Land (1948); Anita L. Lebess’s Pilgrim People (1950); Jacob R. Marcus’s Early American Jewry (1951–52); Oscar Handlin’s Adventure in Freedom (1954); and Nathan Glazer’s American Judaism (1957). Add to this the historiographical collections: Morris Schappes’s Documentary History of the Jews of the United States, 1654–1875, which appeared in 1950, followed in 1963 by Joseph Blau and Salo Baron’s The Jews of the United States, 1790–1840. It is no insignificant irony that most of these historians were themselves immigrants or children of immigrants from Eastern Europe.


Whatever the ideological and historiographical differences among these historians, the stories they told collectively gave coherence and continuity to Jewish American history, made a single, progressive narrative of its discrete cultural components, its various and diverse waves of immigration—Sephardic, German, and then East European—combining like tributaries into a progressively widening and intensifying Jewish American stream. Till then, the history of Jewish life in America seemed marginal to the broader story of Jewish history. It was certainly less researched. But the “tragic decade that ha[d] just closed” compelled these midcentury historians to transform it into a “long and eventful history.”

Second, the narrative assumed and confirmed Jewish communal integrity: there was a Jewish American community, a longstanding Jewish American community, ripe for its new role, ready for its story to be told—despite differences in geographic location, economic status, political beliefs, and denominational affiliations. Third, the history and the community were shaped or characterized by American beliefs and experience: as some of the titles I have mentioned suggest, Jews were depicted as pilgrims in search of freedom who, like those other pilgrims of Plymouth Plantation, found that freedom in America and were conscious of and thankful for “the prosperity, recognition, and status [they had] attained.” The story of America’s Jews echoed the story of America itself, and each wave of immigration rehearsed the same script of exile and asylum. Taken together, the cultural “products of three centuries of [Jewish] experience in America” were markedly American: “diversity, voluntarism, equality, freedom, and democracy.” Jewish American history was by and large a narrative of successful acculturation, in Milton Gordon’s precise sense of the term (his *Assimilation in American Life* appeared in 1964)—a narrative of cultural or behavioral assimilation that nevertheless strategically stopped short of structural or complete assimilation: comfortable in both roles, Jews became like other Americans but

10. On the state of American Jewish historiography at midcentury, see Salo W. Baron, “American Jewish History: Problems and Methods,” *Steeled by Adversity*, 26–73. See also the Davis and Meyer volume *The Writing of American Jewish History*, which contains the proceedings of a conference held in September 1954 by the American Jewish Historical Society on the occasion of the tercentenary of Jewish settlement in North America. According to the organizers and participants themselves, the conference itself was a significant moment in the history of Jewish American historiography.


12. Ibid., vii.

13. Ibid., 260.
they did not cease being Jews who associated socially with other Jews, who contributed to American institutions but also set up their own. Sometimes, drawing upon ideas invented in the nineteenth century and what Jonathan Sarna has called the cult of synthesis, they suggested or implied that Jewish and American were more or less synonymous terms, that assimilation was nothing more than the recognition of already shared values. In short, it was a narrative of national pride coupled with ethnic pride, of gratitude laced with gratification, of finding a home and always-already being at home. And just as American Jews built their own separate-if-parallel communal institutions, so too the historians wrote these histories as parallel but separate histories. “The history of Jews and Judaism in America has a direct bearing on the history of America itself,” they believed. Indeed, the achievements of the Jews, they insisted, were “part and parcel of American History.” But they were being recorded in separate, ethnic histories.

The anxious exhilaration of postwar writers and intellectuals such as Howe at their increased success and influence is plainly part of this larger phenomenon. But while they shared in the general sense among American Jews that their time had come, their approach differed significantly from that of the tercentenary historians, even though they shared their East European immigrant origins. “With Europe devastated,” wrote Elliot Cohen in the first issue of Commentary, “there falls upon us here in the United States a far greater share of the responsibility for carrying forward, in a creative way, our common Jewish cultural and spiritual heritage.” The ambivalence implicit in Cohen’s “creative,” the tension between the heartfelt demands of tradition and peoplehood on one hand and the often pugnacious resistance to those demands on the other, characterizes their approach to literature in general and to their collective literary-historical project in particular.

