Three Jewish American Novels

by Stephen Wade

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Scope of Topic

This short introduction is to outline the main preoccupations and themes of some of the most influential Jewish American novelists in the last thirty years. It will establish some starting-points for further criticism and enquiries about this influential and much-discussed body of writing.

The life of every citizen is becoming a business... Man's life is not a business.'

Bellow: Herzog

Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?

Shakespeare: The Merchant of Venice

INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival in American literature of Saul Bellow, Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud in the fifties and sixties, there has been an increasingly important number of novels and stories by third generation Jewish American writers. They deal, mainly, with the versions of identity in the various generations of immigrants since the first wave after the Diaspora of the last years of the nineteenth century. These preoccupations with different concepts of being Jewish relate, inevitably, to how the writer perceives the importance of the Holocaust and also the Jewish state of Israel.

These subjects are always central in this body of work, but there is also a series of questions asked in these novels: what is an American? Clearly, since the early arrivals in the New World, American art and literature has been, in a sense, a series of versions of the story of arrival and of adaptation. The varying degrees of integration often form the subject-matter of the major writings.

Arguably, the founding father of this literature was Abraham Cahan, whose novel, The Rise of David Levinsky (1917) depicts the Americanisation of a Lithuanian Jew who charts his integration and adoption of new states of being. This approach was factual and documentary; Cahan explains a great deal, and gives a chronicle of a specific community. The later writers had to shake off this need to explain Jewishness, and also they had to play down the didactic forms — teaching and preaching to readers who may be gentiles, or Jews of later generations who may have lost their religious knowledge of Hebrew dogma and so on.

This short introduction summarizes three novels which represent different types of writing within these traditions.

Unfortunately, recent American history has formed more complex perceptions of many minority groups within the ‘melting pot’ of that vast and many-faceted culture. The Jewish elements in this have had their ideologies, beliefs and lifestyles subjected to the media creations of stereotypes and simplifications, so that many readers coming to Jewish American fiction will perhaps have ideas of the society reflected in these works which are based on the films of Woody Allen or on the self-deprecating stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce.

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The fact is that representations of Jewish people in American cities are too familiar, and therefore perhaps already beyond realistic portrayal for gentile readers. But whatever may be the truth of this, the main reason for reading Roth, Bellow and Potok is that these writers, along with others who can only be mentioned here, attempt to write about the complexities and dilemmas of standing between two identities and two continents. Their Europe has an ancient history: their America has only a couple of centuries, and their accelerated culture means a dizzying world available for the creative writer to explore.

For all these reasons, reading modern Jewish American writers is a productive way of approaching the dominant themes of American popular narratives as well as classic American literature itself.

**BOOKS TO READ**


Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus* (Penguin, 1986)

**NOTES**

**Philip Roth: Goodbye, Columbus**

This is a short novel which was published together with some short stories in 1959, and marked the emergence of a writer who was later to cause a furore in the Jewish communities of the USA with his novel, *Portnoy's Complaint*. This later work centred on the Jewish family in a comic-absurd way, parodying much stereotype humour and adding some surreal fun as well. But *Goodbye, Columbus* is a much gentler, evocative and restrained work, dealing with Jewish life and leisure in the newish suburbs where Americanised Jews were moving, out of the urban areas which were now being occupied by other immigrant groups.

Roth explores this microcosm of wealthy people at work and play through the eyes of the sensitive librarian, Neil Klugman. The first-person chronicle allows Roth to give us a series of sharp contrasts, sometimes comic and often poignantly poetic, all developing a profound insight into habits of mind and feelings in that closely-knit, comfortable society.

Brenda Patimkin is the young Jewish girl in this suburban playground whom Neil begins to love. We sense the allure of her wealth and lifestyle as well as the obvious sexuality and sense of liberation that she offers him. Neil is inhibited, rather withdrawn and somehow waiting to fill his identity — to become something else. The library where he works is evocative of an older, more genteel world:

> The stairs were an imitation of a staircase somewhere in Versailles, though in their toreador pants and sweaters these young daughters of Italian leatherworkers, Polish brewery hands, and Jewish furriers were hardly duchesses . . .

