

Jewish-American Writing, From Ethnicity to Mainstream

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Abstract

Jewish American literature is one of the earliest ethnic projects that developed in the 1950s and opened the way for other ethnic literatures in the United States to enter the American mainstream. It loosened up the literary canon and created a more liberal atmosphere in which American literature began to be taught at American universities. The success of Jewish American literature shifted the focus of American literature from an emphasis on purely Eurocentric classics to global and polyglot writings in translation. Most Jewish American writers cashed on their immigrant experience and, taking advantage of grand historical totalities fashionable in the 1930s, connected their persecuted Jewish past with their difficult diasporic present. They put their Yiddishkeit memories and Talmud studies to good use and created an intellectual culture of professionalism and self-realization. They entered American state universities and by virtue of their hard work and scholarship succeeded. But in their success lay the seeds of their literary downfall. Beginning as rebels they gradually became conservative and espoused imperialist and

elitist ideas expressing their dissatisfaction with Afro-Americans and other groups who could not pull themselves up by sheer individual effort. Full of gratitude to the American welfare state and universities the Jewish intellectual became both imperialist and pro-Establishment. American writers like Bellow, Roth, Heller, Doctorow, Potok and Sukenick were co-opted in the American white mainstream and consequently the centrality of their ethnicity dissipated. It is possible to see the influence of Platonic ideals and socio-psychological notions of exile, identity and Diaspora coupled with a mocking tone in their fiction. Jewish American writing shared an ethical world of poetic anxiety together with an urban skepticism which was distinctively American in character. Jewish American writing was also able to problematize the predicament of the immigrant communities and the problems associated with their assimilation. The present essay constituted the introduction and conclusion of my doctoral dissertation on contemporary Jewish American novelists and since then has been updated and altered wherever necessary.

Jewish American literature is one of the earliest ethnic projects that succeeded in the United States in the 1950s and later in subsequent decades spread to other parts of the world. It paved the way for the entry of other literary ethnicities such as African-American, Asian American, multicultural American, postcolonial and translation literatures into the American mainstream. In a sense the pioneering work done by Jewish American writers after the Second World War shifted the focus of American literature from a Eurocentric construction to a globally inclusive and polyglot edifice. But by the early 1980s the identity-forming or identity-transforming Jewish American literature had outlived its functions that forced Irving Howe to ring its death knell in his anthology of *Jewish-American*

Stories (Bellow, 1977).

Unlike many other scholars who saw a lucrative business in Jewish American writing in terms of jobs and publications, Howe was categorical in his denial by stating,

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 (Howe, 1971 16).

Leslie Fiedler was quick not only to second Howe's prognosis in *The New York Times Book Review* 1986 but was categorical in his diagnosis: "the Jewish-American novel is over and done with, a part of history rather than a living literature" (Fiedler, 1986). However there are still old vanguards of Jewish American literature such as Ruth R. Wisse who would like to reject Howe's Doctrine and resurrect the old corpus or corpse (Wisse, 2000).

Lee Siegel takes issues with James Atlas's voluminous biography of Bellow attempting to validate its idyllic quality. Siegel reminisces with inconsolable nostalgia of the passing of Jewish American literary enterprise as a kind of litany,

It is safe to say that the American-Jewish sensibility once was characterized by a skepticism about current conditions, which was in fact a way of affirming life. It had laughter and was devoid of the cold calculation that wears sentimentality like a fig leaf. It seemed to come from nowhere. American-Jewish literary expression had a special kind of

ethical beauty; an inconsolable joy; a pregnant mirth drawn out of life's sadness (Siegel, 2001 75-83).

This 'ethical beauty,' mirth and sadness, symptomatic of Jewish American evocative writing, has been taken over by writers of other ethnicities and other immigrant communities who are struggling to find a place for themselves in capitalist America and succeed like the Jews.

The sensibility that Siegel laments was rooted in a particular socio-historical moment of immigrant marginality and ethnic alienation. There was no permanence in the sensibility as there was no permanence in the Jewish-American experience itself when it began. Once Jewish Americans became full-blooded Americans like Augie March their ethnic literature was over. Just like the Afro-Americans who craved for the rebirth of their literature some new and aspiring Jewish American critics and writers hoped for a renaissance, a resurgence of interest in the Yiddishkeit. But the twenty-first century is different and lacks the desire for a recrudescence of the halcyon days (Furman, 2001).

Though a host of younger Jewish Americans are writing good fiction today they are neither ethnic nor mainstream. We have writers like Art Spiegelman, Allegra Goodman, Rebecca Goldstein, Nathan Englander, Michael Chabon and Ronald Sukenick who are not fired by an assimilationist shame but explore meta-fiction or return to the glories of their lost ethnic histories. The golden age of Bellow/Roth/Heller generation that touched Asian shores in the early 1970s and spawned hundreds of doctorates in countries as far apart as India and Japan on psycho-sociological themes such as identity, self and humanism, has gone. The Jewish American writers have been co-opted in the white American mainstream and are neither marginal nor persecuted in the United States. To work on them with the

same seriousness as scholars did in the 1970s is passé.

The Early Beginnings

The 1950s marked the robust beginning of Jewish American literature with the publication of Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) where Augie boldly proclaimed, "I am an American, Chicago born," advertising both his American and regional identity. With Bellow's translation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool" in the same year the vanished glory of the old Jewish village, the shtetl destroyed by Hitler's Nazi brigade, was restored. Both Bellow and Singer would win their Nobel Prizes two decades later—Bellow in 1976 and Singer in 1978—marking American recompense for Jewish persecutions in Europe.

The sense of guilt that America suffered forced open opportunities for the American Jews in all professions especially academics where the floodgates were made open for Jewish professors in all academic disciplines including literature. The new found sense of national greatness that was felt in the United States immediately following the Second World War created a more generous and liberal spirit which expanded the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture to include German, Italians, Irish, Russians and Jews.

Before World War One no one took American literature seriously but after 1950s, with the support of the US government and liberal-minded Jewish American writers and scholars, American literature could stand proudly alongside many other literatures if not at par with European literatures. The assimilationist works of writers like Anzia Yezierska, Abraham Cahan, Cynthia Ozick, Grace Paley and Henry Roth gave impetus to multicultural projects of the 1960s by reaching out in angst and humility to the American readers.

In retrospect this reaching out to the world was not an innocent project of a few Jewish writers writing good humanistic fiction in egalitarian America. It came with a whole lot of literary and critical baggage that was endorsed by a host of scholars. America designed models to appreciate it, made courses to teach it and sponsored non-American scholars to fund it. In the 1970s it was not difficult to conduct research in what was called 'contemporary Jewish American fiction.' A lot of secondary material on Jewish American writing had already been disseminated in foreign libraries and critical books came free of charge. In the heydays of scholarly research in Jewish American literature in India a host of local and foreign experts congregated at the American Studies Research Center at Hyderabad offering sought or unsought advice about the ways to appreciate and analyze the literature. However in the 1980s once the ASRC became a hotbed for Marxist scholars, official support petered out. Also by this time Jewish American literature had lost its ethnic and immigrant appeal.

Unlike in the United States Jewish American literature has not been popular reading in other parts of the world. It has been read by university students and scholars who wanted to make a career out of it. A lot of these books were purchased by libraries and US sponsored organizations. By and large the promotion of Jewish American literature was able to rake large profits for the writers. Some of the Jewish American writers may not have been complicit in the project but they were undoubtedly beneficiaries of the system.

The Jewish Immigrant Experience

The Jewish immigrant experience that developed in the American North before and after World War Two entered American fiction and autobiography in the early 1950s bringing new images of poignant discrimination and loss. Both fiction and autobiography highlighted the growing concerns of the educated

immigrant Jew who lived in the city and participated in its excitements. The recurrent theme of the Jew trying to find a place for himself in the city became central to most fiction written at the turn of the twentieth century. Such fiction dealt with the cultural contradictions and psychological upheavals that arose in the wake of social and personal adjustment to the new environment. The prevalence of global historical totalities in social sciences and grand moral narratives of the Kantian variety during and after World War One created a guilt complex in white America which rushed in to compensate the immigrant and the Jew, the twice marginalized ethnic group, with board and lodging. The first generation immigrant Jews worked hard in egalitarian America but because of cultural and linguistic setbacks could not succeed. It was their children with an all-American education who finally made it.

As second and third generation Jews overcame the handicap of their foreignness in America, they found opportunities to work in the learned professions and the establishments of the mass-media. Many of these intellectuals found their Jewish experience nostalgic, at times oppressive, from which they sought release in writing novels or autobiographies. Writers and academics like Alfred Kazin (1915-1998), Leslie Fiedler (1917-2003), Saul Bellow (1915-2005), Philip Roth (1933-), Norman Mailer (1923-2007), Joseph Heller (1923-1999), E. L. Doctorow (1931-), Chaim Potok (1929-2002), Lenny Bruce (1925-1966), Stanley Elkin (1930-1995), Woody Allen (1955-2000) and others wrote of their experience, either directly or indirectly, in their fiction. They incorporated the experiences of the Holocaust, Yiddishkeit, broken identities, ruptured past and lost homelands in their writings. They shared their experience not only with the Jewish community but with the rest of America and the world in intellectual and emotional wonderment.

There was a distinctive regionalism in Jewish American literature which pushed writers to carry the heavy burden of filial anxieties and the European past into their overtly American writings. In an introduction to *Jewish-American Stories* in 1977 Irving Howe wrongly labeled Jewish American fiction as “regional literature” and though he later retracted this statement it may not have been such a blunder. Jewish American literature shared many of the concerns of regional literatures such as Southern, New England or Midwest. The traumatic past, whether it was filial or historical, was an “inescapable subject” for all Jewish American writers.

Cultural, Psychological and Psycho-Cultural Studies

Over the decades a body of criticism has grown around the works of contemporary Jewish-American writers that often sounds as promotional or propagandist. The criticism underscores the complexity of Jewish-American writing, its thematic contemporaneity and salability. This body of criticism can be roughly divided into three broad categories: Firstly, cultural studies, secondly psychological studies and thirdly studies that integrate the first two, that is, psycho-cultural studies. Critics of the cultural studies school like John Clayton, Allen Guttman and others emphasize themes of affirmation, assimilation, nostalgia, or self-humiliation in the fiction of these writers. Those who belong to the psychological studies school, for instance critics like Max Schulz and others, stress the concept of self-hood or identity in their fiction. Some of the psycho-cultural studies, especially of Ihab Hassan and Tony Tanner, deal with the emergence of a new consciousness or the changing nature of identity in the novels written by some of the Jewish writers. These studies help the critics to combine both cultural and psychological themes and observe the new personality that took shape in Jewish-American fiction in the 1960s and 1970s. But psycho-cultural critics are unable to understand the emergence of a new consciousness or

the reasons for stability and change. This paper attempts to examine some of these aspects.

The cultural studies of Jewish-American writers emphasize the distance some of the writers like Bellow, Roth, Mailer or Potok have traveled from mainstream Judaism. Such studies attempt to confirm the assimilation of the Jewish writers in the WASP culture, firstly through the national readership such writers enjoy, secondly through finding Christian themes of affirmation and celebration in their fiction, thirdly through simply being nostalgic of the lost Jewish life-style, and lastly by being condemnatory of the new writing by calling it humiliating or cheap. Allen Guttman's book *The Jewish Writer in America* deals with the theme of assimilation of Jewish-American writers in the WASP culture (Guttman, 1971). The study is sub-titled “Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity.” It examines the works of writers like Meyer Levin, Daniel Fuchs, Henry Roth, Isaac Rosenfeld, Bellow, Roth, Alfred Kazin and others to establish how Jews have gradually become assimilated into the American culture. Guttman writes,

What are the literary consequences of the virtual conclusion of the process of Americanization? It is my personal conviction that the twenty-five years that followed World War II have been both ‘break-through’ and climax. The assimilation of the Jewish writer has reached the point where Bellow, Mailer, and Roth can find a national rather than a largely ethnic audience that Abraham Cahan, Ludwig Lewisohn, and Meyer Levin were forced to settle for (when they wrote of Jew rather than of Gentiles (Guttman, 1971, 226).

Guttman explained that between 1945 and 1970 the Jewish writers became both

Americanized and assimilated in the American mainstream and consequently their “ethnic” readership expanded to include a much bigger “national” readership. This became a social and economic advantage to Jewish American writers.

It may be argued that a national readership is a rather weak criterion for cultural assimilation of Jewish writers as it does not establish their change of belief or their adoption of the dominant WASP culture. Though Jewish writers have increasingly derided, even at times rejected, most of the Hebraic tradition, they have not gone over to the other camp. They have been skeptical of both the Hebraic and Christian traditions. Skepticism has been a special trait of their writing and it is a necessary corollary to their intellectual bent of mind. James Sire finds *Mr Sammler’s Planet* almost a Christian novel. He complains that though Sammler eschews reason for spiritual strength in the Christian way, he does not show his belief in Meister Eckhart’s teachings. Had Bellow allowed this to happen the novel would have been a truly Christian novel (Sire, 1971 55-68).