While Handlin and others were putting the contemporary American Jewish community into historical perspective, Howe and his cohort were busy taking stock of the historical development of the literature their contemporaries were then producing, the first monograph on the subject,

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Leslie Fiedler’s *The Jew in the American Novel*, appearing in 1959. But the narratives they produced or implied differed significantly from the tercentenary ethnic metanarrative of *Adventure in Freedom* or *Pilgrim People*. To be sure, in the decade leading up to Howe’s 1977 collection, several literary scholars tried in one way or another to embrace at least the scope of this narrative: Sol Liptzin, Allen Guttmann, Theodore L. Gross, Louis Harap. (And, significantly, it is this larger narrative that has been adopted in the recent *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* and in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*.) But, as Howe later reflected, he and his cohort “refused to acknowledge [them]selves as part of an American Jewish community,” and by and large they looked askance at this ethnic history, if they looked at it at all. They found in it, and in the literature they associated with it, conventionality, not creativity. “As the Jewish community now exists, it can give no sustenance to the American artist or intellectual who is born a Jew,” Lionel Trilling wrote in 1944. “And as far as I am aware, it has not done so in the past.” They had no interest in feeling at home—or, at least, not wholly at home, or not in that way—and thus had no interest in the narrative the Jewish American historians were shaping. Theirs was not what Julian Levinson calls “the long view of Jewish American literary culture,” at least not in the inclusive sense of the tercentenary historians. They had no interest in claiming as their own, say, Isaac Harby or Mordecai Noah or Penina Moise or Rebecca Hyneman or Isaac Mayer Wise or Adah Isaacs Menken or H. M. Moos or Nathan Mayer or even Emma Lazarus. “I do not

18. Fiedler’s monograph was originally published separately (New York, 1959). I will refer in this essay to the version collected in *To the Gentiles* (New York, 1972), the second volume of Fiedler’s collected essays.


22. Levinson, *Exiles on Main Street*, 146.

see what there is to gain by a study of the facile but uninspired verse of a Penina Moise [or] the plays of a Harby or a Noah,” argued the poet Charles Reznikoff at the American Jewish Historical Society conference marking the Jewish American tercentenary, “simply because they are called ‘Jewish.’”24 “If [historians] want to work on Emma Lazarus or Mordecai Manuel Noah, I have no quarrel with them,” Alfred Kazin announced with condescending chutzpah at the same conference, “although I cannot honestly consider these very interesting.” He concluded: “I don’t want us to study Emma Lazarus and Major Noah and say, ‘Well done, thou good and faithful Jew.’ I am interested in the study of individuals . . . because they are interesting.”25

As the remarks of Kazin and his older contemporary Reznikoff make clear, to say that they did not take the long view is not to suggest that they were wholly unaware of at least some of the writers of the preceding waves of immigration to America but that they did not, or would not, see them as literary forebears. Thus, a decade after the tercentenary, when Kazin offered his account of the true genesis of Jewish American literature in his important Commentary essay “The Jew as Modern American Writer,” he would turn to Lazarus and grant her significant space, as a


negative point of departure. He recalls her friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson (she was “the first Jew whom . . . Emerson ever met”) only to note that “so subtle a critic,” whose genius was central to Kazin’s view of American literature, granted her only “uncertain praise” for her poetry. Eventually, “the Russian pogroms aroused her . . . to become a consciously ‘Jewish’ poet,” but her passionate Jewishness did little to improve her conventional, genteel, “excessively literary” verse. Kazin concludes sardonically that to the sage of Concord and his family, and indeed to the larger Victorian literary world in which she traveled, Lazarus was little more than “that still exotic figure, that object of Christian curiosity, the ‘Jew.’” She was not an individual, not interesting, not a writer to be reckoned with, unable to force herself into the American literary consciousness and unworthy of the Jewish American literary canon. For Kazin, in fact, nothing of real literary value had emerged out of the first two and a half centuries of Jewish life in America, nothing to justify the long view. He explicitly and summarily dismisses not only Noah and Lazarus but also their cultural scions Robert Nathan and Ludwig Lewisohn. While noting that Gertrude Stein was “an original” and that Waldo Frank and Paul Rosenfeld were “extraordinarily sensitive writers,” he declares categorically and unequivocally that, while “the older German stock had produced many important scholars and publicists,” they had not produced a “significant type of the Jewish writer.”

26. The essay originally appeared in Commentary in April 1966 as “The Jew as Modern Writer” and was also published that year as the introduction to Norman Podhoretz, ed., The Commentary Reader (New York, 1966), with the addition of the word “American” in the title. The essay was reprinted in Jewish American Literature: An Anthology, ed. A. Chapman (New York, 1974), and it is this text to which I will refer.


29. Nathan was actually Lazarus’s cousin. For his biography, see http://www.robertnathanlibrary.com/display/index.cfm?page=biography. Lewisohn, a frequent target of Howe and his cohort, was a later German immigrant, but Kazin considers him to belong culturally to the earlier German migration. For a full-length account of his life and work, see Ralph Melnick, The Life and Work of Ludwig Lewisohn (Detroit, 1998).

