

IN SEARCH OF  
AMERICAN  
JEWISH  
CULTURE

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Brandeis University Press

PUBLISHED BY UNIVERSITY PRESS OF NEW ENGLAND  
HANOVER AND LONDON

1999

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# DEFINITIONS

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THE CULTURE OF AMERICAN JEWRY WAS BORN IN EASTERN EUROPE AND was then transplanted and refashioned in cities such as New York. In the New World the tension between the parochial and the national, the particular and the universal would be resolved in favor of satisfying mass taste. Tradition would also be invigorated, but the allure of the democratic marketplace would prevail. In retrospect, the fragility of what the immigrants brought over is easy to emphasize. But the vitality that is also demonstrable should not be obscured. If one artifact can epitomize the resources of a minority culture as well as the transforming power of the popular arts, I move the nomination of "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön" (to me you are beautiful).

The composer of the song was Sholom Secunda, who had been born in Russia in 1894 and was groomed to be a cantor. In 1906 his family immigrated to the United States, where the prodigy was billed as the "Crown Prince of *Khazanim*" (cantors). He seemed so destined for stardom that in 1915 the flamboyant impresario of the Yiddish theater, Boris Thomashetsky, introduced Secunda to another promising kid who had shown a certain flair for composition. But Secunda was shocked to learn that his potential collaborator was an ignoramus who composed by ear. A teenager with no formal classical training would be a drag. Later, George Gershwin would express his appreciation to Secunda for having made his own success possible: "If he had agreed to write with me, I, too, would now be writing music [only] for the Yiddish theater." In 1932 Jacob (Joe) Jacobs wrote the lyrics, and Secunda the melody, for "Bei Mir Bistu Shein," which immediately scored a hit in the Yiddish musical theater and at Catskills weddings and bar mitzvahs.

Even a casual perusal of the lyrics casts doubt that Jacobs was imagining a crossover triumph, as evidenced by an in-group barb like "Even if you were a Galitzyaner! / I tell you it wouldn't matter to me." (Known for their piety, Jews from Galicia were also mocked for their superstitiousness, their provincialism, their ignorance, and their naïveté.) The song was remarkably popular. But those who enriched the repertoire of the Yiddish

musical theater could not count on living off the residuals. Eddie Cantor rejected a chance to introduce the song on NBC, telling the frustrated composer: "Sholom, I love your music. But I can't use it. It's too Jewish." By 1937 the team sold the rights to the song to a Yiddish music publisher, and split the \$30 proceeds.

What happened next depends on who tells the story. Resort owner Jennie Grossinger claimed to have taught the song to two Negro entertainers, whose stage names were Johnny and George, in the Catskills (referred to by *Life* magazine as "the Jewish Alps"). Songwriter Sammy Cahn insisted that as early as 1935 he heard two black performers (though not Johnny and George) do the song in Yiddish at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Cahn, whose name had been shortened from the presumably less pronounceable Cohen, was astonished to observe the crowd rocking with delight. Perhaps no audience was more demanding than the Apollo; a number that could make it there could make it anywhere. Cahn mused privately, imagine what this song would do to an audience that understood the words. He persuaded the three Andrews Sisters to record it for Decca Records. Its president, Jack Kapp, went along—but only if Cahn and his collaborator Saul Chaplin would translate "Bei Mir Bistu Shein," which they did. English was the precondition of popular interest. Cahn, whose lyrics would help extend the career of Frank Sinatra, kept the title exotic by refusing to anglicize it, but did generate confusion by elevating it into German: "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön."

Decca released it in December 1937, and within a month a quarter of a million records were sold, along with about two hundred thousand copies of the sheet music. Soon enough records were sold to make the Andrews Sisters' single the number one hit of 1938. The song drove America wild. *Life* reported customers rushing into record stores asking for "Buy a Beer, Mr. Shane," and "My Mere Bits of Shane." But the Andrews Sisters did not have this song to themselves. Because some like it hot, Ella Fitzgerald quickly did her own version. Not until 1961, it is sad to report, did Secunda regain copyright of his hit. Upon his death thirteen years later, he left behind a huge list of Yiddish and liturgical musical works, including the score to Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish-language film, *Tenye der Milkhiker* (1939). But perhaps because Secunda's oeuvre was "too Jewish," he worked mostly in obscurity. Shortly before his death at age seventy-nine he had gone to Tokyo; in the baths there, he asked a masseuse to sing to him any American songs she might know. She complied with a Japanese version of "Bei Mir Bist Du Schön."<sup>1</sup> From an otherwise largely concealed minority culture, the song had circumnavigated the globe. An ephemeral community of immigrants (and then their children and grandchildren) could tap and then revise its own traditions, and somehow manage to satisfy national and even

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cosmopolitan tastes. Two years later, in 1976, Saul Bellow, the product of a Yiddish-speaking home in Chicago, would become the first American Jew to win the Nobel Prize for Literature—and would also be counted with Herman Wouk, grandson of Rabbi Mendel Leib Levine of Minsk, as among the most translated American authors in the People's Republic of China.<sup>2</sup>

Determining how this minority group has contributed to the arts, while also sustaining and altering its religion, challenges the powers of the cultural historian. But the philosophers must also be satisfied when they say: Define your terms and then defend your definition. That is the particular aim of this chapter and the next, both of which offer an interpretive overview. Each key term—American, Jewish, and culture—is problematic.