Another cultural study is John Clayton’s *Saul Bellow* (Clayton, 1968, 236-278). It elaborates on the theme of affirmation in Bellow’s works and estimates the significance of the protagonist’s role from this point of view. As the sub-title “In Defense of Man” suggests, Clayton’s book deals with themes of individual affirmation in the writings of Bellow. It contains strong elements of existential and humanistic ideas and impresses upon the reader the celebration of some of the Judeo-Christian values. Clayton believes that Bellow’s novels arise out of a need to be “truly human” and his theme is “the defense of man”. Clayton thinks that Bellow defends “individuality” (Clayton 1968, 278, 253, 136). Similarly studies on Potok take up such themes. Most notably of these is Daphne Merkin’s article on Potok in *Commentary* which deals with the “other-worldly” nature of

Jews in the novels and tends to extend the image of the yeshiva bochar, or the Talmud student in Jewish American fiction (Merkin, 1976, 74). However, Merkin fails to take note of Potok’s novel *My Name is Asher Lev* (1972) where the young artist rebels against his Jewish community and becomes an apostate (Dembo, 1988 112-116). He leaves his orthodox New York community to live in exile in Paris. But his connection with the American Yiddishkeit has not been completely severed (Kauvar, 1986 291-317).

Potok was haunted by the undecided future of Asher Lev. As subsequent history of Potok’s writing would tell us that he followed the first novel eighteen years later in the sequel *The Gift of Asher Lev* (1990) where a new personality of the Jewish intellectual, in the role of an artist emerges. However he fails to resolve the predicament of staying with the old Jewish world or leaving it. Contrary to Merkin’s eulogistic assessment of Jewish American literature, the tugs and pulls of late modernity does reveal the worldliness of these characters.

Fiedler’s study on Jewish writers, especially Roth, becomes nostalgic of the Jewish world in which people grew up at the turn of the century; and the nostalgia is an extension of the cultural studies carried out by other writers. Fiedler finds in Roth’s early work, like *Goodbye, Columbus*, only nostalgic memories of Jewish Newark. Fiedler in his essay, “The Image of Newark and the Indignities of Love: Notes on Roth,” talks of “the cindery darkness” which men build around themselves and in whose midst they suffer “the indignities of love” (Fiedler, 1972 123).

A fourth group of cultural critics finds in Jewish-American writers cheapness, self-humiliation and embarrassment. They find it difficult to perform their function as critics as they are unable to see in most Jewish-American fiction any

reflection of their ideals. Benjamin De Mott, writing in *Commentary*, opines that Jewish fiction mostly deals with the theme of self-humiliation and evokes the emotion of self-pity.

As has been intimated, that easily admirable voice is not often to be heard in contemporary fiction. And the tone of Jewish fiction is especially remote from that which the critic might be disposed to consider as the ideal. It not only lacks suggestions of personal force, it seems to mock such force—seems in fact to imply that the role of the masterful man aloft in the world of ideas, the stance of positive control, is actually one that no Jew could ever bring off with total success, without winking reductively at himself in the process (De Mott, 1979 123).

DeMott laments that here the Jewish voice lacks “force” and is not “masterful” enough to take control of the American reality with gung-ho and aplomb. He recognizes the elements of self-mockery, self-humiliation and self-pity even when American Jews have entered the American establishment successfully. He feels that “the life of the Establishment is the only source of even half-satisfactory substitutes for the grace, cultivation, or village simplicities (of certain European Jewish experience, for example), that command immediate critical respect” (De Mott, 1979 129). On the other hand, Jeremy Larner finds in Roth’s novels as attempts to humiliate the Jewish people and not an honest way at delineating their lives. Larner says that Roth in his novels only “cheapen[s]” the people he writes about (Larner, 1960 761). The self-mockery, self-humiliation and deliberate cheapening of the Jewish experience in America has more to do with the ethnic slot in which Jewish American writing still finds itself even when the ethnic minority has escaped this predicament socially.

The psychological studies tend to emphasize the concept of “selfhood” or identity in the fiction written by Jewish-American writers. Max F. Schulz in his book *Radical Sophistication* titles his chapter on Bellow as, “Saul Bellow and the Burden of Selfhood,” underscoring his argument that Bellow celebrates “selfhood” and “identity” (Schulz, 1969 127). He postulates that Bellow’s novels disregard “popular Shibboleths” and confront the issues of the “single self” and the “multitude” defining anew the “integral self.” He believes that in Bellow’s novels “civilization exists ... only so long as the individual can retain his selfness intact. Anything less leads to death and genocide” (Schulz, 1969 128-29). The notion of an integral or an essential self is a totalizing notion that might have had some converts in the 1970s but has no takers in 2010. The metaphor of the immigrant experience has not been only a cultural mosaic but also an overarching national construction where to be American was to be a part of the American mainstream that constituted nationhood and national identity.

Ihab Hassan in his book *Radical Innocence* comes close to understanding the real purport of some of the aspects of contemporary Jewish-American fiction (Hassan, 1962). Choosing Bellow as a representative of the contemporary Jewish-American writers, Hassan finds that Bellow places a strong emphasis on the immediate reality which helps to redeem the author. Hassan says that if “redemption of man” is to come, it must come “from the present acting upon itself” (Hassan, 1962 324) Here Hassan implies that though the Jewish American community has achieved remarkable social and economic success in America, it has undermined its humanistic Hebraic values. In brief Jewish American writers have imbibed the instability and skepticism that success invariably brings with it. This tendency and sensibility is also reflected in prose and fiction written by American Jews.

Eschewing a stable Jewish past and embracing multiplicity and change, the Jewish American protagonists come closer to being hundred percent American. He shared in the trials and tribulations of a Caucasian American identity which is essentially changing. But at times Hassan is at a loss. He senses the new multiplicity of the new man, but does not find the reason for such a change or try to integrate other tendencies of such a life-style, especially a tone of mockery and skepticism. Hassan advances a weak argument by saying that Bellow's fiction is built on the tension or "dialectic" between "a proclamation for radical innocence" and "a proclamation of acceptance" (Hassan, 1962 324).

Tony Tanner explores the new sense of multiplicity and in a way examines the area left partially investigated by Hassan. Through the works of writers like Heller and Bellow, Tanner tries to understand the multiplicity of contemporary experience that he terms as a "mode of motion" (Tanner 1971, 64). Tanner believes that this urban style and movement helps individuals to locate themselves in the flux of time:

The dance on the periphery may not be leading anywhere, but at least it celebrates a refusal to sleep, a resistance to arrest; a mode of motion turns out to be a way perhaps, the only way, of life (Tanner 1971, 84).

It is rather naïve to believe that Jewish American writers were churning out fiction in the 1950s without any concern for literary success or financial gain.

It is also hard to conceptualize that any "mode of motion" can exist without a purpose as Tanner would like us to believe. The American Jew in the fiction of novelists like Potok, Bellow, Doctorow, Heller and Roth though denying financial or social success craves to acquire both. The new urban ethic that developed in

the writing of Jewish American writers seen as a way of life was both opportunistic and situational though camouflaged in the garb of Jewish humanism and Christian forgiveness.

The Talmudic Student

The heightened intellectual content of Jewish American fiction was a legacy of the Yiddishkeit and Jewish scholarship of the past. This was combined with the intense desire by second generation Jewish Americans to succeed in American society. Scholarship and hard work were the only means made available to them. Most writers cashed on their immigrant and Jewish past of which the serious Talmudic student was one. The student conducting religious studies was highly admired in old Jewish societies and was rewarded with both wealth and social status. He represented intellectualism, serious inquiry and moral virtue which were prized in traditional societies. Religious study was also a way to become one with the divine.

The intellectual as a social category in Jewish society could be traced back to the *yeshiva bochar* or the Talmudic student of the Old World ghettos. As critical inquiry grew strong among them, intellectual Jews deviated more and more from the Jewish tradition. In this way, they lost status and wealth and the admiration of their community, but instead gained the freedom of conscience. Consequently, the tradition of the serious-minded Talmudic student slowly weakened.

With the migration of the Jews from Europe to America during 1880's Jewish intellectuals began establishing themselves, in cosmopolitan centers like New York and Chicago. Here their intellect was rewarded both in terms of prestige and economic gains and they found, to resort to a phrase of Louis Wirth, a "favorable habitat" (Wirth, 1964 104). However, Jewish intellectuals during this

period were not occupied so much with critical inquiry as with getting themselves acclimatized to the American culture and environment. The lives of intellectuals like David Blaustein and American psychologist Robert Paul Abelson (1928-2005) exemplify this attitude.

During the Thirties, Jewish intellectuals began to emerge as a distinct social category in America, though there were some significant individuals during and after World War One. They were writers and critics like Ludwig Lewisohn (1882-1959), Edward Dahlberg (1900-1977), Daniel Fuchs (1909-1993), Meyer Levin (1905-1981) and others. The most prominent amongst them was Lionel Trilling (1905-1975). He distinguished himself both in literature and comparative criticism through his association with American journals such as the *Partisan Review* and *Menorah Journal* by emphasizing the connection between literature and cultural history and later between literature and socio-political themes. Some of his well-known students were Norman Podhoretz, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Hollander and Louis Menand. The Jewish intellectuals of the early 1930s were firmly attached to their immigrant environment, both in imagination and ideas. They certainly did not extend the scope of their scholarship beyond these.

Though many scholars praise the excellent quality of American Yiddish literature it is largely neglected or read in translation. In 1973 Harold Bloom lamented the neglect of Yiddish poetry and stated that there were several Yiddish poets writing in the United States—Moshe Leib Halpern, Mani Leib, H. Leivick, and Jacob Glatstein—who were “more impressive in my experience as a reader, than any American-Jewish poet who has written in English” who were hardly read (Howe, 1973). However it is difficult to club Jewish writers writing in English with those writing in Yiddish. Very often than not even writers do not

read each other and critics of one group do not follow the critics of another. Yet occasionally there have been attempts to create a composite whole by bringing them together under one totalizing umbrella—Jewish American literature or recently as American-Jewish literature, note the emphasis on the qualifier American.

The New York Intellectuals

Only with the emergence of a group of intellectuals, called “The New York Intellectuals,” their horizons broadened of Jewish American writing (Howe, 1978 599). This group consisted mainly of New York Jews who came together to pursue the common goal of critical inquiry and emphasized the role of history and culture in the shaping of literature. It included literary critics, journalists, and writers like Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz, Harold Rosenberg, Sidney Hook, Lionel Abel and others. For a while, this group roughly veered towards anti-Stalinism as it shifted away from Judaism. Their general movement, however, was in the direction of modern urban culture, as they took up urban themes like cosmopolitan living, individual alienation, religious skepticism, urban politics or urban violence and other related subjects. They began to appear together in a recognizable group in both *Partisan Review* and *Commentary* where they expressed their literary and cultural ideas. They brought to their learning an incandescent passion that was probably a reaction to starting late in life.

After the cataclysmic events of World War Two most of their values and intellectual positions began to look questionable. The persecution of Jews in Russia and the holocaust in Hitler’s Germany made them abandon communism and radicalism. Some like Singer could anticipate the Holocaust in 1935 when they came to America—“I foresaw the Holocaust” (Kim-Brown, 2004). Suddenly

they discovered America as a sanctuary for Jewish intellectuals where they could congregate and pursue their scholarly interests. Therefore, betterment of their lives and integration with their environment began to take priority over intellectual dissent. Issues that immediately confronted urban intellectuals and others took precedence over everything else. Individual instability and social adjustment became some of the significant themes that began to penetrate Jewish writing. And by mid-century Jewish intellectuals became conservative in temper, if not in ideas. They increasingly adopted an anti-communist position, some through conviction and others through fear. Those who remained communists were weeded out during the McCarthy era or went into disrepute. During this time, though some intellectuals spoke out against the threat posed by Senator McCarthy, their tone mellowed afterwards. By now they had realized that the capitalistic fruits of American democracy were better than the German persecution or Russian pogroms.

Intellectual opinion became amorphous during the Fifties and depended more on the success and power one could derive through it than on firm convictions. From a serious pursuit, intellectual activity turned into an avant garde drama. This tendency among Jewish intellectuals was a new way to respond to the multiplicity of the urban reality as it thrust upon them new goods and experiences. Many critics derided this disposition, especially Irving Howe in *World of Our Fathers*. The earlier ideals of seriousness and scholarship, prominently embodied in the archetype *yeshiva bochar*, were replaced by a new ideal of multiplicity of opinion. It was poignantly embodied in the slogan “publish or perish.”

During this time, intellectual activity brought to style and ideas a refined sophistication and complexity of mind. The intention was to encompass as many

roles, howsoever contradictory, as possible. It typified the new American way of thought that Max Lerner described as “tentative, fragmented, directed at the immediate object, and open to change at both ends” (Lerner, 1961 718). The new living models were quite successful in the early stages but could not last long as the adolescent revolutionaries were unable to take responsible decisions in society. Some like the Black Panthers, Lenny Bruce, the Chicago Conspiracy Group, John Sinclair and the Rosenbergs turned their revolutionary lifestyles into violent political confrontation with the establishment. The American status quo met their revolt with an equally firm hand both militarily and legally. The young revolutionaries of the Sixties could not use American norms or institutions to their advantage. They found the American legal system wanting and became psychologically unstable.

In the Sixties, academic and college students caviled at the criticism of the Jewish intellectuals. Those who remained at the top, like Fiedler (1917-2003), developed a polemical style when they spoke from the lectern. Others like Philip Rahv (1908-1973) began using a sophisticated style, at times loaded with French and German words, to charm their audiences. Intellectual activity turned into a sort of pugilistic tournament and the Jewish critic became an impresario.