In his more comprehensive study of “the scope and shape of the Jewish American tradition in fiction,” Leslie Fiedler shows himself willing and able to look back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for its origins. But he does not find what the tercentenary historians found. He never mentions, even in a cursory way, Wise’s The First of the Maccabees (1860), say, or Nathan Mayer’s Differences (1867). Instead, he chooses to begin his survey with several depictions of Jewish characters in early non-Jewish American novels such as Charles Brockden Brown’s Arthur Mervyn (1799), George Lippard’s The Quaker City (1844), and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun (1860). He strays from the path of fiction to mention Herman Melville’s long poem Clarel (1876) but utters not a word about Lazarus, whose Songs of a Semite appeared in 1882. And while he traces the invention of the Jewish American writer and the origin of the Jewish American novel as far back as 1885, he attributes the invention, in his characteristically impish way, to a non-Jew, to the slippery Henry Harland, who published a series of Jewish-themed novels under the Semitic-sounding pseudonym of Sidney Luska. In short, unlike the postwar historians, the postwar intellectuals did not ensconce themselves in a longstanding Jewish American literary tradition because they saw no such tradition, no usable Jewish American literary past, no precursors to their own achievements. They simply could not see themselves or their contemporaries in the uptown conformism and conventionality (as they no doubt perceived it) of the previous Jewish waves of immigration. The lost young intellectuals could not identify with their stodgy and feeble “our crowd” attempts to assimilate America to themselves and themselves to America, all the while remaining ethnic curiosities, neither Jewish enough nor American enough to make a creative impact. Given this neither-here-nor-there cultural situation, Fiedler found “a certain appropriate irony in the fact that the first Jewish-American novelist was not a Jew at all.”

31. Fiedler, To the Gentiles, 65.
32. To be sure, the novels of Wise and Mayer were not widely known. But Lazarus was far from an obscure figure.
35. Fiedler, To the Gentiles, 70.
They were more open to the immediate world of their fathers, to the East European immigrant milieu of the Lower East Side, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. But here, too, the postwar intellectuals were hesitant and careful about drawing clear, solid lines of filiation. It was their world, and they regarded it with affection. But it was also a world they longed to leave behind. Howe later recalled the “overwhelming impression” made upon him by *Passage from Home*, Isaac Rosenfeld’s 1946 coming-of-age novel, “because it touched elements of my own experience that I had willed to suppress.” “Nobody who has been brought up in an immigrant Jewish family,” he wrote in a review of the novel, “and experienced the helpless conflict between the father, who sees in his son the fulfillment of his own uninformed intellectuality, and the son for whom that very fulfillment becomes the brand of alienation . . . can read [the novel] without feeling that here is acute and true perception.”

That same year Howe wrote what amounts to his own passage from home, an essay called “The Lost Young Intellectual,” describing the type of the rootless and hapless young intellectual whose alienation from his immigrant Jewish family is indelibly marked by mortification:

I recall vividly an incident that took place more than twenty years ago. Like many other Jewish children, I had been brought up in a constricted family environment, especially since I was an only child, and at the age of five really knew Yiddish better than English. I attended my first day of kindergarten as if it were a visit to a new country. The teacher asked the children to identify various common objects. When my turn came she held up a fork and without hesitation I called it by its Yiddish name: “a goopel.” The whole class burst out laughing at me with that special cruelty of children. That afternoon I told my parents that I had made up my mind never to speak Yiddish to them again, though I would not give any reasons. It was a shock for them, the first in a series of conflicts between immigrant and America.

A similar incident: When I was a few years older, about eight or nine, my parents had a grocery store in an “Americanized” Jewish neighborhood, the West Bronx. I used to play in an abandoned lot about a block away from the store, and when I’d neglect to come home at supper time, my father would come to call for me. He would shout my name from afar, giving it a Yiddish twist: “Oivee!” I would always feel a sense of shame. I would always run ahead of my father at hearing my name so mutilated in the presence of amused onlookers, and though

I would come home—supper was supper!—I would always run ahead of my father as if to emphasize the existence of a certain distance between us. In later years, I often wondered how I would react if my father would again call “Oivee” at the top his lungs in say, Washington Square.  

“Half a century later,” Howe reflected in his memoir, A Margin of Hope, “I still feel the shame.”

So when it came to the literature of the East European immigrants and their children in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the intellectuals were no less caustic in their judgments than they were toward the uptown Germans. Howe called the literature of the ghetto “a sea of mediocrity,” swimming with stereotypes and dripping with sentimentality, in which the Lower East Side becomes “a symbolic presence dominating all the characters created in its image.” Patient, loving mothers join sage fathers in dramas “compounded equally of filial self-deception, nostalgia, and guilt” and sharing “one common assumption: that the Jews are not human like other people, somehow not subject to the same pressures of experience as other men.” To Fiedler, most of the literature written by Jews in the first half of the twentieth century was “of merely parochial interest.” Even in the thirties, when “the outward circumstances . . . of the Great Depression conspired to welcome the Jewish writer,” Fiedler wrote, “the inward life of the Jewish community was not yet defined enough to sustain a major writer, or even to provide him with something substantial to rebel against,” not yet characterized, that is, by the peculiarly vexed and invigorating tension between Jewish and American culture, by the vivifying ambivalence of fathers and sons, that would obtain only a decade or two later. No wonder, he concluded,