Thanks to the religious psychology of Feuerbach, the atheism of Marx, the higher biblical criticism of Renan and others, and finally the nihilism of Nietzsche, the nineteenth century destroyed the supernatural. The twentieth century destroyed the natural. No longer was the domination of Christianity inevitable. Nor did white supremacy appear to be inherent in the structure of reality, and finally patriarchy ceased to enjoy an ontological status. What has remained is "only" culture, which three methodologists of American Studies have called "perhaps the most germinal idea in twentieth-century scholarship in the social sciences and humanities."<sup>3</sup>

No other word occupies so privileged a place in the academic lexicon. But, as literary historian Stephen Greenblatt has complained, the term is also "repeatedly used without meaning much of anything at all." According to the historian Raymond Williams, "culture" is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language," primarily because of its use "in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought." Although by 1952 the anthropologists Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn had already managed to dis-criminate among 160 different definitions of "culture," Williams radically compressed that number, so that he could describe "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development," as well as "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity."<sup>4</sup> His formulations are relevant to this inquiry, especially in the form of deliberate efforts to promote and perpetuate artistic and intellectual expression. A bit easier to construe than to define, culture is now understood to be more than a pat-tern of meanings that is inherited. Culture is also something that is con-cocted. It is not only a system of behavior that is accepted, but is also a complex of beliefs that is adapted and contrived. Picked up by osmosis, cul-ture is also consciously transmitted.

The status that the study of "society" once enjoyed in the academy has now yielded to "culture." Two trends have converged that inevitably affect how the experience of American Jewry can best be fathomed. What the pi-

oneering social sciences achieved by relativizing what had been taken as certitudes is now done by cultural studies, whose work is similar. Cultural studies involves some sort of unmasking or demystification of the ideological aims of the institutions or groups under scrutiny. For its academic practitioners, culture is not usually "high," nor is it singular; rather, it consists of "that plurality of symbolic systems and practices that enable different groups to make various kinds of sense of their lives."

Such a definition is less indebted to Matthew Arnold than to anthropologists, one of whom has been widely influential in offering a semiotic approach to culture that is also applicable to the case of American Jewry. Clifford Geertz has referred to "structures of signification," to "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings," and to "a system of inherited conceptions . . . by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Such "symbolic dimensions of social action" need to be decoded, so that the ways our species make experience intelligible can be elucidated.<sup>5</sup> Geertz's version of anthropology as well as cultural studies are ways of taking seriously the expressive evidence by which, say, a minority group seeks to define itself, tries to give shape to its experiences, and exchanges standards and values.

Every culture, proclaimed the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, is "the result of a mishmash." Even more so is America, because its society is itself composed of minorities, "formed of all the nations of the world," according to Alexis de Tocqueville, who observed "different languages, beliefs, opinions: in a word, a society without roots, without memories, without prejudices . . . without common ideas, without a national character." He was compelled to wonder: "What serves as the link among such diverse elements? What makes all of this into one people?"<sup>6</sup> To this polyphony, everybody's voices could be added; and in theory they all counted—not only at the ballot box, but also in the circulation of ideas and images.

The ideal of democracy sanctioned majority rule in taste as well as suffrage. Popular sovereignty operated in culture and not only in government. The motto of the newspaper which inaugurated the penny press, the *New York Sun*, was: "It shines for ALL." The marketplace that embraced the masses became the touchstone of value. "We are the only great people of the civilized world that is a pure democracy," Henry James proclaimed in the *Nation* in 1878, "and we are the only great people that is exclusively commercial." Within two decades, when rural free delivery was established, a corporate beneficiary was Sears, Roebuck and Company, which got its mail-order catalogues classified as *educational* material.<sup>7</sup> In so emphatically commercial a society, its most accessible philosopher (William James) would speak of the "cash-value" of truth and the nation's wisest jurist (Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.) would speak of the "marketplace of

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ideas." America's most effective dissident would speak before the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 of the "promissory note . . . of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," even though the government had instead "given the Negro people a bad check."

Such metaphors come easily in a society in which aristocratic and socialist standards are weak; because American culture is broadly democratic, the popular arts aim at intelligibility. Good taste is virtually synonymous with mass taste, as Jewish immigrants quickly grasped and proclaimed. The box office, according to theatrical producer Lee Shubert, "never lies." The "mob," Irving Berlin insisted, "is always right."<sup>8</sup> Adolph Zukor, who founded Paramount Pictures, entitled his 1953 autobiography, *The Public Is Never Wrong*. To marketers, it is infallible.

Though studies of national character are no longer fashionable, the American has been widely believed to be something other than an ersatz European. Indeed, the first great professional historian of the United States, Frederick Jackson Turner, once characterized the American mind in terms that do not sound European: "practical, inventive, experimental." In pursuing an errand into the wilderness, the American was further driven by a "dominant individualism," with a "buoyancy and exuberance which comes from freedom." That "dominant individualism" to which Turner referred was hardly confined to the wilderness, and tended to counter collectivist aspirations. Americans were not supposed to be limited by the accidents of birth and inherited status. Truths were supposed to be self-evident, according to the Declaration of Independence; and in "Self-Reliance" (1841), Emerson insisted that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind." The ethos of "Americanism," Theodore Roosevelt asserted in 1899, required treating one's neighbor "on his worth as a man," and forgetting "whether he be of English, German, Irish or any other" sort of nationality, "whether he be of Catholic or Protestant faith." Even Turner, a son of the Middle Border (Portage, Wisconsin) called his fellow citizens "a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics."<sup>9</sup> Difference was not supposed to be a handicap. Individualism sanctioned the pursuit of personal ambition, however extravagant, for the sake of a loosely defined American Dream. The ideology of individual aspiration could therefore be compressed into a couplet for Disney's *Pinochio* (1940): "When you wish upon a star / Makes no difference who you are."