The cultural and psychological experiments of the Sixties deeply affected the Jewish intellectual just as it did the rest of America. The Sixties, as it is well understood now, witnessed attempts made by impatient adolescents to legitimize new life-styles. These life-styles became popular throughout American cities, especially in the North, in the form of adolescent communes, psychedelic drugs, new music and group sex. The search for a short cut to happiness became the cornerstone upon which the new life-style during the Sixties was built. The Jewish intellectual who grew up in the Sixties was deeply affected by these

events either directly or indirectly. The intense need for total felicity or total physical gratification became an important ingredient of intellectual life-style in the Sixties. Intellectuals like Norman Mailer and others actively participated in student marches and enacted roles of seekers after total felicity. They became icons of revolt and hedonism which was also construed as another form of revolt against the conservative Victorian values.

Saul Bellow

Of all the Jewish American writers Bellow is both distinctive and symptomatic of a new intellectual habit of mind. The characters in the fiction of Potok, Heller and Doctorow are still enmeshed in the Jewish tradition, grappling with the pulls and counter pulls of their Jewish past and Christian present. Though these characters reflect secular learning and urban attitudes, the impact of Western ideas has not permeated deep in their sensibilities. It is only in the writings of Bellow that we see an intellectual quality that not only permeates the consciousness of the characters but expresses itself also through his style. There are also contradictions of thought, intention and ideology.

There are shifting loyalties from rebellion to conformity but there is also a Platonic understanding of the soul in exile as Harry Trellman the divorced Chicago businessman tells us in the tear-jerker *The Actual*:

A man's road back to himself is a return from his spiritual exile, for that is what a personal history amounts to—exile.

Hillel Halkin in his perceptive analysis of *The Actual* in "Mr. Bellow's Planet" connects Bellow's writing to the soul's exile and its return. And a "road back to himself" is the "neatly worked-out incarnation" that Bellow creates for himself

and his characters (Halkin, 1997 51). However *The Actual* lacks the force of a Bellovian novel with its intellectual twists and soul searching. It is too mushy for Bellow. It could be as Stephen Spender claimed many decades ago that "success alters the quality of the ego which is the consciousness contained in the work" (Spender, 1974 17).

Bellow was born on June 10, 1915 in Lachine Montreal and after his birth his family moved to Chicago. James Atlas in his authoritative biography on Bellow by the same name tells us that his father turned into a bootlegger to earn a livelihood (Atlas, 2002). In his early years Bellow became friends with the leftist Jewish immigrant Isaac Rosenfeld and began writing for the Trotskyite journal *Partisan Review*. The turbulent 1930s in America in which Bellow grew up had a deep impact on his life and he has been able to successfully represent the travails of the Depression. Though he began as a rebel and radical he was soon co-opted in the Establishment politics, material success and dominant psychological discourses. Looking back at those radical years many decades later Bellow wrote in the *Guardian* (April 10, 1993),

The country took us over. We felt that to be here was a great piece of luck. The children of immigrants in my Chicago high school, however, believed that they were also somehow Russian, and while they studied their Macbeth and Milton's L'Allegro, they read Tolstoy and Dostoevsky as well and went on inevitably to Lenin's State And Revolution, and the pamphlets of Trotsky. The Tuley high school debating club discussed the Communist Manifesto and on the main stem of the neighborhood, Division Street, the immigrant intelligentsia lectured from soapboxes, while at "the forum," a church hall on California Avenue, debates between socialists, communists and anarchists attracted a fair number of people.

This was the beginning of my radical education. For on the recommendation of friends I took up Marx and Engels, and remember, in my father's bleak office near the freight yards, blasting away at Value Price and Profit while the police raided a brothel across the street—for non-payment of protection, probably—throwing beds, bedding and chairs through the shattered windows. The Young Communist League tried to recruit me in the late 1930s. Too late—I had already read Trotsky's pamphlet on the German question and was convinced that Stalin's errors had brought Hitler to power.

In college in 1933 I was a Trotskyist. Trotsky instilled into his young followers the orthodoxy peculiar to the defeated and ousted. We belonged to the Movement, we were faithful to Leninism, and could expound the historical lessons and describe Stalin's crimes. My closest friends and I were not, however, activists; we were writers. Owing to the Depression we had no career expectations. We got through the week on five or six bucks and if our rented rooms were small, the libraries were lofty, were beautiful. Through "revolutionary politics" we met the demand of the times for action. But what really mattered was the vital personal nourishment we took from Dostoevsky or Herman Melville, from Dreiser and John Dos Passos and Faulkner. By filling out a slip of paper at the Crerar on Randolph Street you could get all the bound volumes of *The Dial* and fill long afternoons with T. S. Eliot, Rilke and e. e. cummings (Bellow, *Guardian*, 1993).

But by the end of World War Two American Trotskyite fervor waned and most Trotskyite intellectuals opted for liberal capitalism than revolution for personal gain and success. Bellow was more interested in writing great novels and not

grassroots revolution. He said,

I feel that art has something to do with the achievement of stillness in the midst of chaos. A stillness which characterizes prayer, too, and the eye of the storm. I think that art has something to do with an arrest of attention in the midst of distraction (Kazin and Plimpton, 1967).

The "arrest of attention in the midst of distraction" was more of a spiritual intellectualism and a vestige of his Jewish past. Like most intellectuals of the 1950s Bellow also shifted from Trotsky to the rather bizarre ideas of Austrian American psychologist Wilhelm Reich. His biographer Atlas tells us that Bellow practiced Reich's techniques of gathering ozone energy and yelling through a handkerchief-stuffed mouth. Bellow represented those Jewish intellectuals who had made it in the United States and therefore disliked those who could not help themselves. Though a conservative he could often write with uncanny smartness about the human predicament and social ills. In his Jefferson Lectures, "The Writer and His Country Look Each Other Over" delivered in 1977 he explains the human condition,

The living man is preoccupied with such questions as who he is, what he lives for, what he is so keenly yearning for, what his human essence is.

However his sympathy for mankind did not extend to women or Blacks.

Women and Blacks

Women are occasionally misrepresented while Blacks are both misrepresented and underrepresented in his fiction. Bellow had a low opinion of women and according to Atlas was cheating on his wife long before she got involved with

another man. During this time when Bellow wrote a short story “What Kind of Day” in *Vanity Fair* many feminists objected to the portrayal of women in the story. To this objection Bellow took offence and responded rather sharply in an interview in the *Washington Post* on May 20, 1984,

I have to be true to nature. I don't mind saying good things. But I cannot allow my arm to be twisted. I've had ladies say to me after that story appeared in *Vanity Fair*—not a magazine that does me proud anyway, I don't know why they were reading it—they said, ‘What sort of a woman is this you've portrayed? She's really old-fashioned and sexually enslaved without a mind of her own, running after an older man and trying to make it in the world of high culture. We're not like that any more.’

Well, I'm sorry girls —but many of you are like that, very much so. It's going to take a lot more than a few books by Germaine Greer or whatshername Betty Friedan to root out completely the Sleeping Beauty syndrome. “And anyway,” I'm an historian, not an ideologist. I don't think that I really owe anybody anything. The American public is accustomed to slathers of flattery. I go neither the one way nor the other.

The pretensions to be a historian, to write boldly and yet be conservative toeing the establishment line was something of a contradiction in Bellow's writing and public dealings. Today in a world of historical fragmentation his totalizing histories would be quite unacceptable except by a few old time imperialists.

Bellow hardly ever dealt with Blacks in a significant manner until we come to *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, a trait he shared with his commercial surrogate Woody Allen. In the novel the hero an aging survivor of the Nazi concentration camp is

accosted by a black pickpocket in Chicago who exposes himself in an act of effrontery and bravado. In his biography of Bellow Atlas singled out this incident to show Bellow's racist tendencies. Taken aback by Bellow's representation of Blacks Atlas, Bellow's biographer exclaims about this incident that, “a more overtly racist cluster of images is hard to imagine” (Atlas, 2000). Guttman believes that there is a perceptible distance between Bellow and Sammler. The leftmensch 70-year old protagonist is more opinionated than Bellow and the novel is not just an advertisement for the radical right (Guttman, 1973 157-66). Others like Leo Haber complain of a lack of action in the novel as if Bellow was just presenting a “stereotypical record of Talmudic debate” (Haber 1970, 24-26).

In 1959 Bellow wrote *Henderson the Rain King* detailing a man's sojourn in black Africa where he is surrounded by foolish natives who say things like “Wo, dem be trouble.” It is during this time that the rhetoric of the civil rights movement was raging in America. It seems Bellow consciously wrote it off. Living in Chicago and fearing the violence in Black ghettos he began to dislike Black Nationalism. Most Black intellectuals disliked Bellow's prejudice and negative opinions about Blacks. In 1994 Brent Staples, an Afro-American *New York Times* reporter takes a psychological journey through Bellow's much-hated childhood ghetto of Chicago and mockingly writes,

Bellow lived in an apartment tower just off the Midway on Dorchester Avenue. I knew from the novels that his apartment faced the lake and that it therefore overlooked my running route at the eastern end of the Midway. When passing that spot, I concentrated on the upper windows of the tower. I envisioned him staring down at the lone runner trudging along. I raised my arm and waved.

I added the tower to my evening walks. The intersection at 59th and Dorchester was the dark stretch of sidewalk where I had played the cruelest innings of Scatter the Pigeons.

Now and then I bounded up the tower stairs to make sure Bellow's name was still on the bell. A security gate cut you off from the base of the tower itself, which was too bad because there were shadows there to linger in.

What would I do when I caught him? Perhaps I'd lift him bodily and pin him against a wall. Perhaps I'd corner him on the stairs and take up questions about "pork chops" and "crazy buffaloes" and barbarous black pickpockets. I wanted to trophy his fear.

I stalked Dorchester Avenue for months before I caught him out. I turned out of 58th Street when I saw him: a little man in an overcoat, hurrying along the sidewalk about 20 yards ahead of me. I cursed my timing. Ten seconds earlier would have put me right on his heels. I could easily have run him down, but that wasn't the game. The game was to wait for a chance to place me squarely between the tower and him. That way, he'd have to face me in the dark. This was not to be the night. He threw back a glance, wisps of white hair flying, then picked up his pace. He showed surprising bounce getting up the stairs. When I reached the tower, I saw only his shoe disappearing through the gate.

I finally got the advantage of him in broad daylight, in an afternoon crowd in front of the Hyde Park Bank. The crowd wasn't as good as darkness, but it was camouflage. I could watch him without being seen. He was walking toward me, his khaki cap pulled low to protect his eyes from the

sun. Even squinting, the eyes seemed saucerous, huge, the skin around them slack from heavy use. Spider-legged squint lines radiated from the corners of his eyes, upward into the temple and downward into the jaw. The skin over these squint lines was translucent, like the membrane of an egg, so luminous in the sunlight that I nearly reached out to touch it. He moved through the crowd looking downward, hungrily scanning hips, crotches and legs. This was how he did it. The rest of us were a junkyard where he foraged for parts.

I wanted something from him. The longing was deep, but I couldn't place it then. It would take years for me to realize what it was. I wanted to steal the essence of him, to absorb it right into my bones. After I passed him, I felt faint and reached out for a wall. That's when I realized that I'd been holding my breath (Staples, 1994).

It is an imaginary but telling account of Bellow's narrow-mindedness and prejudice that runs through his works. It is not possible for Afro-Americans like Staples to steal his 'essence.' Perhaps it is not worth stealing at all.

If you forgive Bellow's gender and color biases, you may find a certain sharpening of focus, an intellectual intensity and a practical urban maturity which is somewhat subdued in other writers. Though Bellow is attached to the Jewish tradition he brings to his work the intellectual and philosophical traditions of Europe and America with an intellectual nuance that is both ironic and self-mocking. The ever-changing Faustian and picaresque personality of Bellow's heroes captures the entire novelistic tradition of the Anglo-American literary world. In his early novels, *Dangling Man* and *The Victim* Bellow is still rooted in the modernist themes of alienation and angst but when we come to

Adventures of Augie March we see new possibilities in his writings. In Augie March Bellow deftly combines the picaresque mode of Henry Fielding and the dark comedy of Charles Dickens transforming both to suit the needs of a young America. In the hands of Bellow American fiction acquires a new intensity, complexity and depth which has never been seen before. Here is a distinctive voice of a new American picaresque hero who fumbles, tumbles and trudges the streets of urban America and emerges victorious by his own intelligence and skill. Though Bellow was quintessentially Jewish American he was not a completely deracinated writer like some of his characters. The Jewish past, the Yiddishkeit, the Holocaust, the hybrid Jewish identity haunts him from *The Dangling Man* (1974) to *Ravelstein* (2000), the fictionalized account of Allan Bloom.

American Welfare and University Systems

Like most immigrant families in America, Bellow felt a deep sense of gratitude towards the American welfare and university systems. He was surprised to see university students attacking those hallowed precincts during the Vietnam antiwar protests. Bellow found the communist Vietnamese rebels a threat to American ideals of democracy and their American student supporters as fascists. In 1987 Allan Bloom, a philosophy professor at the University of Chicago, wrote the now famous book *The Closing of the American Mind* which caviled at the distorted vision of the academic left. Bellow wrote the preface to the book. Bloom was a student of the imperialist professor Leo Strauss who tirelessly campaigned for the dominant role of an imperialist state. Paul Wolfowitz was another disciple of Strauss. *Ravelstein* was written as a kind of Boswellian tribute to Allan Bloom who died of AIDS as a confessed homosexual in 1992. Though Bellow mixes Marxist ideology and commodification of culture in the novel no one is fooled by his eulogy:

Ravelstein's legacy to me was a subject—he thought he was giving me a subject, perhaps the best one I ever had, perhaps the only really important one. But what such a legacy signified was that he would die before me. If I were to predecease him he would certainly not write a memoir of me. Anything beyond a single page to be read at a memorial service would have been unthinkable. Yet we were close friends, none closer. What we were laughing about was death, and of course death does sharpen the comic sense. But the fact that we laughed together didn't mean that we were laughing for the same reasons. That Ravelstein's most serious ideas, put into his book, should have made him a millionaire certainly was funny. It took the genius of capitalism to make a valuable commodity out of thoughts, opinions, *teachings*. Bear in mind that Ravelstein was a teacher. He was not one of those conservatives who idolize the free market. He had views of his own on political and moral matters. But I am not interested in presenting his ideas. More than anything else, just now, I want to avoid them. I want to be brief, here. He was an educator. Put together in a book his ideas made him absurdly rich (R, 14).