39. Irving Howe, “The Stranger and the Victim: The Two Jewish Stereotypes of American Fiction,” Commentary 8.2 (August 1949): 149, 148, 147. Even later, when he turned with affection to the culture of the immigrants in World of Our Fathers, he wrote: “Out of the immigrant milieu there came a torrent of memoir, fiction and autobiography, ranging from the cheap hokum of ethnic self-indulgence to serious works of art . . . Most of this writing turned out to be of small literary value, the very urgencies behind its composition hardening into narrowness of scene, parochial return, and mere defense” (585).
no Jewish American works are included in “recent standard histories of the American novel.” Even in On Native Grounds, Kazin’s wide-ranging study of modern American prose first published in 1942, few Jewish American writers appear—Michael Gold, for instance, and Jerome Weidman—and these only in passing, footnotes to other American writers. Later, Kazin would change his mind about the literature of the thirties, finding in “many of the young Jewish writers just out of the ghettos”—in Michael Gold, Daniel Fuchs, Clifford Odets, Nathanael West, and a few others—more or less what Fiedler felt they had lacked, “the peculiar crystallization of ancient experiences” combined with “the avidity with which [they] threw themselves on the American scene.” But in 1944 he, like Howe and Fiedler, was plainly dismissive of their efforts, affirming explicitly what was implicit in On Native Grounds. “I have never seen much of what I admire in American Jewish culture, or among Jewish writers in America generally,” he wrote in the Contemporary Jewish Record, adding saucily that some of the writers were so bad he “would like to shoot” them. “Let us get away from the cliché Jew who runs in packs,” he pleaded in 1954. “Let us forget the Jew who figures [only] as a sweatshop worker or as a type and remember the individual experience, and the individual genius behind the experience.”

To be sure, the intellectuals found a few individuals who stood out from the pack. One was Abraham Cahan, particularly in The Rise of David Levinsky (1917). “I had long avoided The Rise of David Levinsky,” Isaac Rosenfeld admits frankly in the opening sentence to his influential essay on the novel, “because I imagined it was a badly written account of immigrants and sweatshops in a genre which... was intolerably stale by now.” Rosenfeld’s assumptions betray the emotional underpinnings of

40. Fiedler, To the Gentiles, 66, 97, 66. My emphasis.
his contemporaries’ resistance to Jewish American literary history, to the embarrassments of one’s provincial background. But he and his cohort ultimately found in the novel something utterly different, something that spoke to the aesthetic and cultural concerns rooted in their deep ambivalence about immigrant culture and their own passages from home. Howe praised Cahan’s novel because it resisted the sentimentality and eschewed the stereotypes that marred other ghetto fiction, because Cahan was able to throw off the blinders of communal conformity and see past, for instance, “the parochial falsehood that rich Jews inevitably come to an unhappy end because they try to assimilate themselves to the Gentile world.” The result, he wrote, was not only a work of “truth and imagination” but also “one of the best products of American naturalism.”

Fiedler similarly praises the novel for thumbing its nose at the “delusive bourgeois values” of the Jewish community. Though he is less ebullient than Howe and devotes considerably less room to Cahan than he does to the faux-Jew Henry Harland, he revels in the fact that the novel riled the “guardians of the Jewish community” when it appeared, and he labels its reception a defining, paradigmatic moment in Jewish American literary history. For such, Fiedler writes, would always be the communal response “to any work that treats with art and candor the facts of Jewish life in the United States.” To be praiseworthy, a Jewish writer must stand outside the Jewish community and, by extension, outside Jewish American history. “In this respect,” he concludes, Cahan “remains the model for all serious Jewish American novelists.”

But it was something more than his refusal to defer to the sappy pieties of bourgeois Jewish life that distinguished Cahan for the midcentury literary historians and bestowed upon him the saintly aura of Jewish American precursor. What they admired in Cahan was what they imagined for themselves, the seeming ability to inhabit two worlds at once, both Jewish and American, without compromising or succumbing to the demands of either. Howe believed that Cahan was able to see the immigrant experience for what it was—understand the pull of American society and the

46. Howe, “The Stranger and the Victim,” 149. Howe later damped down his praise, calling Levinsky only “a minor masterpiece of genre realism” (World of Our Fathers, 525; see also his remarks on Cahan in his introduction to Jewish American Stories, 14). And for all his praise, Fiedler determined that the novel was still “somehow irrelevant to the main lines of development of fiction in the United States” (To the Gentiles, 66). Kazin, for his part, thought William Dean Howells’s attraction to Cahan a result of his predilection for Russian realism (“Jew as Modern American Writer,” 588).