With hierarchy impugned, authority need not relied upon; the buoyant freedom that Turner exalted promoted instincts for improvisation. Americans, a visitor noted in 1837, "live in the future and *make* their country as they go along." (Remember that during the first of Indiana Jones's adventures, he flamboyantly yells: "I'm making this up as I go along.") The arts attracted lonely pioneers, literary historian Alfred Kazin declared, each of

whom “fought his way through life—and through his genius—as if no one had ever fought before. Each one, that is, began afresh—began on his own terms.” American life is relatively unregulated, and its do-it-yourself “genius” is characteristically described as raw, untutored, undisciplined, uncensored, flexible, unbounded. George Herriman, the mulatto comic-strip artist, claimed that “Krazy Kat was not conceived, not born, it jes’ grew”—an allusion to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Topsy; and Jes’ Grew became, in novelist Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), an archetype for jazz and more broadly for mass culture. With *America as a Civilization* (1957), Max Lerner was probably the last scholar intrepid enough to write a single systematic work on that daunting topic. But in the decade it took to write the book, he conceded, so much had been transformed that much of it was “no longer valid.” Even during a presumably quiescent decade, “American civilization had been changing drastically right under my fingertips as I was writing about it.”<sup>10</sup>

It is also decentralized and diverse. A passable history can be written about “French Post-War Culture from Sartre to Bardot”—the subtitle of the 1984 book *Saint-Germain-des-Près*, in which authors Paul Webster and Nicholas Powell focus on the cafes in only one neighborhood in one city. That sort of compression would make no sense for the United States. Its film capital was not the literary capital (if indeed there was one), and no neighborhood (not even Greenwich Village) has ever been the locus of national creativity. Even when a city like Chicago produced more than its share of important American writers, it is easy to forget how the lines of descent and influence got crossed in a multithenic and multiracial society. The Chicago school is usually associated with “realism,” and one of its proponents, James T. Farrell, is considered an authoritative and authentic chronicler of the Irish-American experience. But his own development as a writer was not unmediated: Farrell was inspired by reading, and then meeting and talking with, Abraham Cahhan. Bellow is commonly taken to be an authoritative guide to some aspects of American Jewry. But he was wary of being assigned to a “school” whose other chief representatives did not hone their skills in Chicago, and objected to the yoking of his name with Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth, as though these three novelists had become business partners, “the Hart Schaffner and Marx of our trade.” Bellow squeezed off another round against such critics by adding: “People who make labels should be in the gumming business.”<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, labels are often necessary to establish the proper limits of a subject. Who, for example, is a Jew? The classical definition is anyone whose mother is Jewish, even if Judaism is not practiced, so long as he or she has not converted to another faith. But a Jew is also anyone who *chooses* to be one, by undergoing (in the phrase of the Zionist journalist Hayim

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Greenberg) “the process of Jewish religious *naturalization*.” (Judaic law forbids any distinction to be drawn between Jews by birth and Jews by choice.) To be a Jew is tribal or it is formal, or both, which is partly why a definition gets tricky. Anyone who practices Judaism is a Jew, but far from every Jew practices Judaism. To be a Jew can be a social identity as well as a religious affiliation.

Judaism has also been defined as “whatever Jews did or do together to preserve their collective identity,”<sup>12</sup> even practices that may not be rituals or invested with theological meaning. Judaism in this sense may be a culture—or at least at the heart of a culture. But there can also be Jews without Jewish culture. The obverse is not true: there cannot be a cohesive Jewish culture without Jews. That is why the definition of who is Jewish is salient. Whom a burial society is allowed to inter is not synonymous with whose creative talent has been cultivated in a historically significant way. But a consideration of Jewish identity itself is a precondition for exploring Jewish culture.

Once upon a time, to be Jewish was not very problematic. Jewish identity was once so precise and rigid as to be the butt of humor, as in the psychiatrist Theodore Reik’s report of a defendant who is asked by the judge: “What’s your name?” “Menachem Jomtef.” “What is your profession?” “I am a dealer in secondhand clothes.” “Your domicile?” “Rzeczow.” “Your religious creed?” The defendant can scarcely disguise his exasperation: “I am called Menachem Jomtef, I am an old-clothes man, I live in Rzeczow—I am perhaps a Hussite?”<sup>13</sup> So certain an identity (who is a Jew?) meant that its rationale (why be a Jew?) was unexamined. That question, the es-savist Ahad Ha-Am commented, would have skirted the edges of blasphemy for previous generations—and would also have demonstrated egregious stupidity. He himself considered the question of remaining Jewish quite pointless, akin to being “asked why I remain my father’s son.”

Such conditions have been rarely believed to be escapable. Isaiah Berlin asserted: “A Jew is a Jew, as a table is a table. Things and persons are what they are and one accepts them naturally. I’ve never been either proud or ashamed of being a Jew any more than I’m proud or ashamed of possessing two arms, two legs [or] two eyes.” The British philosopher added: “I take my Jewishness for granted,” as something “natural.” He claimed “never in my life either [to have] wished not to be a Jew, or wished to be one.”<sup>14</sup> Citizens of the Soviet Union did not have a choice; and its system of internal passports listed Jews by “nationality,” which was irrevocable. The dissident Lev Kopelev, the model for the philologist Rubin in Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle*, could not discover “in my conscious mind anything that would link me to the nationalistic ideals or religious traditions of Jewry.”<sup>15</sup> But Soviet law made his identity unambiguous and unalterable.



identity is, according to this fashionable view, *not* something that one is born with. Identity is constructed. It is mutable, subject to collective transmission and also to individual will and agency.