Bellow's intellectual elitism and Straussian pretensions motivated him to criticize the radicalism on American campuses which he felt were havens of enlightened democracy and a protection from the terrible vulgarities of the world. Bellow used his fiction to express his resentment and biases. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet* he writes against the student movement and in *The Dean's December* he details the death of a student Mark Gromer in 1977 by the hands of a prostitute and her pimp. He passionately explains how they throw him down from the third floor of an apartment building. His love for the capitalist system is apparent in the novel:

Again, the high intention—to prevent the American idea from being

pounded into the dust altogether. And here is our American idea: liberty, equality, justice, democracy, abundance (DD, p. 123).

Here is art in the service of ideology. Anyone he does not like is either thrown off a building or taken to a skyscraper where his evil nature comes out. In *Herzog* the gangster Cantabile takes Charlie on to a sky scraper and asks him to return the money. Then Cantabile folds each dollar bill into a paper plane and throws it off the skyscraper to show his disdain for Charlie's money.

Bellow's other novels, such as *Mr. Sammler's Planet* or *Humboldt's Gift* are no less eulogies of his admirable buddies—Isaac Rosenfeld and Delmore Schwartz respectively. We find literature in the service of tear-eyed sentimentality. Bellow eulogizes the great contribution of Rosenfeld in his *Great Jewish Short Stories* thus,

The death of Isaac Rosenfeld in 1956 deprived American literature of immense stylistic and intellectual gifts. He was perhaps the most brilliant member of his generation, a philosopher and critic as well as novelist (Bellow, 1971).

In another book *An Age of Enormity* to which Bellow wrote a foreword he confesses his love for Rosenfeld and the impact of Rosenfeld on his acquaintances. Rosenfeld was committed to the stage psychology of Reich which is also Bellow's favorite analytical tool. Most of Bellow's work themselves like *Seize the Day*, *Henderson the Rain King*, and *Herzog* are "saturated with Reichianism" (Rodrigues, 1972 212). Obviously the debt Bellow owes to Rosenfeld and Reich are enormous; the first gave him style and ideas, the second tools of psychological analysis. The satire and inspiration in *Mr. Sammler's*

Planet comes from Rosenfeld's short story "King Solomon" (Goldman, 1982 117).

It is Bellow's intellectual tenor which is markedly Jewish and American that makes him the most discussed post-war American novelists by both Jewish and non-Jewish critics. Most of them are however fascinated by Bellow's delineation of Jewish identity and repertoire of Jewish male-non-Jewish female interaction and do not go any further. Perceptive scholars like Irving Howe find Bellow "struggling" to understand the "mysterious ordeal of Jewishness," while Alfred Kazin sees in his fiction a devotion to Judaism that reveals "the unreality of this world" (Howe, 1976 593; Kazin, 1973 132-33). Josephine Hendin highlights the "elegiac and nostalgic "quality of Bellow vis-à-vis the theme of Jewish "victimization and vulnerability" (Hendin, 1978 108-10). Guttman opines that Bellow's novels try to understand the issue of "assimilation and crisis of identity" of the Jews in America (Guttman, 1971 12). Irving Malin opines that society for Bellow acts as an inescapable "threat" (Malin, 1969 9-47). Malin traces aspects of Jewishness, marginality and alienation in Bellow's fiction after neatly dividing his novels into broad themes to suit his totalizing purpose. Even when Malin notes the tension in Bellow's fiction between Judaism and skepticism—especially in *Dangling Man*—he does not pursue the matter to any serious consequence.

Hassan's analysis is far more perceptive than the rest. Bellow's urban Jewish American characters are relatively "conscious of their ancient heritage" and "embody the perplexities of the American Jew seeking a new consciousness" of themselves and a "new definition of [their] fate" (Hassan, 1973 27). Frank P. McConnell tells that Bellow does not aim to "revivify the sanctions and values of Western culture" but to legitimize a new urban behavior that has sprung up (McConnell, 1977 10). Therefore, Bellow's protagonists are not "myth

preservers” as McConnell believes. They are on the contrary myth-makers.

Fiedler wonders why Bellow changes the philosophical content in each novel. Fiedler points out that the philosophical content of Bellow’s novels is based on the “latest book” he had read and had been impressed with. For instance, the ideas of philosophers and psychologists like Rudolf Steiner, Edward Shils and Wilhelm Reich found their way into Bellow’s fiction (Leelavathi, 1970 51-52). Leslie Fiedler, however, did not explain why this phenomenon occurred. Perhaps, he refused to see that the hallmark of Bellow’s characters was a lack of complete belief either in their own philosophy or in another’s. The philosophical shifts in Bellow’s fiction suit the author extremely well, because his characters can be put adrift on a sea of change. Bellow’s ideal protagonist changes as he encounters new experiences keeping his own desires at the center. The philosophical shift in Bellow expresses both the philosophical confusion and the multiplicity of belief in his characters. The defects of Reich’s personality loom large over Bellow’s conceptualization of his fictional characters. Fiedler may be right in suggesting an intellectual confusion in Bellow as a result of shifting philosophical positions.

In Bellow’s fiction that stretches from the 1940s to the end of the century, there is a new urban class of men who desperately seek to know themselves and find a place in the world they live in. They bring to the novels an intellectual force that is lacking in earlier Jewish fiction, especially in the writings of Henry Roth and Daniel Fuchs. The strong intellectual content of Bellow’s protagonists provides a new force to the protean life-style they practice. Most of Bellow’s protagonists are either academics or creative artists. For instance, Moses Herzog and Charlie Citrine are professors in American universities, while Asa Leventhal is a news editor. In fact, all protagonists possess an analytical frame of mind. Echoes of Arthur Sammler’s Aristotelian statement in *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* that “all men

by nature desire to know” can be heard in all his novels (Bellow, 1969 111). We find most characters are deeply introspective and analytical and it helps them to interpret their experience without much help from either the Jewish or the Christian tradition. Only Tommy Wilhelm falls short of this estimate, probably because his wild emotions overshadow his intellectual trait.

Bellow not only chooses intellectuals as his heroes but also singles out men who possess or share an immigrant Jewish background. He then places them in the cities of Chicago and New York, where incidentally most Jews in America live. Except for *Henderson the Rain King* all other novels have a Jewish protagonist who shares the East European world of his grandparents, parents, or he has experienced it directly (Bellow, 1958 rpt. 1976). Augie March, for instance, encounters the Jewish world through his Grandma Lausch, while Moses Herzog does so through his Russian-Jewish mother. Both characters carry this past with them and Herzog goes so far as to refurbish it when he visits the Polish ghetto with his beloved, Wanda, as his guide (H, p.37). Rahv thinks that Bellow had “put a great deal of himself into his protagonist Herzog,” a remark which is applicable to others as well (Rahv, 1969 394). Bellow’s own immigrant past, especially his Canadian childhood, enters some of his novels together with his Hebraic heritage. Bellow elaborates upon this aspect in his latest diary, *To Jerusalem and Back*, which is a personal account of his visit to Israel. In this he says that as he boarded the plane bound for Israel, he found himself in the midst of other traditional Jews. Though their “hats, sidelocks and fringes” were foreign to him, he found that they reminded him of his own Jewish childhood. Bellow says that while sitting with these co-passengers and observing their attire and listening to their conversation, he felt as if he was revisiting his childhood (Bellow, 1977 1-2). Perhaps, like Herzog, Bellow too desires to refurbish his Jewish past by making this sentimental journey to Israel.

Either directly or indirectly, Bellow's characters share a common fate by virtue of being Jews. Consequently, they also share the insecurity of the East European world, especially of the holocaust years. The insecurity is transferred to the American cities where most Jews live now. Though over the years the insecurity has mellowed down in intensity, it continues to affect their lives. Bellow remembers an incident, in *To Jerusalem and Back*, about a Harvard professor who feared a second holocaust while in America. This is what Bellow says about the incident:

A Jewish Professor at Harvard recently said to me, "Wouldn't it be the most horrible of ironies if the Jews had collected themselves conveniently in one country for a second Holocaust?" This is a thought that sometimes crosses Jewish minds. This is accompanied by the further reflection (partly, proud, mostly bitter) that we Jews seem to have a genius for finding the heart of the crisis" (JB, p. 15).

Sammler, for instance, is a holocaust victim who has lost one of his eyes and has also suffered torture under the Nazi regime. His pain and revenge are both represented when he shoots the German soldier who begs for life (SP, pp. 13-39). Herzog, on the other hand, can only imagine the experience holocaust that Sammler has undergone. When Herzog thinks about the Jewish victims he feels like "bursting into tears" (H, p. 96). The question is how much is intellectual reconstruction and how much is real feeling on Bellow's part is rather difficult to imagine.

Bringing this background to their city lives, American Jews in Bellow's novels feel insecure as their Jewishness is singled out. For instance, in *The Victim* this sense of insecurity is highlighted. Kirby Albee seeks recompense for the loss and

atonement for the hurt Asa Leventhal has caused him. Leventhal has fought with Albee's employer Harkavy and unknowingly caused Albee's dismissal from the job. Albee considers Leventhal guilty and demands financial and emotional help as recompense. As Albee follows Asa in New York City begging for help, the former also mocks at the latter's Jewish origins. Albee begins by calling New York "a very Jewish city" and links Asa with other Jews of the city with phrases such as "your people" (TV, p. 64). Albee's remarks, though thrown in casually, have the desired effect of making Leventhal feel insecure and consequently angry at Albee. Like Leventhal, all Jewish characters have a feeling of being aliens in the city that makes them cry out, like Herzog, "In New York we were strangers too" (H, p. 165). The feeling of distance both from the Jewish and the Christian tradition quickens their movement in the direction of an urban life-style.

The feeling of insecurity coupled with the sense of alienation occasionally generates a feeling of vulnerability and victimization. They feel victimized like Leventhal and want some kind of "Anglo-Saxon fairness" (TV, p. 77). The white majority feels scared of the strange customs and energy of the immigrant Jew. Albee comes from an "old New England family" and sees the Jews as "Caliban monsters," more successful than he is (TV, p. 124). It generates in him a feeling of resentment against Leventhal who represents the Jewish community. In *The Victim*, Schlossberg's categories of "less than human" (sub-human) and "more than human" (super-human) are distorted images of man through which WASPS and Jews understand each other. In fact, both groups become victims of fear and mutual distrust generated by the cultural distance between them. The feeling of cultural gap and a sense of alienation from the WASP culture make them wonder like Herzog, whether they will always remain alien in this land and will "never be able to grasp the Christian or Faustian" world-views (H, p. 286). Bellow's

protagonists ponder over the barrenness of their own lives that the city accentuates. Bellow's ability to represent this image of the Jews is par excellence. Even Irving Howe admits that, "among all the American Jewish writers he [Bellow] draws upon the richest Jewish culture, which in the circumstances may simply mean that he knows enough to surmise the extent of our dispossession" (Howe, 593). It is the dispossession and tenacity of purpose to succeed that made Jewish American literature both incandescent and appealing before its collapse.

Though Bellow's characters experience a sense of loneliness and forlornness in a WASP-dominated city, they find the social opportunities provided here quite attractive. As such, the characters express opposite reactions to urban life. In Potok these emotions are given to different generations: Bellow synthesizes them in the same personalities. In a way Bellow's fiction marks the process of crystallization of the protean man. In Bellow's novels the protagonist suffers from both psychological and emotional ambivalence: psychologically he realizes the possibilities inherent in urban life, and also the emotional demands it makes upon him. It generates in him a conflict between a desire to be inner-directed, where there is "less danger of being broken," and a desire to be outer-directed, where there is an opportunity to "flash" or show one's power and privilege (TV, p. 85). The pressures of the city repel the individual, while its privileges attract him. For instance, Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day* desires to be in the countryside because he cannot bear the pressure, or the "too much push" of New York City (STD, p. 57). However, he does not leave the city as here lies everything he desires and has failed to get.

By slow degrees, Bellow's characters perceive the opposite pulls of the city and try to resolve them. They, like Joseph in *Dangling Man*, accept the loneliness and anxiety as compensation for the opportunities they get there. "As such places

go," Joseph admits about his accommodation, "it is not bad though there are the standard rooming house annoyances: cooking odors, roaches and peculiar neighbors" (DM, p. 8). In *The Adventures of Augie March* though Augie March runs away from Chicago to Mexico, seeking a "change of pressure," he finds that escape is futile. Once he realizes this, he comes back to Chicago (AM, p. 162). In *Humboldt's Gift*, Charile cannot match the "shrewd urban faces" (HG, p. 90) and feels uncomfortable in the city crowd but he does not wish to leave the city: on the contrary, he "insisted on living in Chicago" (HG, p. 274).