47. Fiedler, To the Gentiles, 77.
resistance to it—because he himself was secure in both worlds and “felt no need to apologize for one to the other.” For Howe, Cahan’s double groundedness (buttressed by a nondogmatic socialism) was the source of his novelistic acuity and objectivity, endowing him with “attitudes of irony and detachment that permitted him to observe the two worlds and their interactions with a sharply sardonic eye.” 48 Rosenfeld, too, was drawn to the book’s cultural doubleness, to its “fundamentally Jewish” rendering of constant and irresolvable yearning for the past and its “exemplary treatment of one of the dominant myths of American capitalism—that the millionaire finds nothing but emptiness at the top of the heap.” He marveled that, in Cahan’s hands, “so singularly Jewish a theme [could] be so readily assimilated to an American one.” 49 For Rosenfeld, the essence of Cahan’s genius and his significance for Jewish American literary history lay, first, in his discovery of “the considerable structural congruity that . . . underlie[s] the character and culture of the two peoples,” Jews and Americans. For Jews, in other words, assimilation need not mean surrender to the dominant type. Moreover, Rosenfeld argued, Cahan saw the congruity not in the putatively shared values of freedom and democracy that allowed Jews to feel always-already at home in America (as in Sarna’s “cult of synthesis”) but in a constituent, unfulfilled yearning, an endemic homelessness, an unsatisfiable “hunger.” He saw this as “a profoundly Jewish trait” embodied most broadly in “the theme of the Return, of yearning for Eretz Israel, to which are linked Cabala and Messianism, modes of prayer and worship as well as modern political and social movements,” a yearning that Jews felt “must be preserved at all cost.” But he also saw it as American, insofar as it defines “the character of the American businessman” for whom “the process of accumulation” becomes an endless end in itself. In short, they are assimilated to each other in their inability to feel comfortably assimilated anywhere. In Levinsky, the diasporic Jew and the striving American are conjoined, homelessness is given a fictional home, and the literature of the midcentury Jewish American writer is prefigured. 50

Let me underscore the fact that, for Howe and his cohort, The Rise of

50. Rosenfeld, “David Levinsky,” 280, 277, 278. In his award-winning biography Rosenfeld’s Lives: Fame, Oblivion, and the Furies of Writing (New Haven, Conn., 2009), Steven J. Zipperstein contextualizes the essay within Rosenfeld’s life and career and offers a reading complementary to mine (pp. 185–87).
David Levinsky was the exception that proved the rule, an oasis in the desert of the merely exotic, conventional, and provincial. In general, they were stubbornly unwilling to take the long view of Jewish American literary history, to see the narrative then being written by the tercentenary historians—linear, progressive, and ethnic—as their history writ large. So how did they imagine their own provenance?

To begin with, they presumed cultural complexity and spoke of “many cultures operating simultaneously on the Jewish writer’s mind.” They saw themselves as heirs to literary traditions beyond American borders and outside the Jewish community. Hence, for instance, the breadth of Howe’s 1957 study Politics and the Novel—from the European writers Stendahl, Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Turgenev, Malraux, and Silone to the American writers Hawthorne and James (among others) to the Jewish writers Koestler and Trilling. Hence, too, the fact that Philip Rahv’s essays on Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, and Chekhov (as well as other European writers) stand side by side with his essays on American and Jewish writers. When Kazin listed “the writing I have been most influenced by,” he mentioned “Blake, Melville, Emerson, the seventeenth-century English religious poets, and the Russian novelists,” noting pointedly that they had “no direct associations in my mind with Jewish culture.” When Saul Bellow, bristling at the label “Jewish writer,”

51. Another exception, in particular for Howe, was Henry Roth’s Call It Sleep. It and The Rise of David Levinsky were the “two lone books of truth and imagination in sea of mediocrity” (“The Stranger and the Victim,” 149). See also Howe’s 1964 review of the Avon reissue of the novel on the cover of the New York Times Book Review, in which he echoes and elaborates his earlier judgment of its exceptional character: “Intensely Jewish in tone and setting, ‘Call It Sleep’ rises above all the dangers that beset the usual ghetto novel: it does not deliquesce into nostalgia, nor sentimentalize poverty and parochialism” (“Life Never Let Up,” New York Times Book Review, October 25, 1964). Roth is the one earlier Jewish American writer included in Jewish American Stories.


described himself as “a person of Jewish origin—American and Jewish—who has had a certain experience of life, which is in part Jewish, but also American, Russian, son-of-immigrants, male, twentieth-century, Midwestern, hockey fan, and so on,” he was in part speaking to this cosmopolitan complexity and to the difficulties of literary-historical categorization in general and the Jewish writer category in particular.55 And while this did not prevent him from editing Great Jewish Short Stories in 1963 and formulating his own “laughter and trembling” theory of Jewish literary history (quoted, as it happens, by Howe in his introduction to Jewish American Stories), it also led Howe, Kazin, and Fiedler, when they turned to Jewish American literary history, to formulate approaches that problematized the very category they were constructing.56