There is, also, another parallel theme: the imagination. The story deals with the peculiarly American version of dreaming of becoming rather than being happy with a sense of fulfilment. The sadness and deadness of the city seems to fuel this in the book, and Roth uses the device of introducing a little black boy who comes to the library in order to look at art books. Neil welcomes him and helps him, despite the general
view taken by the library staff that it is simply a nuisance to go out of your way to help a kid. As the story develops, though, Neil sees significance in this unregistered, puzzling need to find knowledge that he sees so clearly in the boy:

Chances were he'd have discovered someone else, Van Gogh, Vermeer . . . But no, they were not his kinds of artists. What had probably happened was that he'd given up on the library and gone back to playing Willie Mays in the street . . .

Neil discovers another side to the Jewish experience, too. This is in the perspectives we find when Brenda’s father is described. Neil visits him in his office, and we see a man in his element, explaining the work ethic that has ‘made’ him a sharer in the ‘American Dream’:

A man works hard he’s got something. You don’t get anywhere sitting on your behind you know. The biggest men in the country worked hard, believe me . . .

What Roth builds on as the story becomes richer in its texture of contrastive narratives is the disenchantment we are made to feel though Neil’s reactions to both the pleasure principle of the younger Jewish American community and to the abrasive, relentless toiling and dealing of Mr Patimkin. But there is another layer, even to this novella, where so much is compressed into the short form.

This is the humour of Neil’s own domesticity: his Aunt Gladys is a memorable character. Her creation illustrates ideally how Roth handles characterisation technique. We are given extremism and obsession in a comic form — the hilarious chaos and absurdity of the house and its unwritten codes of behaviour and thought:

“You’re going to pick the peas out is all? You tell me that, I wouldn’t buy the carrots.”

“I love carrots,” I said, “I love them.” And to prove it, I dumped half of them down my throat and the other half onto my trousers.

“Pig”, she said.

It is here, in Roth’s merciless yet tongue-in-cheek assault on the Jewish values of home, heart and business, all related to ‘good conduct’ and to the poor Jews back home, that we find Roth’s distinctive voice. His characters either look backwards with a sense of guilt or loss, or they look forward with a clear sense of what America is and what it means. He is skilful at giving the reader a keen impression of the important elements in contemporary Jewish American life and thought, but in doing this, never solemn, and certainly not obscure or esoteric.

Chaim Potok: *The Chosen*

Potok’s novel was published in 1966, at the time when the first real impact of the fundamental changes in the world-view of the newest generation of Jewish Americans was becoming apparent. In contrast to Roth, however, Potok is interested in writing an
openly explanatory, informative account of the history, lives and identity of the Hasidic Jews as they live — and particularly how they think, in their New World.

From the first page, it is made clear that there are two kinds of Jewish communities in the novel. The narrator, Reuven Malter, has a father who is a respected teacher and who writes articles on the Talmud (a focal set of Jewish texts and commentaries) and Reuven is contrasted with the Hasidic Danny Saunders. Potok writes that the Hasidim walked the Brooklyn streets like specters, with their black hats, long black coats, black beards and earlocks.

They are certainly depicted here with a sense of awe and respect, mainly for their scholarship and self-discipline.

The emotional velocity of the story depends initially on the long stay in hospital that Reuven has to endure, and how he gradually comes closer to Danny.

However, along the way, Potok takes in every opportunity to give us glimpses of the divisions in the two communities, and particularly with the incredibly self-demanding lives and religious disciplines of the group around Danny’s father, Reb, who is a charismatic leader and rabbi to his sub-group — a sort of minority inside a minority. The aftermath of the baseball game in which Reuven almost lost the sight in one eye develops to this:

“Say, who was that rabbi on the bench? Is he a coach or something?”
Danny Saunders laughed. “He’s one of the teachers in the yeshiva. My father sends him along to make sure we don’t mix too much with the apikorsim . . .”

The apikorsim are ‘unbelievers’ in the eyes of the Hasidic Jews; they are looked down on because they do not observe the religious practices of Judaism as strictly as the Hasidim.

This scene with the two young men shows how much of Potok’s purpose is to instruct. Anyone who knows very little about the varieties of Jewish beliefs and lifestyles, especially in the context of the USA may learn a great deal in the course of reading this novel. One of the most dramatic aspects of the main themes is an example of this: Danny has a struggle to finally break with the anticipated career he should follow — inheritor of his father’s position in fact. Danny wants to study psychology, and change his lifestyle: to be, in effect, more Americanized, even to the extent, for example, of cutting off his earlocks. He does achieve this, and near the end, his father, the mighty rabbi, speaks openly and honestly to all.