Bellow's characters are able to live in the city by periodically becoming indifferent to others and reconstituting themselves. As Bellow's fiction matures, his characters gain this insight. "What you needed in a big American city was a deep no-effect belt, a critical mass of indifference" (HG, p. 54). Only then can one enjoy the "beautiful and moving things in Chicago" (HG, p. 66). To lament upon the brevity of human contact or relationships, as Tommy Wilhelm does, can lead one to disappointment and pain. In other words, Bellow's characters attempt at striking a balance between concern for others and indifference to others. Only by alternating between involvement and withdrawal can urban man exist sanely in society. But this is an advanced stage of growth that is termed as operational as it involves cognition of their traits. This stage is barely discerned in the protagonists but it is clearly delineated in the personality of the archetype, "reality instructor." It is only on rare occasions that Bellow's protagonists perceive what is needed of them in the city. M. R. Satyanarayana points out that Sammler is his own reality instructor who seeks counsel from his own experience but is sucked into the vortex of black ghetto violence (Satyanarayana, 1971 55-68). Though Charlie advocates the "no effect belt" method of relating with others he himself is not able to achieve this fully and is taught partly by Cantabile and partly by experience itself.

The “no effect belt” that Charlie advocates has its pernicious effect too when it is employed without complete knowledge. It has a tendency to make the protagonist self-centered. This is the case with most characters. Not being fully able to judge when to be indifferent and when to show concern, they find themselves withdrawing from long-range commitments. And whenever they seek companionship they seek immediate and quick gratification from it. This is true especially in their relationship with women from whom they seek immediate physical gratification: purchase of love and sex becomes an important aspect of the protean man’s life-style. Herzog, for instance, asserts, perhaps rationally, that

Paying didn’t matter. Nor using, what other people used. That’s what city life is. And so it didn’t have the luster it should have had, and there wasn’t any epithalamium of gentle lovers (H, p. 124).

However, the protagonists always feel that the satisfaction they get out of a consumerist relationship is incomplete. Sarah Blacher Cohen, says that Herzog’s view of himself is linked to his view of Chicago. The consumerism of a metropolitan city like Chicago gets “linked” to the consumerism in interpersonal relationships. Though consumerism is justified, it is also lamented as it is transitory and does not have a permanent quality to it (Cohen, 1978 139-46). This is the new life-style that is legitimized in Bellow’s fiction.

The protagonists’ ability to quickly adopt a consumerist attitude toward city life, especially toward others, may be rooted in their childhood experiences. Most of the protagonists though they are successful now, remember their childhood pain of penury. They are more possessive of their worldly goods as they have lived through poverty and deprivation. They also relish the power that money brings to them. Having lived in poverty and servitude most of their early lives, they seek to

invert the position. Augie March and Herzog for instance have seen the misery caused by the Depression of the Thirties. Herzog ruminates, “I grew up in a time of widespread ... unemployed” (H, p. 375). Augie remembers how as a child he picked glittering objects off the streets of Chicago hoping they would be coins (AM, p. 447-48). Remembering the incident he realizes “anew how great a subject money is in itself.” He knows that “money, if not the secret, was anyhow beside the secret, as the secret’s relative or associate or representative before the peoples” (AM, p. 344). Worldly goods become the measure of happiness, and this attitude extends to interpersonal relationship and results in the purchase and sale of sexual favors. It is easy for Augie March to extend this attitude to interpersonal relationships: and so is it for Charlie Citrine.

In the beginning of *Humboldt’s Gift*, Charlie Citrine boasts that money was not on his mind. What he wanted was to do was good (HG, p. 2). Charlie, however, holds back the money he owes to Cantabile until Cantabile forces him to pay. Later Charlie laments, during his marital crisis, that his former wife Denise was fleecing him through a protracted legal battle. On another occasion, while in a restaurant with Renata, Charlie plays the “poor-boy bit” as he observes the price of dishes first before reading their names. Renata observes that his eye “goes from right to left,” as he reads the menu in the restaurant (HG, p. 337). These instances point to the fact that money in Bellow’s fiction becomes a symbol of power and indirectly (not having it) of servitude. The power-servitude syndrome extends to the love relationships of the protagonists which is discussed later in the chapter. Incidentally, from the ideological point of view this position can be interpreted as neo-conservatism. This is so because characters tacitly accept the American system and set out to understand and improve its institutions. Even Joseph, in *Dangling Man*, who leans towards Communism gets disillusioned with it eventually and surrenders himself totally to the Establishment.

The consumerist way of interacting with others might give the protagonists immediate physical relief, but it does not give them lasting happiness or any philosophy of life. Their “imagination of the universe,” or their understanding of it, is not determined by any religion or philosophy but defined by their immediate needs (H, p. 63). Their skeptical attitude toward the Hebraic tradition makes these characters “miserable” and spiritually lonely. The protean man is initially not able to self-distance himself and distill the essence of meaning of his sexual experience. In other words, he is not able to evolve a philosophy of his own that will structure his life. In the protean stage he is just skeptical of the tradition. It is a later stage that is termed as operational where he achieves this well-being. Joseph finds he cannot believe in God: “No, not God, not any divinity. That was anterior, not of my own deriving (DM, p. 56). However, he cannot believe in any other thing either. Mostly, characters are caught up in their “skeptical interest” in things (TV, p. 8). For instance, Charlie laments,

To be Christian was impossible, to be a pagan also. That left you-know-what (HG, p. 10).

It leaves him with nothing much. In *Augie March*, this attitude is reflected in his directionless condition. He cannot find out the object of his intense longing (AM, p. 84). In Asa Leventhal’s case skepticism turns to disgust and negation. He questions the sanctity and validity of “all the codes and rules” that no more reflect “our own nature” (TV, p. 70). In the case of Charlie Citrine skepticism turns to exasperation. He admits having experimented with at least five philosophical approaches to the understanding of life. He has tested mysticism, existentialism, nihilism, Buddhism and Christianity and has found them all wanting. After it he sighs, “I had had it with most contemporary ways of philosophizing” (HG, p. 344). The search for a philosophy of life seems to be

constantly thwarted by the skeptical attitude of the characters till “being right” becomes “largely a matter of explanation.” Sammler finds that the “intellectual man has become an explaining creature,” till nothing holds water.

The soul wanted what it wanted.... It sat unhappily on superstructures of explanation, poor bird, not knowing which way to fly (SP, p. 5).

Shorn of the conventional ways of making sense of their experience, protagonists depend more on their own awareness of facts. Mostly, they eschew the conventional explanation and adhere to their own intuition. For instance, *Augie March* believes in his “own counseling system” from the start. “It wasn’t infallible,” he tells us, “but it made mistakes such as I could bear” (AM, p. 204). *Moses Herzog* too keeps “one corner of his mind” always “open to the external world” (H, p. 8). Rarely do the characters see things the way they are seen by others. Their perception is usually intense as it is combined with a sharp intuition. Asa Leventhal finds the people and incidents in the city as “trembling drops.” He “does not know what went on about him,” in the city, “what strange things, savage things. They hung near him all the time in trembling drops, invisible, usually, or seen from a distance” (TV, pp. 81-82). As these “trembling drops” change, his experience also changes shape. The personality changes as the experience change; it becomes protean in nature.

As the characters are constantly changing their attitudes, ideas, and beliefs, when they encounter new experiences, they cannot be defined in exact terms. Bellow’s protagonists, like the character Einhorn in *Augie March*, cannot be “tracked” (AM, p. 83). They cannot be pinned down or defined, as their personalities are “always undergoing transformations” (HRK, pp. 220-1). *Herzog*, for instance, feels that his own individual character “cut off at times both from facts and from

values” is always changing. Herzog perceives this to be the “modern character.” It is a character that is usually “inconstant” as it is “deprived of the firm ideas” and the “clear hard theorems” that the “archaic man” possessed (H, p. 134). Allen Guttman comes close to understanding Bellow’s protagonists when he says that Joseph grows aware of his personality as an “intersection of sets, the fabric woven by the crisscross of social roles” (Guttman, 179). However Joseph does not have a mature understanding of his nature. He has only a premonition of the course his personality might take. Charlie, on the contrary, is conscious of the changing nature of his convictions and personality. He, therefore, forbids his friend Thaxter to quote him to others. Charlie feels that he himself may not believe in what he has said earlier. “‘Put away that paper,’ I said, ‘For God’s sake, don’t quote my big ideas at me’” (HC, p. 259). From this point of view the characters do not remain Though Tony Tanner believes that Bellow’s characters remain “very much themselves at the end of their stories” (Tanner, 1978 145). Perhaps he is right but they do become aware of their shortcomings and the need to overhaul their lives.

The constant change that the personality of the typical protagonist represents is also reinforced by the imagery of the automobile used in the novels. The automobile represents the mind in perpetual motion, while the attitude of the protagonist toward it expresses his self-assessment. For instance, Tommy’s life is in shambles, as is his Pontiac (STD, p. 20). As Herzog’s Falcon meets with an accident (when he takes his daughter Junie away for a ride in Chicago), he realizes that instead of protecting her he had nearly killed her. The incident reflects his loss of self-worth. Finally, Charlie’s inability to protect his Mercedes-Benz against the attack of Cantabile’s thugs symbolizes his helplessness and vulnerability. In short, the image of the automobile represents various aspects of the protean personality—and of city life as well.

The personality of the protagonist acquires a new flux as it encounters new experiences. Augie speaks for all of them when he says ironically that a man with a changing personality was “unsafe” today. “Personality is unsafe in the first place. It’s the types that are safe. So almost all make deformations on themselves so that the great terror will let them be” (AM, p. 402). Incidentally, the “great terror” alluded to by Augie March is the feeling of doubt that he has when he encounters the world afresh. Many give in and make “deformations on themselves” in order to avoid the “terror” of the new and the unknown. In the absence of guidelines for living and confronting death, characters feel an intense existential terror.

When the individual sacrifices the claims of his nature he finds he is still prevented by the urban system to breathe freely in the crowded city. Even when characters make deformations on themselves by conforming, they find that they still cannot define their personal space. In other words, in these novels city life makes people helpless, as they become dependent more on organizations and groups than on particular individuals. For example, Albee finds that “groups, organizations succeed or fail, but not individuals any longer” (TV, p. 62). When protagonists feel crowded in from all sides by urban groups they desire retreat and isolation: they seek a personal space in which they can live and breathe freely. This feeling is expressed most effectively through the image of the lone wolf in *Seize the Day*. As man feels threatened by city life, he wishes to escape from it. When he cannot, in Tamkin’s own phrase, he howls from his “city window” like a lonely wolf (STD, p. 107). But usually he cannot howl. Many times, when the individual finds the crowding of his personal space unbearable, he desires death. He wishes either to commit suicide or to submit totally to the organizations in the belief that by complete submission he would escape the pain of suffocation. The protagonist realizes that even when he is willing to conform

to the social pattern at the expense of his personality, he still does not get enough personal space to live in. The “defeated wolf offered his throat,” says Charile, “and the victor snapped but wouldn’t bite” (HG, pp. 77-78).

Poetic prose is the hallmark of Bellow’s esthetic sensibility and expresses the feelings his protagonists bring to the capturing of details that they observe around them. Disgusted with the boredom of bureaucratic meetings, Herzog writes,

I try to look right and proper but my face turns dead with boredom, my fantasy spills soup and gravy on everybody, and I want to scream out or faint away (H, p. 39).

Bellow’s intense passion for detail is reflected in the description of Sandor’s feelings as Herzog goes to Sandor for some legal advice on the issue of his divorce from Madeline. Sandor gets angry while giving Herzog advice and this is described as the “love of that heart must have pushed those ribs out of shape and the force of that hellish tongue made his teeth protrude” (H, pp. 109-10). This force is evident early in Bellow’s second novel *The Victim*, and becomes strongest in *Humboldt’s Gift*.

Bellow has interrogated the paradox of the self at the same time reverting back into the conservative self of self-interest and Establishment values. Though he has questioned Jewish beliefs and traditional ways of philosophizing he has not revealed anything extraordinarily new. He has shown new tensions the contemporary man is subject to as he confronts the world of “formless turbulence, news, slogans, mysterious crisis, and unreal configurations” (Bellow, 1977 9). Bellow legitimates a new intellectual daring in his fiction but retreats to

defending the status quo. Doubt and belief, pain and joy are feelings that coexist in his novels. But questionably the immigrant individual has changed, just as the reality he interacts with has altered. “We have so completely debunked the old idea of the self that we can hardly continue in the same way,” says Bellow (Bellow, 1977, 18). The belief in fate or destiny is not as strong as the Yiddishkiet had made us believe. In modern America the Jews could design their present and shape their future. They could find a locus standi in the entropy that ensues. In the absence of an earlier world-view, a new one prevails that professes that individuals or “these particles may have functions but certainly lack fate” (AM, p. 516). In such a time, when tradition lies discredited, Bellow advocates that man’s happiness depends upon his reliance on intuition and not on religion or metaphysics. “Perhaps some power within us will tell us what we are,” says Bellow, “now that old misconceptions have been laid low.”

All this is fine but Bellow shares his arrogance and prejudices that alienates a lot of people. In the 1990s Bellow remarked that he would read the Zulus only when they produced a Tolstoy. The present generation might more interested in the way Bellow treats the preponderance of “power” and how and when to seize opportunity and succeed than in the condition of the modern soul. They will be more interested how the immigrant intellectual has finally made it in America and now strides like a colossus over the American literary and economic imagination. And this they can get from other sources not necessarily from Bellovian fiction.