But the more it becomes apparent that identities are learned rather than given, contingent rather than secure, historically positioned rather than inherent, the stronger the temptation to discern porosity even before the granting of civic equality. Even before Emancipation, Jews were not *only* Jews, exempt from the pressures that shaped their culture. Among Roman Jewry in the early modern period and with increasing momentum through the nineteenth century, Italian was heavily flavored with Judeo-Romanesco—a unique, often Hebraically based, vocabulary. There were interactions with others despite confinement to the ghetto; the cuisine varied somewhat from the local diet. Jewish subculture, according to Kenneth Stow, an authority on Italian Jewry, went beyond merely religious expression.

Or take Vladimir Medem, who cofounded the Bund in 1897, the same year as political Zionism. He had been baptized as an infant into the Russian Orthodox Church and picked up Yiddish only as an adult, without ever converting to Judaism. But such cases were somewhat freakish. Only with the revolutions of 1917 would Russian Jews achieve civil equality; and on the desk of their greatest historian, Simon Dubnow, was a picture of the liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose works Dubnow called “*kivve kodesh*” (holy writings).<sup>20</sup> Medem and Dubnow illustrate how permeable was the eastern European Jewish society that the twin forms of totalitarianism would bury alive.

Such flexibility where the Emancipation was late to penetrate can also be found in the prototype that Hannah Arendt had applied to western European Jews: the pariah. Her four exemplars are Kafka and Bernard Lazare (neither of whom practiced Judaism); Heine, who never repudiated his youthful decision to “crawl to the cross” (but never lost his Jewish consciousness either); and Chaplin, whose ancestry was often believed to have been Jewish. Such a belief was unwarranted, as she conceded: “Even if not himself a Jew, he has epitomized in an artistic form a character born of the Jewish pariah mentality.”<sup>21</sup>

The United States may be the site, however, that has most fully tested the category of Jew, where the definition is loose enough to embrace culture rather than religious belief or the identity of one’s mother. In planning an encyclopedia on the history of American Jewish women, its two coeditors wondered about including Marilyn Monroe. She had converted immediately prior to her third marriage, after submitting to two hours of religious instruction. Was that sufficient? To solve this conundrum of identification, Paula E. Hyman of Yale asked her adolescent daughters, “who were tuned in to popular culture”; and Deborah Dash Moore of Vassar

asked her “similarly situated sons.” Exclusion was the unanimous verdict, which the editorial board of the encyclopedia upheld (though, in any Reform synagogue, Monroe was eligible for an *aliya*—the honor of being called to the Torah). However refreshingly democratic the procedure the encyclopedia adopted, what remains elusive is a clear set of criteria by which such a judgment is reached.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless the case for contingency and plasticity can be pushed too far. Jewish identity cannot be satisfactorily reduced to the play of capricious historical forces that make cultures into options. Even if identity is socially constructed rather than “given,” who would transmit or inherit it other than a Jew? The Jewish religion can be adopted, its laws followed, its rituals practiced, its beliefs sincerely held. But how does an individual select a culture? Ordinarily only those born and raised within Jewish families, woven into the fabric of the Jewish people, could have the experiences that facilitate the use of patterns of meaning according to the heritage of that particular culture. The legacy of Jewish history becomes one’s own most readily when one’s ancestors were part of it.<sup>23</sup>

That Judaism accepts converts means only that membership in a distinctive people is not transmitted exclusively in the genes. If Jewish culture depended on choices made available to every generation, something as intricately systematic as a culture could not be perpetuated. Neither the Jewish people nor their culture can be categorized as a voluntary association, comparable to the Elks or the National Rifle Association. From birth forward, freedom of choice is never possible, even for those who belong to such organizations; the life that one lives is inevitably circumscribed. And neither Judaism nor Jewish culture could be rendered continuous if the tribal and ancestral links between the generations were severed—or defined as arbitrary. The recent scholarly emphasis on social construction obscures the determinacy that governs cultural persistence.

The modernity that Americans have found so congenial also tends to undermine the rigidity that separates Jews from others. To ensure persistence has traditionally entailed a sense of distinctiveness, and religious faith once marked as well as reinforced the singularity of membership in the Jewish people. Judaism codifies an awareness of difference and inculcates a sense of unique destiny. Judaism virtually defines itself in contrast to idolatry (which is one of the seven Noahide prohibitions), and contrasts true believers to the “nations.” Indeed, “without the Other,” historian David Biale has argued, “the Jew of ‘Judaism’ lacks definition.” Judaism is not a religion famous for extolling ambiguity, but instead promotes “binarism.” *Havdalah*, marking the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the rest of the week, means “separation.” Consider as well the distinctions between milk and meat, kosher and *trayf* (though there is also the third category of



*parve*), the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai, and finally Jew and Gentile. The first generation of American Jewish philosophers and literary critics, one historian surmised, showed "a mode of thinking in dichotomies," a legacy of the "intellectual structures acquired in their fathers' worlds."<sup>24</sup>

Because binarism is deeply encoded in historic Judaism, can it be mere coincidence that the sociologist who analyzed religion in terms of the gap between sacred and profane, Emile Durkheim, was the son of a rabbi? Nor is it surprising that the anthropologist who insisted that binary opposition (nature/culture, raw/cooked, "hot"/"cold") is locked into all social structures and mental processes is Lévi-Strauss, the grandson of a rabbi. A third French Jewish thinker, philosopher Jacques Derrida, has also argued that dichotomies are codependent. Difference is how to begin to understand culture—and indeed to grasp the making of the self, which is formed in relation to the Other.