Reb Saunders has been a distant, disturbing figure throughout: Potok depicts an aloof, strong, self-absorbed disciplinarian, so his climb-down at the end is all the more powerful. He says to Reuven:

“You think I was cruel? Yes, I see from your eyes that you think I was cruel to my Daniel . . . Let my Daniel become a psychologist. I have no more fear now. All his life he will be a tzaddik. He will be a tzaddik for the world . . .”

(A tzaddik is a man of high virtue, respected and dignified).

Overall, the novel traces the growth of a friendship which is, in a way, as much about division, suspicion and mistrust in two congruent communities as is Romeo and Juliet,
but it is a story that explains a lot about how Jewish life in America has meant that immense numbers of immigrant groups of varying persuasions have had to adapt and to accept inevitable change.

**Saul Bellow: *Herzog***

Of the three novels, Bellow’s is without doubt the most ambitious and intellectual: it tells the story of a Professor who represents many of the central problems of identity for Jewish people in urban America. The Jews are known as ‘The People of the Word’ and many texts in this category are concerned with writers, artists, thinkers, musicians and so on. Herzog is one of these: an intellectual, a literary critic, but also a failure, and many of the reasons for his failure are found in that specific dilemma of the sensitive, thinking individual, who cares for others and worries about mankind in a country where the media and the hectic pace of social change have led many such people to therapy.

Herzog is typical of this group. He has a therapist, like Woody Allen, and he has two failed marriages behind him.

What Herzog becomes, as the story progresses, is part-clown and part tragic figure. He expresses himself largely by writing letters — to relatives, to thinkers from the past, to the President and many more. He also keeps a sort of notebook of Great Thoughts which are interspersed in the text, in italics. The reader needs to cope with some startling passages about mankind and some basic questions about what life is and why we are here, but in the end, it is a tragedy of a man who could not simplify his life and his mind.

Bellow also includes two other strands that build on the Jewish artistic sensibility which is everywhere as we read: the references to the past, and the succession of huge, domineering, often frighteningly greedy, self-centred characters who cross the stage of the social commentary in the novel. For instance, Valentine Gersbach, who is ‘public figure . . . poet, television intellectual, lecturing at the Hadassah (An American organisation promoting awareness of Jewish issues etc.).’ Gersbach is a stereotype of a certain type of Jewish American who is expert at self-promotion and uses his minority identity to good purpose. He seems to have an answer for everything, and peppers his speech with Yiddish. He is assertive and is a ‘man who has risen from terrible defeat’. He has lost a leg, and even this becomes one of the bases of his immense capacity for self-presentation.

But the theme that Bellow returns to over and over again in different ways, is Herzog’s chaotic, self-critical frame of mind: an intellect cracked and under stress.

Oh Herzog was in the wrong . . . But all he asked, it seemed to him, was a bit of co-operation in his effort, benefiting everyone, to work toward a meaningful life.

What Herzog represents in the end is that version of Jewish identity that places the word and the mind as central in life: a humanism concerned with the life of the mind. Herzog, we are told, comes from a ‘genteel Yiddish’ background.

He heard with instinctive snobbery Valentine’s butcher’s, teamster’s and commoner’s accent . . .’

In fact he is naturally filled with a sense of being part of an elite who live to study, to think, and to idealise.
Herzog is mostly concerned with these ideas, but it is also consistently funny: despite the fact that the subject-matter needs some background knowledge from the reader at times, the general effect is one of a larger-than-life creation of an imagination that is capable of showing one type of Jewish American caught in the dilemma of needing to succeed in an intellectual sense, while feeling very sharply the dissolution of the life of feeling and belonging to a defined community. In that sense, it is a novel of the European tradition also.

FURTHER READING

Joseph Heller, Good as Gold (1979)
Bernard Malamud, A New Life (1966)
Isaac Bashevis Singer, Enemies: A Love Story (1972)

CRITICISM

Marcus Cunliffe, Modern American Literature Since 1900 (Sphere, 1975)
Philip Roth, Reading Myself and Others (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975)