The Jewish Intellectual as Protagonist

Sharing this intellectual milieu of Bellow, the American Jewish novelists made the Jewish intellectual the primary focus of their work. In other words, it was left to some of these creative artists, who have superior vision and intuition, to

embody new ideas in a courageous alternative model. Herein lays the special appeal of Heller because he did not take the American system on its own terms. On the contrary, he used the political double-think of people like Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew to show their insanity. Heller does this most effectively in *Catch 22*. Much later he does the same trick in *Good as Gold* where he chooses an unsuccessful Jewish academic running for a non-elective political position as his protagonist. But since this novel belongs to the Seventies the use of double entendres becomes rather put on. Later Roth developed this style in *Our Gang* that was basically a parody of Nixon's duplicity in his style of functioning. Briefly, the Jewish intellectual and writers of the Sixties laid a new emphasis upon physical gratification and combined it with their earlier life-style of multiplicity. Therefore, two themes became prominent during this time: the need for multiplicity or role-changing and the desire for total physical gratification or promiscuity.

In the Seventies the emphasis on practical ways of living, especially a desire to understand the other's point of view and an attempt to establish connections in life became fundamental. Most of the Jewish intellectuals too had grown up during this time just as the rest of the youthful revolutionaries of the Sixties had. The revolutionaries of the Sixties matured into adulthood once they had tested their ideals against the hard rock of reality. They found many of their utopian dreams flawed and discovered that the cultural, constitutional, personal, and scholastic freedoms they were seeking were only great expectations.

Richard Sennett demonstrates how the initial failure of dreams, that the revolutionary leaders dreamed, brought "a deep change" in their lives. They grew stronger in their "commitment to the cause," yet the "nature of [their] commitment" was "transformed by the experience of failure" (Sennett 1970 110-

11). For the first time these men became absorbed in outward detail, wanted to know the enemy, and also to understand themselves. Failure brought in their lives an awareness of the existence of others and the desire to understand those who were "different." In the Jewish-American writer, who was certainly a representative intellectual of that time, this tendency sought release in self-criticism and in acceptance of others.

The psychological freedom of the Sixties, inter-twined with practical ways of urban living in the Seventies, gave birth to a strange class of men. These men exhibited two extremes in their personalities. On the one hand, they were emotional, impersonal, and narcissistic, and on the other, rational, affectionate, and other-directed. These paradoxical tendencies not only were embodied in the life-styles of the Jewish intellectual but became the pattern around which the novels were built. This inter-mixture of opposite emotions brought, on the personal plane, a feverish intensity in the pursuit of pleasure together with an overwhelming sense of enervation, if it was delayed.

The Reality Instructor

America values practical skills more than emotional dreaminess, but if you can integrate your emotional wistfulness with reality it suits its purpose. Only a few characters in Jewish American writing are able to integrate the two and such persons are represented as mature reality operators or instructors who can function successfully in any situation. This tendency was noted long ago by the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville in his famous book *Democracy in America* (Tocqueville, 1945 145). On the socio-economic plane reality operators revealed a keen awareness of history and a blatant disregard for all written history. On the political plane they showed outspoken contempt or muted silence on the issue of American involvement in Vietnam. On the sociological level they

showed a desire for change in the city environment and a decrease, if not a total cessation, in urban group violence. On the literary front, the awareness and disregard of human history made writers, like Ronald Sukenick (1932-2004), Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), Thomas Pynchon (1937-), John Hawkes (1925-1998), Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), Gunter Grass (1927-), Donald Barthelme (1931-1989), and John Barth (1930-) use the genre of the novel both as fact and fantasy. The clear divide between fiction and fact was obliterated completely. Writers began to see the highly imaginative content in history and reflected on its hidden intentionality and destructive fallibilism. To most American novelists of the 1960s and 1970s including Jewish American writers al historical “engagements” became essentially “lunatic and futile” (Alter, 1975 45-51). Their strong emotional need for locating authenticity in all kinds of narratives, whether it was historical or literary, paced a strong pressure on their psyche that welcomed multiplicity and fragmentation.

Fiction was no longer categorically defined as the portrayal of probable fact. It became a subjective way of expressing multiple realities that may not be “objectively grasped” (Buckeye, 1969 44). The Jewish American novel not only portrayed a fictionalized of escape but also measured the personal space one could occupy. Novels dealt with both real and imagined details and actual and fictional persons. Both these aspects, the imagined and the real, were transformed by a blinding rage into the literary vision of writers and sought expression through the personality of the skeptical urban protagonists and other minor characters. As most writers came from big cities, the city became the playground for the realization of desires and the fulfillment of dreams. It is possible to see this theme being replayed in fiction from James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* to Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*. Both novels were sort of bildungsroman dealing with the process of growing up in bad old Chicago.

During the 1970s most Jewish intellectuals relinquished serious critical inquiry for its own sake or as spiritual consecration. Intellectual activity began to be directed more towards fulfilling immediate needs such as the acquisition of power, money, position or prestige and less towards divine goals. The ideal of the *yeshiba bochar*, such as long-range commitment to a cause, celibacy, pursuit of non-worldly happiness, belief in the Jewish tradition, rootedness in Yiddishkeit, a sense of belonging, was replaced by a new multiplicity, commitment to the moment, promiscuity, pleasure-directed life, wanderlust and seeking sustenance without. The spiritual consecration of the *yeshiba bochar* was gradually transformed into a sexual consecration of the Jewish intellectual. From a religious man, with fixed goals and personality, the contemporary man began to value multiplicity and change.

The Runaway Jewish Intellectuals

The “runaway Jewish intellectuals” who came to America cities before and during Hitler’s *endlosung* (the final solution) became, along with other Jews already residing there, became secure and successful by the 1960s (Friedman 1969). Most of them worked in big cities and became “most enthusiastic city-dwellers” (Sklare, 1972 70). The WASP Americans, on the contrary, were fleeing the hustle and bustle of the city. Most of the Jewish intellectuals who came to America during mid-twentieth century were the result of Hitler’s Jewish purge: “A generation of Jewish intellectuals thanks to Hitler” pontificates Ronald Sukenick in his novel, *98.6* obviously referring to this phenomenon (Sukenick, 1975 179).

The image of the shtetl orthodoxy and horrors of the holocaust loomed large in the representations of American life by Jewish writers. The Jewish intellectuals

who came to America during this time shared the insecurity and pain of the holocaust just as their ancestors, who migrated to America at the turn of the century, had brought the insecurity of the *shtetl* or small town world. The Jewish writers together with their protagonists shared directly, or by proxy, the East European world. Like Bellow, Doctorow and Potok, Augie March, Daniel Lewin, and Asher Lev also share the insecurity of the holocaust and persecutions in Germany or Russia either directly or indirectly. They return to the urban life of America but there too they find an orthodox community. Memories of the *shtetl* and holocaust arouse in the Jewish writer, paradoxically, fond and painful memories that seek release in fiction. He also shares a community of fate or *schicksalsgemeinschaft* by virtue of being a Jew.

Desirous of making the city his home, the Jewish writer strongly opposes the Yiddishkeit or *shtetl* life-style as he leans toward the new urban life-style. Though this psychological tension affects his life in devious ways, it also helps him to understand and adapt himself to the urban environment in a better way. Marshall Sklare points out that the Jews in recent times have played a major role in “supplying others with the amenities and graces of urban life” which have now become lost luster (Sklare 1972 70).

Most Jewish American novels developed a scheme using emotional suffering and alienation as components of character development within the American social framework. Since the writers themselves occupied urban centers of learning they used their urban loneliness and its concerns to create urban characters in their fiction wallowing in their ‘unique’ Jewish ethnicity. Using the techniques of the bildungsroman and media res literary representations Jewish American writers like Bellow, Potok, Roth, Heller and others pursued psychological yearnings, what they called the soul, locating it in Platonic and Hebraic philosophical

traditions. Most of their learning was skin deep as most American writing during this time was. There was hardly any intellectual paradigm or a composite philosophy that would explain their bizarre search for identity, soul’s exile or desire to do social good. There novels were always rooted in the latest psychological fad, some ancient Yiddishkeit, immigrant experience, desire to succeed or indulgence of the senses. We anyway do not go to literature for philosophical insights or psychological elucidation; we go to it for some strange emotional authenticity as if a literary representation or confession would authenticate the world we live in. Novelists themselves pursue other sources.

Though each novelist and his work might be different, all seem to draw from the soul’s search for meaning, making sense of the reality they live in and learning from practical-minded and successful people. In the desire to succeed they compromise their tear-eyed idealism and become conservative. Hardly anyone goes beyond the love-money-sex triangle.

The Skeptical Man

A typical protagonist adopts an urban way of life as he encounters the multiplicity and uncertainty of the urban reality. He wears different masks and like his Greek ancestor Proteus assumes different roles in society. It is not that he is playing roles like most of us. Our institutions are such that they expect of us certain roles from time to time but the roles that most of us play are different from the roles that the skeptical and protean men play. They are skeptical of tradition, that defines experience through its symbols and metaphors, and are given to the myth of total physical gratification. They are unable to structure his experience with the aid of society but depend upon themselves for direction and definition. As their personality undergoes change their experience also changes. They might feel that they do not possess a core personality, or a original locus to

which they could return during an emotional emergencies. Most conventional men who play roles can, after they have played their roles, return to his original locus; their roles are a part of their social order. The skeptical individuals feel there is no return.

We see urban protagonists in Jewish American literature continuously struggling to maintain their balance in the city they lives in. They do so by adopting a tone of mockery while relying on their innate intuition. They seek connections between disparate events and objects multiplied greatly by the mass media. The archetype protagonist in these novels is the ever-changing skeptical individual. Augie March speaks for most of the heroes in Jewish-American fiction when he says:

Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand and believe you can come to them in this immediate terra incognita that spreads out in every gaze (Bellow, 1949; rpt 1965 536).

Is the recurrent seafaring Columbus image accidental in the works of Bellow and Roth or does it reveal the psyche of the protagonists and the authors? Perhaps, just as the explorer Columbus who was looking for land accidentally discovered America, so also the Jewish protagonist looking for an emotional land discovers a territory that is urban America. Invariably, they do not find America and through this lack or absence invert the Columbus image. The lack or absence also creates a sad, elegiac mood that enters the tone of voice as self mockery, But certainly they are adrift on a sea of change as Columbus was; perhaps, they are waiting for an accidental discovery.

The Changeable Man

Many Jewish American protagonists combine a protean streak with opportunism and search for sexual satisfaction. Erik Erikson defines protean traits as one of “many appearances” that forces individuals into “many disguises,” “chameleon like adaptation [s] to passing scenes” and “essential elusiveness” (Erikson, 1975 71). Such people are constantly on the move and seek orientation from objects and events themselves. Robert Jay Lifton sees them in a process “of interminable exploration and flux, and [their] self-process [is] characterized by relatively easy shifts in belief and identification” (Lifton, 1968 152). As we move from Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev* through Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March* and to Roth’s *Letting Go*, we see a deepening of multiplicity and change.

The sequel to *My Name is Asher Lev* returns to the apostasy of the Hasidic hero Asher. Now living in France he continues to be disturbed by his imitative and painfully autobiographical art. He returns to Brooklyn when his favorite uncle dies. Though here he reunites with his Hasidic colleagues, his Uncle had made him the sole keeper of his prized art collection while his Ladover community has selected his son, Avrumel, to succeed the orthodox community as a leader. Asher is plagued by the dilemma to remain in Brooklyn or return to France. He knows that the orthodox Jewish community views his art as evil and living away from them is the viable alternative. The sequel *The Gift of Asher Lev* therefore opens with this dilemma:

Afterwards I lived in Paris in the same apartment where I had painted the Brooklyn Crucifixion. I married Devorah, and we moved to the Rue des Rosiers. Some years later, Devorah gave birth to a girl, and we named her Rochel, after Devorah’s mother, of blessed memory, who was taken away in the July 1942 roundup of French Jews. We called her Rocheleh, beloved

little Rochel.... I made many drawing and painting of Devorah and Rocheleh but I kept most of them for my own collection and would not show or sell them (Potok, 1991 3).

Though Asher is 45 years old he is not regarded as a successful painter, in fact derided for his “potentially mawkish sensibility” verging on “miserabilism” (p. 5).

The special position of the Jewish intellectual in the urban scenario has given him the lead role in this new life-style. Open to new ideas, he was increasingly becoming dissatisfied with the Jewish tradition as he realized that it was already outdated. Thorstein Veblen’s observation about European Jews applies equally well to American Jews:

The Young Jew finds his own heritage of usage and outlook untenable; but this does not mean that he therefore will take over and inwardly assimilate the traditions of usage and outlook which the gentile world has to offer; or at the most he does not uncritically take over all the intellectual prepossessions that are always standing over among the substantial citizens of the republic of learning (Veblen, 1964 229).

Skeptical of others’ traditions and finding his own meaningless, the Jewish intellectual feels intense psychological barrenness and inner cosmic absurdity.

Childhood and Psychological Barrenness

The psychological barrenness is typical of most writers like Bellow and Roth in whose works it gets mixed with certain childhood experiences of economic deprivation or psychological repression. Therefore, when they acquire riches or

become adults, these characters have a tendency to invert the world of poverty or deprivation of their early lives. In the case of Roth the psychological barrenness becomes intermixed with certain repressive experiences of childhood in the life of the protagonist and this intermingling raises many complex issues. For instance, Alexander Portnoy believes that his strict childhood upbringing in a middle-class Jewish family is partly responsible for his failure with women. The failure in his relationship with women brings about a feeling of deprivation and creates a psychological void in him. The inversion of the childhood penury takes the form of overt possessiveness of worldly goods, as in Bellow.