But if the imperatives of religion cease to determine Jewish identity, which has become alterable, then the consequences are what Marjorie Garber, a cultural critic, has called a "category crisis." By that she means "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another: black/white, Jew/Christian, noble/bourgeois, master/servant, master/slave." This definition stems from her own investigation of cross-dressing. The category crisis of transvestism begins with a very practical question: which public restroom does one use?

Garber's analysis finds some confirmation in American life itself, which philosopher George Santayana called "a powerful solvent." The national experience is not compatible with taxonomy. Under modern conditions, Judaism itself faces a category crisis, as integration into an open society has demonstrated, according to David Biale, that "the identity boundaries between the Jew and the Other are inherently unstable." To historicize Jewish culture is to recognize that "the difference between 'Jew' and 'goy' is no longer ontological." He adds: "The relationship of Jewish culture to its surroundings was, and is, dynamic and permeable."<sup>25</sup> Dividing lines so clearly marked in principle were crossed in practice, and rigidities were not immune to the threat of dissolution.

After all, if gender is socially constructed, why not race and ethnicity too? None of Lenny Bruce's routines is more famous than his pair of distinctions intended to discredit traditional versions of Jewish identity: "All Drake's cakes are goyish. . . . Instant potatoes—goyish," and so are TV dinners and cat boxes and trailer parks. But though "fruit salad is Jewish," "body and fender men are goyish." Another dualistic comedian with acutely developed ethnographic interests, Jackie Mason, generalized that "you

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never, ever see a Jew under a car," and also noticed the absence of his co-religionists on the roster of rodeo performers. Only Gentiles would risk falling off of broncos ("I say, *shnick*, use the other hand!"). As for jockeys, who must weigh under a hundred pounds, Mason opined, "a Jew is not going to give up coffee and Coke just to sit on a horse."<sup>26</sup>

It was Bruce, however, who most strikingly anticipated the academic formulation of identity as a social construction, telling his listeners to "dig [that] I'm Jewish. Count Basie's Jewish. Ray Charles is Jewish." And so is Hadassah. But neither B'nai B'rith nor Eddie Cantor were. (Here demurral must be entered. Rather than derogate the B'nai B'rith as "goyish," Bruce might have substituted, say, the American Jewish Committee; and the former Israel Iskowitz was an electric and impassioned performer deeply committed to Jewish life and to Jewish as well as other charities.) Bruce was right to assert that skin color is irrelevant. But should "soul" or spiritual authenticity or a capacity to swing or to be hip be the true signifiers of Jewish identity? That, at the risk of sounding square, is dubious. More plausible was the comedian's claim that, "if you live in New York or any other big city, you are Jewish. It doesn't matter even if you're Catholic; if you live in New York, you're Jewish. If you live in Butte, Montana, you're going to be goyish even if you're Jewish."<sup>27</sup>

Explaining a joke is awkward, although Bruce's routine is too extensive and elaborate to fit the label of a mere joke. In an era when the persistence of ethnicity was not a sociological commonplace, he was making such an accident of birth more decisive than class or geography or religion. That hardly establishes the soundness of his monologue, even as a loose generalization. Professor Fiedler was then living in Missoula, Montana, but was quite recognizably Jewish, having come from Newark and New York University. His eight children were from Montana, so it should be noted that most have considered themselves only "in some vestigial sense Jews." None "has at the present moment a Jewish mate; nor, for that matter, do I," Fiedler acknowledged in 1989.<sup>28</sup> So one particular family's history indirectly confirmed Bruce's point, which, within its limits, is well taken: "kosher style" has exerted considerable impact in urban America, but has played less well in the heartland. If only for purposes of comic exaggeration, his antessentialist riff on Jewish identity is suggestive. So democratic, so diverse, and so hospitable did the nation prove to be that a customary way of understanding the Diaspora needed revision.

Elsewhere the hegemony of Gentiles was so taken for granted that, as Sartre argued shortly before the state of Israel was proclaimed, Jews are presumably destined to represent "negativity" forever. Theirs was the permanent status of the "other." In defending them in 1946 against antisemitism, he did not bother to read a single Jewish book and therefore



could not imagine what positive contribution could be made by Diaspora Jews: "They cannot take pride in any collective work that is specifically Jewish, or in a civilization properly Jewish, or in a common mysticism." So much for the Talmud, for the Golden Age of Spain, and for the Kabalah. Sartre was hardly alone in doubting that Jews could form a culture of their own, however permeable. The émigré sociologist Max Horkheimer also believed that his fellow Jews perpetually embodied the "negative principle," which is why by the 1970s he criticized Israeli nationalists for having become "positive themselves."