While they “were not at home in the organized Jewish world,” Howe and his cohort nevertheless “held in contempt those Jewish intellectuals and academics who tried to pass themselves off as anything but what they were.”57 While they admitted, even boasted, that their relation to Judaism and Jewish tradition was highly attenuated, they nevertheless brandished the word “Jewish,” insisting that it defined them, or at least a significant part of themselves. It set them apart, deliberately positioning them in privileged relation not only to a foreign literary tradition that was European, particularly East European, but also to one that they understood as very decidedly Jewish—thus ironically doubly distancing themselves from the American tradition they were about to enter, that they longed to enter, that they claimed for themselves. Part of Howe’s attraction to Yiddish literature was that he perceived “the cultural distance between East European and Western society,” in particular the fact that “the bourgeois revolution had not yet triumphed in Eastern Europe [and] had barely brushed against its Jewish enclave.” Because they lived “at a distance from history, from history as such and history as a conception of the Western world,” because “the world of the East European Jews made impossible the power hunger, the pretension to aristocracy, the whole mirage of false values that have blighted Western intellectual life,” the Jews “were able to gain an insight into that moral weakness of Western world,” and they infused that insight into Yiddish literature.58 The East

57. Howe, Margin of Hope, 252.
European Jews brought with them to America this insight, this critical distance and ironic detachment, and bequeathed it, if not to the earlier ghetto writers Howe looked down upon, then to Bellow and his generation, who accepted it “almost as if it were a cultural legacy.” This is plainly what Howe means by insisting in *Jewish American Stories* upon “the continuity from Europe to America of Jewish experience and the writings about it” and by beginning his Jewish American anthology with Sholem Aleichem, Isaac Babel, and Bellow’s translation of Isaac Bashevis Singer. Kazin suggested a somewhat different, variegated, and contentious Jewish literary genealogy: “When I think of Jews for whom the word meant and means something,” he wrote in 1944, “I think of Sholem Aleichem and Peretz, the scholars of Vilna, the great hearts of the Jewish Socialist Bund . . . the Hasidim . . . Bialik and Marc Chagall, of Ernst Bloch . . . Nello Roselli . . . and Rosa Luxemburg.” In 1954 he listed “Kafka, Simone Weil, Marcel Proust, Isaac Babel, Leon Trotsky and perhaps Edith Stein—who died at Auschwitz because she was a Jew, but died as a Carmelite nun.” Obeisance to these forbears—Yiddish, Hebrew and modernist writers, Jewish traditionalists (Hasidim and Mitnagdim), political radicals, and religious apostates—is not a rejection of America per se but a declaration of intellectual independence from the paleface pieties of American middle-class culture and from the American Jews whose Judaism was, they believed, so thoroughly assimilated to it. They readily admitted, even boasted that a powerful Jewish literature preceded them. But Jewish American writing begins only with their own generation.

To be a Jew also meant to them a difference in class and, hence, a distinctive difference in attitude and style. To be a Jewish American writer meant, for Fiedler, “to break through the taboos of gentility,” to “break up . . . the long term Anglo-Saxon domination of our literature”

62. Howe was certainly aware that Yiddish writing continued to develop in America, and he admired many of the writers, especially the poets. Nevertheless, he writes, “the blunt truth is that Yiddish prose in America has scored greater successes in drawing recollected portraits of obitel’ life that in its efforts to capture the elusive qualities of Jewish experience in America.” Then he adds wistfully, “But now that the obitel’ is gone” (*A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, 70). He thought of his work on Yiddish literature as a way of coming to terms with his past av past, not as an aspect of his Jewish American present. See Howe, *A Margin of Hope*, 260–69.
and to break down the walls between popular culture and high culture.\textsuperscript{63} To borrow Rahv’s well-known (and now recognized as racist) division of American literature into competing “paleface” and “redskin” traditions, the Jewish American writers and critics were marauding redskins.\textsuperscript{64} Fiedler’s model for this “great takeover by Jewish-American writers of the American imagination” was Nathanael West’s Balso Snell, the eponym of the odd novella Fiedler calls “a fractured and dissolving parable of the very process by which the emancipated Jew enters into the world of Western Culture,” who makes his entry into that world by “penetrating through the asshole, that symbol of tradition and treacherous conquest,” the Trojan horse.\textsuperscript{65} Jewish American literature was not rooted in the vapid gentility of American universities or in the ersatz sophistication of the uptown Jews, Kazin explained, but “in the vaudeville theaters, music halls, and burlesque houses where the pent-up eagerness of penniless immigrant youngsters met the raw urban scene on its own terms.” The American forerunners of Bellow, Roth, and Malamud (and, for that matter, Howe, Kazin, and Fiedler themselves) were not Isaac Harby, Mordecai Manuel Noah, Penina Moise, Isaac Mayer Wise, Emma Lazarus, or Ludwig Lewisohn but “the Marx Brothers, Eddie Cantor, Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, and George Gershwin.”\textsuperscript{66} Kazin understood that the motive behind the tercentenary historians’ desire “to inflate . . . every remote worthy in American Jewish history” was the desire “to prove that we Jews are not arrivistes.” But they were arrivistes and resented the dissembling. “I come from Brooklyn, from that miserable working-class ghetto

\textsuperscript{63} Fiedler, \textit{To the Gentiles}, 76. My emphasis.