Money becomes the measuring rod of all activities and extends to inter-personal relationships as well. On the other hand, inversion of the childhood repressive code takes the form of overt sexual activity, as in Roth. It results in a payback relationship. In both cases inversion of economic or sexual deprivation leads to a consumerist relationship that quickly exhausts itself and leads to rupture or divorce. Incidentally, this consumerist relationship also becomes an expression of the servitude-power syndrome, the servitude the protagonists experience in childhood and the power they experience upon its inversion.

Added to this psychic upheaval, the marginal position of Jews in American cities generates in them intense loneliness and forlornness. Unable to seek emotional sustenance from their own community, and repelled by the “host” or WASP community, they turn to themselves for meaning. Compensation for social distance and distrust is sought in immediate physical gratification and it clearly expresses the theme of complete felicity that became the hallmark of the life-style of the Sixties. This is done through the multiplication of areas of sexual contacts and search for avenues of economic success. In inter-personal relationships, it veers toward a payback relationship which ultimately creates a

psychological disturbance in the protean man. He begins to consider the crisis as an act of betrayal by the women especially the *shikse* women. The breakup of the relationship becomes a metaphor for coming down from the peak experience of love or marriage. The novels also delineate the process by which the peak experiences and the coming down experiences could be synthesized. The special position occupied by the Jews, therefore, makes them vanguard of the new protean life-style. It has, since then, been picked up by a number of writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, like Ronald Sukenick, Thomas Pynchon, Ayn Rand and others.

It might seem paradoxical but the protean man gradually matures into an operational man when he recognizes his changing nature and at the same time locates himself in society. He retains his commitment to the moment but also introduces in his life-style an element of compromise. He becomes a wiser, mellower, less self-centered and more aware protean person. In a way, this stage, or progress toward it, clearly expresses the protean life-style which emphasizes the counter-pull between mutability and stability.

Operational Instructors

Jewish American writing seems to be fascinated by notions of personality development, progress of characters towards betterment and a movement from a skeptical to an operational state. Perhaps, it is an expression of the change in the attitude of the people in the Seventies as they experienced failure in their lives and set out to find practical ways of urban living. Though the progression is mostly slow, yet it is suggested through the portrayal of other characters. The characters begin becoming operational in most novelists, but this transformation is clearly observed in Bellow. It becomes clearer in the protagonists of Roth. In Bellow, the operational state is embodied in "Reality-Instructors," while in other

writers it can be discerned in characters older than the protagonist. Through them we can discern the direction in which the protagonists themselves are moving. The operational stage involves cognition of the skeptical state. It also involves recognition of the external surroundings, self-criticism, acceptance of dislocation and disorder in life, and a sense of humility. In this stage they reconstitute themselves, understand their crisis, increase their childhood curiosity along with their adolescent innocence, yet they bring to it all a new maturity—they begin to assume responsibility for their actions.

Jewish American novelists such as Potok, Heller, Doctorow, Bellow and Roth are able to capture these tendencies in varying degrees in their novels. They represent this life-style according to their distance from hip Judaism and the extent of their skepticism. However, the growth of the Jewish personality in these novelists is not systematic, nor can it be. All these writers are roughly contemporaries and their major novels were written in the late Fifties onwards expressing skepticism, change, malleability, lack of long-range commitments, adolescent innocence, search for total physical gratification, psychological uncertainty, narcissism, reliance, on intuition, inner cosmic absurdity, and a tone of mockery.

It seems that some writers, like Potok, have chosen their protagonists who are still in their nascent stage, while others, like Bellow, have portrayed such protagonists who have reached the finished-product stage. In Potok we can barely discern the making of the protean man, except probably in *My Name is Asher Lev*. Asher Lev has broken away from the apron strings of the Jewish tradition but he still has far to go. Nevertheless, we feel that the pressures are there. It is for this reason that he is placed first in this study. The sequence in which these novels have been placed has been determined by the degree to which they

approximate to the perfect protean man. Viewed from this criterion, Roth comes at the end. An attempt has been made to highlight the progression of the protagonist in these novels.

Some Jewish writers, for instance, Bruce Jay Friedman and J. D. Salinger, are excluded from this paper because either their fiction does not deal with the new life-style or the protagonists are not intellectuals. Furthermore, to delimit the essay I have excluded women novelists like Susan Sontag and Sue Kaufman for they rarely portray the Jewish intellectual in their novels, and whenever they do so, they do it rather sketchily. The dissertation also leaves out a host of contemporary Jewish novelists, such as, Isaac Bashavis Singer and Bernard Malamud. These writers, to my mind, belong more to the Yiddish school of writers who blossomed in New York at the turn of the century. They trace their ancestry from Yiddish writers like Sholom Aleichem, Ludwig Lewishon, Mendele Mocher Sforim, I. L. Peretz and Abraham Cahan. These writers are distinct from the ones who write in English only and do not concern themselves with the portrayal of urban life-style. Finally the paper leaves out Ronald Sukenick who could have been an excellent example of the fruition of the protean life-style but since he belongs to a tradition of meta-novelists he has been left out. However, occasional references are made to his work.

Legitimizing a Life-Style

The archetypal protagonist in the works of the writers discussed is a Jew and an intellectual, living in one of the American cities. Since he is not able to completely grasp his situation he is invariably worried. He is mostly a disgruntled academic, an ambitious artist, a mocking schlemiel, a worried radical or an adolescent revolutionary. Having turned his back on the Judaic experience, that gave him guidance and direction in a certain situation, he now gets his

orientation from personal experience itself. In Thorstein Veblen's words, such a man is "exposed to the unmediated facts of the current situation ... [and] takes his orientation from the run of the facts as he finds them, rather than from the traditional interpretation of analogous facts in the past" (Veblen, 1964 229).

Typical Jewish protagonists like Asher Lev, Augie March, Bruce Gold and Nathan Zuckerman depend upon their experience for an understanding of events and not so much upon tradition. The changing nature of their experience affects their personalities and they too undergo change. These novels portray the journey of the protagonist and the process by which his wandering is internalized. The Jew as an intellectual wanderer in American society has finally been transformed into a skeptical man. The skeptical and protean stage becomes a logical extension of the wandering stage.

Many Jewish American writers attempt to capture an urban reality through their prototypical skeptical and ever-changing characters that becomes symptomatic of urban America and garner a wider readership. Robert Lifton's calls the modern urban phenomenon as "a post-Freudian, post-modern" that marks the collapse of pre-scientific culture and its concomitant metaphors, symbols and life rhythm (Lifton, 1968 153). People living in the metropolitan cities of New York and Chicago experience the same feelings as the protagonists do in the novels. In the city, Susanne Langer writes, each individual is "scrambling for himself yet each [is] caught in the stream of all the others" (Langer, 1964 96). A host of new activities that city-life has introduced atomizes most individuals. Just as in the city man feels disembodied so does the protagonist. In other words, the new life-style affects city dwellers in life and literature equally.

The psychological dimension of this life style gives rise to its own unique

problems. We encounter again and again the self-isolated figure of the protagonist who finds difficulty in locating himself in urban society. He can neither acquire a complete perspective in the city because of its geographical vastness, nor conceive of his true place in it because of his changing convictions. It is this belief that underscores American military blunders from its involvement in Vietnam to abortive air rescue missions of American Embassy personnel in Iran: its deceptions and self-deceptions during it and its inability to do anything much afterwards. Lifton writes:

... the giant [America] *is* helpless, not because his vision is severely impaired. Unable to 'see' the actual dimensions of the environment he finds himself in, he resorts to blind technological saturation of that environment with his destructive fire-power, unable to see the enemy just as well be his wards or allies (Lifton, 1970 15).

The two experiences affect his personal life both existentially and psychologically. He cannot finally decide upon the best course of action or choose the sort of person he would like for a companion. To him everything becomes relative as he attaches a new premium to multiplicity and change.

Erikson believes that "the notion that everything is relative has undoubtedly contributed to the character of contemporary identity formation in many blatant ways" (Erikson, 1975 106). This is certainly true in the case of these persons. Relativism extends to ideas and beliefs and represents itself in an attitude where no point of view or belief is taken seriously for long. It is an attitude that Lifton calls, "a post-modern distrust of all thought systems" (Lifton, 1968 14). In *Humboldt's Gift*, the protagonist Charlie Citrine embodies, in an extraordinary way, this sort of thought pattern.

The constant change the protean protagonist undergoes helps him to locate himself in the flux of our time. He is able to establish connections between events; he is also able to maintain coherence in his inner cosmic space or *Weltinnenraum*. In other words, it means that for the protean individual reality begins to occupy a space within him and actual objects and events are also within him. The external space becomes internalized in essence. For Charlie Citrine reality exists inside him and he is surprised to discover it: "For what is this sea, this atmosphere, doing within the eight inch diameter of your skull? (I say nothing of the sun and the galaxy which are also there)" (Bellow, 1975 306).

Whenever the protagonist is unable to establish connections in his inner cosmic space his world view becomes absurd. The sense of inner absurdity generates in him a feeling of being unconnected to the world and brings unmitigated anxiety about his death. He tries to lessen the first by increased sexual activity and the second by confessing his anxiety to others. By these two processes he is able to relate himself with the world and also crystallize his experience. In short, he comes to understand his protean self better. As such, invariably a typical novel deals with a crisis in the life of a protagonist and is confessional in nature.

To confront the foreknowledge and immediacy of his death, the protagonists adopt a tone of travesty toward it. As can be observed, the mocking tone is his special psychological method of rejecting tones of pontification and religiosity that he encounters in his day to day life. Yet, many times, he becomes prey to the same tone that he rejects. Tommy Wilhelm in *Seize the Day*, Bruce Gold in *Good as Gold*, and Reuven Malter in *The Chosen* (and its sequel *The Promise*) provide excellent examples of this attitude. At other times, the tone of travesty ends in a spasmodic sob as it becomes a pretense. Herzog can be cited as an example of this. In the social sphere, the tone of travesty expresses itself in the rejection of

moral decency or propriety by removing the distinction between public and private behavior. In other words, the unconventional behavior of the protagonists, especially of Alexander Portnoy or Daniel Lewin, is a direct extension of the tone of travesty as it expresses the meaninglessness of conventional metaphors and symbols. Susanne Langer explains that “the old metaphors have lost their aptness, the old models are broken, and humanity—especially the most sensitive and thoughtful part of humanity, everywhere—has lost its mental orientation and moral certitude” (Langer, 145). The void created by the loss of “mental orientation and moral certitude” is filled up by self-mocking travesty.

The protean man faces many new issues that never troubled the non-protean man. He is not able to keep long-range commitments either in love or marriage. Possibly, it is so because he does not possess a stable personality that would outlast the commitment. The protean man unlike others commits himself to the moment and by it is able to multiply areas of contacts over a period of time. But he is also deeply disturbed when each relationship breaks down and he is repeatedly left floundering in the dark. Augie March is afraid of “dying a lonely man,” when he observes that his relationships with women fail repeatedly. Perhaps, one of the reasons of his failure with women is that being a protean man Augie cannot decide to marry. He is doubtful of marrying as marriage involves a long-range commitment that he is not willing to give. Augie tells us about his feelings for his beloved Thea Fenchel:

I had wanted to marry her, but there isn't any possession. No, no, wives don't own husbands, nor husbands wives, nor parents children. They go away, or they die. So the only possession is of the moment. If you're able. And while any wish lives, it lives in the face of its negative. This is why we make the obstinate sign of possession. Like deeds, certificates, rings,

pledges, and other permanent things (Bellow, 1949; 1965 407).

Every protean man realizes it at some point of his life that “the only possession is of the moment.” Augie March articulates this realization clearly and also the fear of dying a lonely man.

Jewish American writing is a fascinating study of the sexual desire of ethnic Jews to possess America sexually. Roth's hero Alexander Portnoy's erotic fantasies about shiksa Thereal McCoy is symptomatic and representative of Jewish protagonists when he tellingly proclaims: America is a shikse nestling under your arm” (PC, 146). The shiksa obsession is the paramount obsession of most Jews that threaten marriage and the very existence of Judaism. Many Jewish men have pursued the ultimate shikse sex goddesses—Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor—and married them. Frederic Cople Jaher in his excellent study of the shikse sums up the matter succinctly in the following words,

THE SHIKSA OBSESSES MANY JEWS: RABBIS SEE HER AS AN INTERMARITAL threat to the survival of Judaism; parents fear that she will lure their sons away from family and faith; and Jewish men fantasize about her sexual and social desirability. She figures prominently—even compulsively—in popular movies and bestsellers by Jewish directors and writers. The dream of the shiksa can become a quest (Jaher, 1983 518-543).

The desire of the protagonist for the non-Jewish women is aroused by many reasons. Firstly, it is excited by the myth of total physical gratification that de Tocqueville calls the “bootless chase of that complete felicity which forever escapes him” (de Tocqueville, 1945 145). Incidentally, the theme runs through

most of American fiction written by Jews from Ben Hecht's *A Jew in Love* (1931) to Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold* (1979). This is especially true of a writer like Joseph Heller. Secondly, it is intensified by a desire to seek a new social forum through which the protagonist can express his psychic life, once the legitimate avenues of Hebraic rituals and its women are discredited. Therefore, the platform is provided by the *shikse* not the *sabra* women. Thirdly, it might be seen as an inversion of the world of childhood repression, real or imaginary; here the protagonist is unable to relate effectively with his present. This is especially the case with a writer like Roth. Fourthly, it can be seen as an unconscious expression or replay of the Samson and Delilah legend which Fiedler finds "improbable." And finally it could be seen as Fiedler would like to call it a desire on the part of "the Jewish intellectual to see himself as Don Juan" (Fiedler, 1972 76).