Henry Pachter, another diagnostician of Weimar culture who relocated himself in America, announced that the condition of a "rootless, cosmopolitan Jew" suited him "better than any other role."<sup>29</sup> Ilya Ehrenburg, who was part bohemian and part Bolshevik, defined himself as a Jew "as long as a single antisemite remains on earth." Such obduracy is undoubtedly a recipe for eternal life, if not much of an recommendation for any religious or cultural affirmation. In Ehrenburg's 1921 novel, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Julio Jurenita and His Disciples*, the protagonist asks representatives of various nations which word should be preserved from the human vocabulary: "yes" or "no." The American is not unique in picking the former; but only the Jew, the perpetual dissident, chooses "no."<sup>30</sup>

So familiar a condition once led Isaiah Berlin to ask: "What does every Jew have in common, whether he hails from Riga or from Aden, from Berlin or from Marrakesh or Glasgow?" Berlin answered his own question: "A sense of unease in society. Nowhere do almost all Jews feel entirely at home." His interlocutor tried to rebut by citing Sir Isaiah himself as "a counter-example. Surely you feel at ease and even amused at the most solemn state occasions, and in the company of imposing and powerful men?" Berlin answered, "You are wrong." He admitted to feeling not completely at home in the land of his adoption: "I am a devoted Anglo-ophile, not an Englishman." Berlin added that because Jews "are a minority everywhere" except in Israel, "constantly being made to look over their shoulders to see what other people think of them," their culture developed "in an atmosphere of intermittent uneasiness."<sup>31</sup> Perhaps justifying his own refusal to live in Israel, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Boston described *Galat* (Exile) as "the essence of the Jewish people," with its triggering antecedents in the expulsion from Eden. It may not be accidental that his writings are pervaded by references to homelessness and loneliness.<sup>32</sup>

The depth of such estrangement should not be exaggerated. Because Christendom worshiped a Jew, the people from whom Jesus had sprung could not be ignored as ancillary to Western civilization. During the Great War, David Lloyd George told Mrs. James de Rothschild: "When Dr.

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Weizmann was talking of Palestine[,] he kept bringing up place names which were more familiar to me than those on the Western Front," where British soldiers were fighting and dying. Jewish civilization and its offshoots were not mere footnotes to the history-taking place on center stage. When an Israeli archaeologist guided Neil Armstrong through the Old City and showed him the Huldah Gate, where Jesus had presumably trod, the astronaut exclaimed: "I am more excited stepping on these stones than I was stepping on the moon."

The subsequent predicament of Jesus's coreligionists in the Diaspora does not stem only from exclusion but rather from feeling so integral to a Christendom that has also stigmatized them. In 1916 the radical critic Randolph Bourne identified as "the anomaly of the Jew" the feeling of being "culturally [and] racially . . . peculiar." But the Jew "has proven himself perhaps the most assimilable of all races to other and quite alien cultures."<sup>33</sup> A sympathetic Gentile, Bourne had already hailed the project of young Jewish intellectuals to enrich what he hoped would become a transnational America.

It was in the pages of the *Menorah Journal* that Bourne diagnosed the anomalous condition of the Jew in a cosmopolitan nation. The magazine had been founded in 1915 to articulate an American Jewish culture, to encourage something separate and continuous that Jewish immigrants and their progeny transplanted and adapted and created. In that year Horace Kallen made the most valiant effort of any Jewish thinker hitherto to legitimate ethnic difference when he coined the term "cultural pluralism." Preferring to validate the Many rather than envision the One, Kallen called for a society bound into a federation of ethnic groups. Irreversible data of birth could be converted into opportunities for self-realization; ancestry would be honored as a means of revitalizing democratic possibility. The individual could be anchored in a continuous and comforting fabric of institutions that enriched the larger community. Kallen was the pioneer theorist of resistance to the ideal of homogenization.<sup>34</sup>

That he also became perhaps the first intellectual to try to describe the substance of an American Jewish culture reinforces his claim to historical attention. A champion of "Hebraism" in the early issues of the *Menorah Journal*, Kallen was praised half a century later by Mordecai Kaplan for having most satisfactorily reconciled the Jewish heritage with American citizenship. Kaplan was being generous. Though Kallen had struggled to find in the ethos of "Hebraism" something peculiarly (if not uniquely) Jewish, he did not succeed in doing so. His basic text was the Book of Job, a work of resonant power, but typical neither of the Bible nor of Judaic thought. What Kallen meant by "Hebraism" remained murky: what exactly is "the total biography of the Jewish soul"? He had a weakness for such phraseol-

ogy: by the end of his career, he forsook "Hebraism" for the very non-denominational "secularism." Such truth in labeling was admirable; but to be a secularist, you don't have to be Jewish. This had been the problem with "Hebraism" as well. Whatever it was supposed to be, it sounded suspiciously like the go-with-the-flow pragmatism, meliorism, and empiricism that had been absorbed from teachers like William James. Indeed, Kallen was so deeply indebted to non-Hebraic thought that, of the six thinkers he claimed had most influenced him (including Barrett Wendell and George Santayana), only one—Solomon Schechter—was Jewish.<sup>35</sup>

Kallen had failed to locate the distinguishing features of a Jewish culture that might enrich and enliven the larger American culture while also providing a striking contrast or challenge to it. The attributes of plasticity and integration make the task of specifying what American Jewish culture has been or might be fiendishly difficult. But that was the project of the children of eastern European immigrants who founded and contributed to the *Menorah Journal*. Its masthead promised devotion to "Jewish culture and ideas." The editors and contributors described such values as a response to the cruelties of bigotry, a gesture of resistance to the excesses of Americanization, a necessary adjunct to the Zionist movement, and an elaboration of Judaism itself. Less than six months after assuming the leadership of the Zionist Organization of America, even a figure as distant from Judaism as Brandeis was urging readers of the *Menorah Journal* to seize "the opportunity . . . for the further development of Jewish . . . culture."