\textsuperscript{64} See “Paleface and Redskin” in \textit{Image and Idea}, 1–6. The essay originally appeared in the \textit{Kenyon Review} in 1939. Rahv expanded and developed the idea the following year in “The Cult of Experience in American Writing,” originally published in \textit{Partisan Review} and collected in \textit{Image and Idea} in 1957, 7–26. (Both essays also appear in Rahv’s collected essays.) It should be noted that Rahv’s own valuation of the relation between paleface and redskin in American literary history was more balanced, looking forward to their future reconciliation—a veiled nod, perhaps, to the intellectual Jewish redskins of his generation. Note, too, this prediction: “One thing . . . is certain: whereas in the past . . . the nature of American literary life was largely determined by national forces, now it is international forces that have begun to exert a dominant influence. And in the long run it is in the terms of this historic change that the future course of American writing will define itself” (\textit{Image and Idea}, 25).

\textsuperscript{65} Fiedler, \textit{To the Gentiles}, 183. Fiedler’s reading of \textit{The Dream Life of Balso Snell} appears not in “The Jew in the American Novel” but in his 1967 \textit{Partisan Review} essay “Master of Dreams: The Jew in a Gentile World,” also collected in \textit{To the Gentiles}.

\textsuperscript{66} Kazin, “Jew as Modern American Writer,” 588–89.
of Brownsville," he proudly announced to the distinguished historians of the American Jewish Historical Society, and there was no shame in that. For it was "one of the great cradles of Jewish life in the New World."\(^{67}\) Unabashedly Jewish. If they were embarrassed by their immigrant parents (and by their own accounts they were), they nevertheless parlayed their working-class immigrant roots into a position of subversive cultural power.\(^{68}\)

Still, though they used the term "Jewish" to problematize their relation to America, to secure their place as critical outsiders, they nevertheless always conceived of their critical project primarily as American literary history, not simply as an ethnic subset of that history. Their high subject was not the emergence of a mode of ethnic expression but "the entry of the Jew into our national literary culture."\(^{69}\) Howe’s 1949 *Commentary* review of twentieth-century Jewish fiction, "The Stranger and the Victim," was pointedly subtitled "Two Jewish Stereotypes of American Fiction" and included Fitzgerald and Hemingway (and several others) among the mostly Jewish writers—as if one of the central purposes of the survey was to force those non-Jewish figures to mingle with their Jewish contemporaries, at least on the page. Over the next decade and a half, as we all know, the writers and critics realized their hopes. "For the first time in history," wrote the editors of *Breakthrough*, the landmark 1964 anthology of contemporary Jewish American writing, "a large and impressively gifted group of serious American Jewish writers has broken through the psychic barriers of the past to become an important, possibly a major reformative influence in American life and letters."\(^{70}\) Hence Kazin’s title, "The Jew as Modern American Writer," and Fiedler’s *The Jew in the American Novel*.\(^{71}\) To emphasize this point—as a counterweight to his

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\(^{68}\) I am suggesting, in short, two distinct East European approaches to the earlier waves of Jewish immigration to America: Jewish historians of East European origin ironically adopted early American Jewish history as their own, and the literary critics of similar origin resisted such appropriation. Interestingly, the historian at the tercentenary conference who urged that scholars take up early Jewish American writers was Rollin Osterweis, a Jew of German extraction. See my "Wretched Refuse," 67–70.

\(^{69}\) Grant Webster, "Leslie Fiedler: Adolescent and Jew as Critic," *Denver Quarterly* 1.4 (1967): 53.


\(^{71}\) As noted above, Fiedler’s monograph limns the history of Jewish American fiction in relation to depictions of the Jew in mainstream American literature,
inclusion of stories by their (and his) East European forebears—Howe begins his introduction to *Jewish American Stories* with this historiographical paradigm:

> Over the decades, by now stretching into centuries, American literature has steadily drawn fresh energies from regions, subcultures and ethnic and racial groups which, if taken together, form a pleasing heterogeneity. These communities prepare themselves in unnoticed spaces of our continent and then, through a blend of charm and aggression, break into the national literature.

Regional and ethnic literatures become American literature, he explains, “once they manage to shake off provincial self-centeredness yet retain the pungency of local speech and the strength of local settings.” Before that moment, the regional or ethnic writer is a “mere provincial.” After, the strength and pungency of the literature dissipates. “So regarded,” he concludes, “the writing of American Jews over the last few decades can be seen as fitting into the general pattern of American literary history.”