Loving a *shiksa* woman satisfies a psychological need of the Jewish male protagonist for love and belongingness. His desire for a non-Jewish woman is intrinsically a desire for psychic release and his sexual union a fulfillment of that desire. There are signs of a consumerism in this relationship where the woman gives herself to the man and the man purchases her favors. The woman gives her body, intellect, emotions, and other attributes while the man purchases these attributes by giving her material gifts specially a home, a vacation, or an automobile. In Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift* Charlie Citrine buys an expensive Mercedes-Benz for Renata Koffritz just to please her. In this sort of relationship both feel a profound sense of disappointment. Charlie increasingly gets angry as he feels that Renata is withholding her love from him, whereas she feels frustrated as she demands more evidence of his love for her. Charlie feels that he has not received due compensation for his money, while Renata feels that he has not given himself to her. They cannot stay together for long. Almost always,

these relationships end in failure or disaster. Usually, the protagonist moves from the purchase of sexual pleasure to the purchase of social class or sophistication and ultimately to the purchase of childhood innocence in the *shikse*. In Roth's *The Professor of Desire* David Kepesh realizes that just as his emotional or sexual purchases have exhausted so will the new acquisitions.

How long will *that* be sold a bill of goods? How much longer before I've has a bellyful of wholesome innocence (Roth, 1978 251).

It is a representative statement. All purchases of "wholesome innocence" would lose their sweetness in due course. There is no abiding innocence in purchasing sexual favors. Surrogates are always waiting at the corner, boredom sets in or he is unwilling to commit marriage. When Jewish protagonists marry a *shiksa* such as David Kepesh, Moses Herzog, or Charlie Citrine they soon get bored as the women cannot meet their high expectations or refuse to yield to their eccentric demands.

When the non Jewish beloved or wife leaves as Renata leaves Charlie or Madeline leaves Herzog, the men consider such departure an act of betrayal and feel emasculated. The theme of betrayal and emasculation has strong links with the Samson-Delilah legend. It runs through most of the Jewish-American fiction, from Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* to Bellow's *Herzog*. The destruction of the man-woman relationship becomes a metaphor for the process of coming down from the peak experiences of either love or marriage. In the operational stage the protagonists attempt to establish a positive relationship between the peak experience and the coming down experience.

From a conventional point of view their actions appear eccentric and their

behavior formless, yet we see a glimpse of the new urban form of behavior which these characters have forged, either consciously or unconsciously. There is a frenzied search for a new and meaningful life in the city. Since the time of the Greeks, madness has been associated with prophecy and it was denoted by Plato by a single Greek word propheteia (Plato, 1945 401). Their behavior seems unconventional as they cannot practice most social rituals or use social gestures effectively. Mostly, the protagonists find no meaning, from a personal point of view, in rituals or social gestures. For instance, Danny Saunders cannot discover any reflection of his scientific and critical attitudes in the Hasidic ritual just as Moses Herzog cannot find any consequential gesture in American academic institutions. Similarly, Augie March and Yossarin cannot discover any meaningful metaphor for themselves in the military ritual. The madness becomes prophetic of the emergence of a new behavior and urban ethic.

As such men confront experience failure they mellow down and mature. No longer debilitated by emotional intensity or idealistic fervor they can operate deftly in their environment. This operational behavior of characters like Tamkin and Uncle Asher produce self-examination. In the first case, characters give up their dreams completely and settle for a life of routine as part of a regressive operationalism (as Augie's brother Simon in *Adventures of Augie March*, Stern in Bruce Jay Friedman's *Stern* do). In the second case, they may build new dreams upon the debris of the old ones (as Uncle Asher and poet Baumgarten do). They do not give up their adolescent dreams altogether, but review them in the context of real-life situations. At times they feel a deep-seated dissatisfaction when dreams fail or a renewed vigor to restructure their lives and find new dreams. In the positive operational stage characters usually develop a sense of childhood wonderment in the world around them, bring innocence to relationships that are of the adolescent, and also add to it a new maturity that is essentially a quality of

adult life. For a typical operational man life becomes an ongoing process of self-realization especially when he discovers original perspectives in the fluidity of the city.

Jewish American writers such as Potok, Heller, Doctorow, Bellow and Roth embody both a disturbed search for meaning and at the same time reaching out for practical ways of living. The transgression of the Mosaic Law in Potok that generates guilt loses its moral sanction when we come to Heller. Money, prestige, power and women, play an increasingly important role in Heller. Though we find that Bruce Gold has gone far in his experimentation with urban ways of living and is older than Asher Lev, he finally regresses. The regression in Bruce Gold's personality is less the outcome of his nature than the consequence of the author's intervention. The writer stops the growth of Gold's personality. However, there is a definite movement toward a more successful urban way of life as we move from Potok to Heller and thence to Doctorow.

In Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* the skeptical and avante garde way of life begins to crystallize while in Bellow's fiction, the process of crystallization is more or less complete. In other novelists it is seen in all its maturity. In Bellow this awareness becomes intense and the call of the Jewish tradition becomes weak. There may be a Sammler who says a death-bed prayer but he is old and weak and is a relic of a bygone era.

The Mosaic Law

Roth inverts the Mosaic Law symbolizing a binding and an obligation to the law of mosaics representing fragmentation and change. Moses opened the way for the beleaguered Jews in Egypt while Columbus opened the way for Spanish colonization of the New World in the name of Isabella I of Castalie. In the work

of Ronald Sukenick the law given by Moses becomes a law of mosaics. It loses its sanctity and becomes fragmented. In his novel 98.6 Sukenick elaborates upon the fragmented nature of the man's personality and inverts the composite Biblical world-view by upturning the Mosaic Law. To Sukenick the Mosaic Law means the way "to deal with parts in the absence of wholes" (p. 167). In the novel *Out*, Sukenick represents the present as the Promised Land where we are on our own—"Wake up to the present the promised land" (p. 245). We need all our intellectual and psychological resources to live successfully: "Experience is a code to be broken by the intelligence" (*Out*, p. 122). When people deal with a "hundred things" thrown up by the mass media they try to establish connections. When they do this successfully they can transcend "discontinuity" and absurdity. But when these connections fail they suffer from an inner cosmic absurdity. The Mosaic Law is carried to its farthest limits when it becomes a part of the authorial style. In *Out*, chapters are numbered in a descending order, "987654321," till finally the words move off the printed page into the vastness of the Pacific Ocean; the last pages are just blank. The ocean, a befitting symbol for the postmodern man, is celebrated as the source of life, energy and regeneration. In Sukenick, the "ocean seems to speak but not quite like music its voice rises toward speech then descends toward silence always moving" (sic, *O*, pp. 263-64). The oceanic image representing the human predicament is also taken up by Ayn Rand and Thomas Pynchon.

Narrative Technique

Most of Jewish American writing privileges the male Jewish narrator and his consciousness. It carries the petitioning voice, the impassioned and narrow voice of the memoirs of the Sephardic immigrants who visited the shores of American in the mid-seventeenth century. This distinctive Jewish voice permeates poetry, fiction and drama that are often fused with the Afro-American ironic narratives.

The use of the male Jewish narrator delimits the narrative technique. Most attempts at introducing other narrative voices, though they add to the richness of the narration, are transparent. The darkly comic style of Bellow, the serious penetrative voice of Potok, the provocative and erotic style of Roth deal with the male-centered spirituality, apostasy or promiscuity, but always remaining within a male-centered universe. This is so, because there is no observable distance between the author-narrator and the protagonist-narrator.

This is typical of Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, where there is no observable distance between the third-person authorial narration and the first-person protagonist narration. The author enters the novels directly and expresses himself through the *doppelganger* narration. One may notice that we do not gather enough information about the way other characters observe the protean protagonist and feel about him. We also do not know how other characters perceive or estimate the significance of events described by the protagonist. The method limits the point of view in these novels. Generally speaking, the novels do not have strong plots. If a plan exists it does in the inner cosmic space of the protagonist who tries to maintain "the passageway between various states of consciousness" (Nin, 1972 32).

Potok's direct narrative style fuses a high seriousness of religious discourse and camaraderie of dialogue when dealing with issues like human life, parent-child relationships, Christian apostasy and pagan art. Most of his characters are relatively young and express their problems of growing up. In fact most contemporary fiction invariably deals with the youth who are both "disturbed and disturbing" (Hicks, 1967 25-26). In novels such as *The Chosen*, *My Name is Asher Lev* and *The Book of Lights* Potok employs a male Jewish protagonist to tell the story. The style possesses a serious and argumentative quality when his

characters discuss questions relating to Jewish religion, culture and identity. At times Potok's style reminds us of James Joyce's penetrating style when he explores themes of alienation, identity, exile and self-actualization. Only in *Davita's Harp* Potok introduces a female protagonist Ilana Davita Chandal who stands against Jewish narrow-mindedness and leaves the Jewish seminary for a secular high school when she is denied an academic prize that she rightly deserves. Potok's style acquires a more emotional and global appeal in *I Am a Clay* where he narrates the story of a couple caught in the travails of the Korean War. In *The Gates of November* Potok draws on his diasporic memory of Russian Jews in Communist Russia. Unlike other Jewish American writers Potok retains his religious seriousness in his works. Bellow and Roth are different.

Bellow deftly intersperses his dark and comic style with extended discussions of philosophical issues which involves the reader, at the same time he draws out the tension between the personal ethic of an imaginative individual and the materialistic concerns of an unfeeling society. Roth perhaps could be seen taking Jewish American fiction to greater heights through his highly provocative style. Roth takes us beyond the Jewish identity project by attempting to conceal race and revealing an all-American identity fired by desire and ambition. His style acquires an erotic urgency that effortlessly deals with self-loathing and social bigotry in urban America.

The style is very much a part of both the Jewish past and the urban reality that both the novelists and their character belong. Sociologists have theorized on this topic in great detail. Robert Lifton in his book *Revolutionary Immortality* discusses the emergence of the new psychology of the urban individual. He believes that there is "a good deal of evidence that protean man is already emerging everywhere as an important psychological type—in the West, in

Russia, in Japan ..." (Lifton, 1968 152-53). Bellow responds to this sentiment when he says that "we suffer from bottomless avidity" and we also see "greatly beautiful shadows embracing on a flawless screen" (Bellow, 1977 73). The urban greed combined with the Platonic yearning of the soul for something beautiful and abiding seems to be an urban psychological paradox and stain. Obviously the narrative style is an expression of a new or altered sensibility, a psychological expression of the urban reality which eschews grand old totalities and universal moralities. However this new sensibility has to be pinned down, legitimized and authenticated to reduce angst and alienation.

On Moral Fiction

Our old Kantian training in the omnipotence of the categorical imperative forces us to seek absolute and unconditional requirements for our actions. Our modern deontological ethics convinces us to evaluate motivation for our actions in absolute terms. We somehow cannot eschew the comfortable world of Kantian universal morality and we cannot chastise our totalizing intellect. The need to authenticate the fragmentariness of the individual and his new sensibility pushes writers like John Gardner and Fiedler to write moral fiction and moral criticism. Gardner talks about a moral standard in art,

True art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it. It seeks to hold off, at least for a while, the twilight of the gods and us. I do not deny that art, like criticism, may legitimately celebrate the trifling. It may joke, or mock, or while away the time. But trivial art has no meaning or value except in the shadow of more serious art, the kind of art that beats back the monsters and, if you will, makes the world safe for triviality. That art which tends toward destruction, the art of nihilists, and cynics, is not properly art at all. Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played

against chaos and death, against entropy (Gardner, 1979 28).

Gardner feels that whatever tone art adopts today it must, in the final analysis, pursue social benefit and lead society out of “chaos” and “entropy” and “improve life.” The moral purpose of art is also reinforced by Fiedler who argues that the “practice of any art” is essentially “a moral activity” (Fiedler, 1960 1). He dismisses writers like Bellow, Walker Percy, Didion, Heller, Updike for their “sprawling works of advice, not art.” True art according to Gardener uses mystical intuition to test opinions through real situations. “One begins a work of fiction with certain clear opinions” and then “one tests these opinions in lifelike situations” (Gardner, 1979). The romantic notion of the artist in a Platonic sense seems to fire Gardener’s literary value. Jewish American literature has time and again negotiated the twin-pressures of Jewish culture and the WASP urban culture. Now as it has been co-opted in the American mainstream literature, new Jewish American writers would find themselves at a disadvantage to sell the identity story on a national level. They need to move beyond national boundaries and become global just as all endeavors in the United States have. Possibly literary works that could link Israeli urban culture and mainstream American culture would prove quite beneficial just as they have in foreign policy matters in the Middle East.

Conclusion

All good things must come to an end. Jewish American writers had it good for nearly half a century spawning a large scholarship and literary following. And precisely because they had it good that they had been co-opted into the system and fossilized. This is what America does to all successful people. Just as Bellow stated in his Nobel Prize speech the Jewish American “human types have become false and boring.” It is difficult to say what remains of Jewish American

literature in a post-ethnic America which is not false and boring. Is it possible to identify what is “fundamental, enduring, essential” in Jewish American literature (Frängsmyr, 1993). Perhaps Jewish American writers succeeded in problematizing the predicament of the successive immigrant and ethnic communities that success was always waiting even while it was eluding them. Jewish-American writing demonstrated that within less than half a century it was possible for backwater immigrant Jews to succeed in America and not only erase the ethnic hyphenation but also acquire a dominant American identity in the appellation American Jewish.

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