For those who repudiated tradition and who objected to the categorization of Jewry as a religious group, the magazine offered a forum. Jewishness could be more than—and not merely—a substitute for piety. Culture was a way for a minority losing its religious moorings in the New World to sustain itself, and was assumed to be fully compatible with the exercise of critical intelligence.<sup>36</sup> But the question of how Jewishness and culture could be reconciled and sustained among the second generation did not resolve into any consensus or confidence. Although the debates in the *Menorah Journal* heightened the ethnic consciousness of Jewish intellectuals, the Great Depression reduced to anemia the circulation and ideological intensity of a magazine that lingered until it expired in 1962.

Could anyone specify the attributes of an American Jewish culture? In 1916 Walter Lippmann, the most brilliant American journalist of the century, dodged such an assignment, presented by editor Henry Hurwitz. Lippmann responded: "I have read Bourne with admiration and a touch of skepticism. I am considerably puzzled over the whole matter of dual allegiances, and have been for a long time." Though disclaiming any preparation "to write anything about Jewish questions," Lippmann acknowledged that "Bourne raises issues which go to the roots of political science, and it

is a trifle hard for me to see just whence he derives his faith. [Felix] Frankfurter, Kallen, and I are slender reeds on which to lean . . . and just what Bourne and the rest of you mean by culture I can't make out." The co-founder of the *New Republic* then inquired: "If you get rid of the theology, and the biological mysticism, and treat the literature as secular, and refuse to regard the Jew as in any sense a chosen people, just what elements of a living culture are left of a culture that is distinct and specially worth cultivating?"<sup>37</sup>

Without specifying a category crisis, Lippmann nonetheless crystallized its problem: how could an identity without a fully formed historic ideology result in a recognizable culture? What are its attributes? Here any answer is treacherous, and generalization can be of only limited validity. But even half-truths can be valuable, and a half can still be quite a bit.

Jewish culture in the United States cannot be assessed according to the standard, is this artifact so authentic and distinctive that no Gentile could have produced it? If this distinction *were* the criterion, then no Jewish culture would exist. Processes of spiritual, aesthetic, and intellectual development cannot be quarantined from the rest of America. Its culture and its Jewish segment are too firmly braided. This is the problem that faces anyone studying American Jewish culture: the larger culture seems so porous, the smaller one so fragile and indistinct. In the United States, no chasm separates the shape that Jews have given their experiences and the operations of the majority culture, into which Jews fit mostly by making it up as they went along.

At the turn of the century, nobody took more starkly compelling or more enduring photographs of Lower East Side residents than Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, neither of whom was Jewish. Nor was the legendary team of director D. W. Griffith and cameraman Billy Bitzer, who kept enlarging the possibilities of cinema in shooting *Romance of a Jewess* (1908). Anne Nichols's *Abie's Irish Rose* (1925) was such a Broadway hit that the play reached an audience of perhaps eleven million; Abie was not her colleague. Among the splendors of synagogue architecture is Beth Sholom (1954) in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. A preacher's son named Frank Lloyd Wright is responsible. United Artists' version of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971) may be as commonly known and appreciated as the stage play (to say nothing of Sholom Aleichem's tales). But Norman Jewison, a Methodist, directed the film. Boundaries may be blurred (or low enough to surmount), but any consideration of what Gentiles are mimicking or enhancing requires the assumption that there *is* an American Jewish culture. Adopting the voice of the blocked and beleaguered Henry Bech, John Updike thrice did a parody of the postwar Jewish novel that was more than passable. His own identity—literary and otherwise—is secure.

Contrast the mysterious career of Henry Harland, who has been credited with inaugurating the themes of assimilation and intermarriage that would permeate American Jewish fiction for a century thereafter. But though he wrote novels like *Mrs. Peivada* (1886) and *The Yoke of the Thorah* (1887) under the name of Sidney Luska, Harland was in fact a Protestant only pretending to be a Jew, whose phony ethnicity was exposed when one of his novels did not merely depict intermarriage but also endorsed it. He eventually expatriated himself, converted to Catholicism, and lied through his teeth to a reporter: "I never knew a Sidney Luska."<sup>38</sup> (Such facile shuffling of identity cards was spoofed in Woody Allen's account of a friend who kept switching back and forth on sex-change operations, because "he just couldn't find anything he liked.") Creative Jews in the United States have operated in a protean culture that makes hierarchy, authority, and rigidity an affront to democratic aspirations and the inclusive tendencies of the marketplace.

And because American Jewish subculture is neither autonomous nor impermeable, the criterion of eligibility cannot be that a Gentile could not have painted it, or drawn it, or composed it, or written it. No artifact of Jewish culture is more manifestly authentic than a *Haggadah*. But in 1512 a Franciscan monk did a Latin translation.<sup>39</sup> Is it Jewish? Not even the effort by historians of premodern Jewry to isolate an uncontaminated cultural identity can succeed. Between what is Gentile and what is Jewish in American culture, no fire wall can be constructed.

A novelist like George Eliot could imagine a Jewish protagonist, but such a projection does not make *Daniel Deronda* (1876) a specimen of Jewish culture (even though the most important Jewish literary figure in nineteenth-century America, Emma Lazarus, became sympathetic to her people's claims to Palestine only after reading Eliot's novel).<sup>40</sup> Leopold Bloom constitutes the radical terminus of assimilation, and imagines himself speaking to Dublin crowds in his pidgin Hebrew: "Aleph Bet Ghimel Daleh Hagadah Tephilim Kosher Yom Kippur Hanukah Roschashana Beni Brith Bar Mitzvah Mazzoth Askenazim Meshuggah Talith." Jewish only on his father's side, the advertising canvasser is uncircumcised. He did not become bar mitzvah. He talks like an agnostic and perhaps even like an atheist. Yet no Dubliner takes Bloom to be anything other than a Jew. (In reimagining Odysseus, "only a foreigner would do," the novelist once explained. "The Jews were foreigners at that time in Dublin.")<sup>41</sup>

Because Bloom is barely yet unmistakably Jewish, he should intrigue the Jewish historian. But *Ulysses* is not a Jewish book, despite its decisive influence on *Call It Sleep*. The film *The Great Dictator* (1940) not only makes a Jewish barber its protagonist, but also puts Chaplin's politics on the side of the sentimental faith in surmounting bigotry that sustained so many Jews.