Launching *Commentary*, where much of the discussion I have been referring to appeared, Elliot Cohen called the founding of the magazine “an act of faith in our possibilities in America.” Fiedler was the critic who most candidly and provocatively called the writers’ desire to flood into the mainstream by a different name, assimilation. Not in the passive, intransitive sense they despised, that is, of blending into a culture and disappearing, but in the muscular, transitive sense. Each Jewish American novel, he wrote, was an *act* of assimilation, an assertion of will. “In order to become a novelist,” he explained, “the American Jew must learn a language . . . more complex than a mere lexicon of American words. He

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as if to say that the Jew was present in American literature even before the Jews began in earnest to write fiction in America, as if his place were being prepared for him from the very beginning—an ironic version of the “long view” of the tercentenary historians.

72. Howe, *Jewish American Stories*, 1, 3 (my emphasis). It is interesting to note that, ironically, Howe’s paradigm of American literary history parallels Oscar Handlin’s sense of American history in general in his classic *The Uprooted* (1951): “Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history” (*The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* [2nd ed.; Philadelphia, 2002], 3).


must assimilate a traditional vocabulary of images and symbols, changing even as he approaches it—must use it, against the grain as it were, to create a compelling counter-image of the Jew, still somehow authentically American.” Kazin agreed that the Jewish American writer “had to find his model in the majority culture” but offered a different version of literary assimilation. For some, to be sure, assimilation meant insipid ingratiating to effete elites, which “had some depressing consequences.” But the best writers rejected “the stilted moralism that has always been a trap for the Jewish writer” and chose to assimilate the vibrant, natural, egalitarian, and subversive culture of the streets. And the Jewish American writer was brought forth.

While both the tercentenary historians and the postwar critics spoke of the congruence or compatibility of the categories Jewish and American, the postwar critics insisted at the same time upon a pronounced Jewish difference, and upon the defiant discomfort of difference. The literary history that emerges from this paradoxical understanding is a fantasy in which assimilation is given its imaginative due, in which renunciation is reconfigured as Jewish self-assertion, in which Jewishness is construed as an angle of vision, an inflection, or, at its most attenuated and mysterious, an attitude or feeling of marginality that “the hospitality, tolerance, and generosity of American democracy [could not] quite dispel.” It was a fantasy in which Jewishness and Americanness are held in a precarious but irresistible tension, a history that is foreshadowed for Rosenfeld in David Levinsky, the lonely yeshiva bochur turned unhappy American millionaire, and culminates for Fiedler in Bellow’s Augie March, in which the authentic descendant of the Jewish schlemiel looks into the mirror, blinks, and sees Huckleberry Finn.

This is the brief and anxious history that was invented for Jewish American literature in the postwar period, a literary history with built-in obsolescence, a history to which the contemporary literature we value for

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75. Fiedler, *To the Gentiles*, 69. Looking back in 1991, Fiedler offered a more cynical view of Jewish American literary assimilation, echoing Howe’s sense of the rise and demise of Jewish American literary history: “And finally, as I had long been dimly aware . . . the very success of Jewish-American writers in thus becoming mouthpieces for all America meant . . . their assimilation into the anonymous mainstream of our culture” (*Fiedler on the Roof: Essays on Literature and Jewish Identity* [Boston, 1991], xii).


78. Fiedler, “Saul Bellow,” in *To the Gentiles*, 64. The essay was originally published in *Prairie Schooner* in 1957.
its unembarrassed Jewishness and untroubled Americanness simply does not belong. From the moment in 1946 that Irving Howe reported in both plaintive and celebratory terms that “a new social type ha[d] appeared in recent years on the American-Jewish scene,” when he described the “struggling young author” or “unattached intellectual,” the son of immigrants who “ha[d] largely lost his sense of Jewishness” but “has not succeeded in finding a place for himself in the American scene,” a liminal figure both Jewish and American and neither—from that moment on it became almost inevitable that Jewish American Stories would appear to him a *yizkor buch* similar to his *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, that Jewish American literature itself would be, for Howe and his cohort, nothing more than, as he put it, “a flicker of history.”

79. Howe, “The Lost Young Intellectual,” 132; Jewish American Stories, 6. It is interesting to contrast Howe’s predicted demise of Jewish American writing to his unwillingness to predict, two decades earlier, the future of Yiddish literature: “What the future of Yiddish as both language and literature will be, no one really knows. Prediction and speculation are possible, but this is not the place for either. Our concern here is not with the future, not with prophecy. It is with the past, with the life and the warmth that come to us when we turn to the pages of Mendele, at the beginning, and Chaim Grade, at the end. Whatever the future, their past is certain. They wait for us, ready to speak, if we will only hear them” (*A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, 71).