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Perhaps that is why the comedian became a sort of honorary Jew. But his film cannot be called Jewish, any more than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) or *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) can be said to illustrate black culture (even though William Styron adopted the "voice" of a slave rebel). These novels are rightly read as specimens of the souls of white folk, not black. Michelangelo's *Moses* and the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" reflect the Jewish influence on others, not the continuity of Jewish culture. Categories are not easy to establish, but they are not meaningless, nor are distinctions impossible to parse.

Should American Jewish culture be allowed to include works that do not bear directly on the beliefs and experiences of the Jews as a people? Or is *any* intellectual or artistic activity that they have initiated in the United States, whether or not such work bears traces of Jewish content, a contribution to American Jewish culture? Does Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970) count, for instance, but not his *Henderson the Rain King* (1959)? Does Joseph Heller's *Good as Gold* (1979) merit consideration, but not his *Catch-22* (1961)? Or all of Malamud's novels after his first, *The Natural* (1952)? What about Ben Shahn, who illustrated Maurice Samuel's *The World of Sholom Aleichem* (1943) as well as a *Haggadah* (1966), but who is better known for, say, his artistic protest of the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti? Whether representing Jews or not, these works are expressions of the same intelligence, distilled products of the same experiences, manifestations of the same sensibility.

For the historian of Jewish culture, books and plays and paintings that depict Jews may be more revelatory and important. But to expel from consideration whatever omits Jewish subject matter unnecessarily diminishes the effort to understand the Jews who created such works, and would make the task of classification even more difficult than it already is. (How much Jewish content would count? And how overt or emphatic should Jewish themes be to merit inclusion?) Moreover, some works are not even representational. There can be no observable Jewish content in the canvases of Adolph Gottlieb, Barnett Newman, and Mark Rothko; Abstract Expressionism *has* no content. Are their paintings, or the sculpture of, say, Louise Nevelson, off-limits to the student of American Jewish culture? To define that culture too stringently risks pushing nonferential masterpieces away, and would repudiate the interpretive possibilities inherent in Meyer Schapiro's claim that no "pure art" unaffected by experience is imaginable: "All fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, the artifacts of Jewish culture must exhibit overt Jewish representations, or explicit Jewish subjects, would impoverish the appreciation of that 'fruitful and inexhaustible inheritance' passed on to Delmore Schwartz.

Nowhere is the word "Jew" mentioned in the fiction of Kafka, whose status among Jewish writers of the twentieth century is at least as secure as anyone else's (even if the canon itself no longer is). The word "Jew" is not mentioned in the Book of Job either, nor was its protagonist apparently a Hebrew. Indeed, it is unlikely that even Abraham, the first monotheist, was in any ethnic sense a Jew; there was no Jewish people to which he could belong. Even more obviously, Adam and Eve were not Jewish. They did their share to reinforce one rabbi's assertion that "Genesis is a very *gay-ische* work. It smells of the ancient Near East with its pantheon of fatally flawed heroes and misbehaving demigods," much in need of reinterpretation "to make it conform to classical rabbinic standards."<sup>43</sup> But the presence of such figures in Genesis and other books does not detract from the status of the Bible as a Jewish book. (It is tempting to revise Bruce's routine, so that Genesis is *goyish*; Psalms, Jewish.) Written in Aramaic and Hebrew, the Book of Daniel is Jewish. Written in German, Martin Buber's *Daniel* (1913) is Jewish too. Written in English, *The Book of Daniel* (1971) should be similarly classified, and not only because E. L. Doctorow's novel is populated with Jewish characters whose multigenerational oppositional stance to bourgeois America is representative. The same author's other fiction, whether or not diagnosing Jewish life, should also be incorporated into a comprehensive interpretation of Jewish culture. So should "Visions of Daniel" (1990), by Robert Pinsky, who became poet laureate of the United States.

What then is Jewish culture? It is whatever individuals of Jewish birth (who did not sincerely convert to another faith) have contributed to art and thought. Jewish culture is not merely synonymous with Judaism. To include the philosophical and legalistic works of Maimonides, for example, but *not* his medical treatises would be to constrict the boundaries of Jewish culture. After the Enlightenment and Emancipation, which have dramatically shrunk the sphere of religion, narrowly liturgical and spiritual themes should not exhaust the meaning of cultural expression. If Jewish culture is more than Judaism, then a religious or ideological standard should not preclude an investigation of what Jews have created, adapted, and conserved. What Raymond Williams summarized as intellectual and aesthetic processes and practices suggests that an a priori determination of what is Jewish is reductive, and cannot do justice to what talented thinkers and artists have bequeathed. (By analogy, what some U.S. citizens have done in arts and letters cannot be cordoned off as un-American activities either. The American mind is too multifarious for that.)

Though "content" cannot by itself distinguish what is Jewish from what is not, a preoccupation with similar themes or ideas is not irrelevant. Clustering in certain fields demands inquiry. Disproportionate expressions of

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certain interests are themselves signs of the animating power of a culture. The Nazis were wrong to claim that there is a "Jewish physics." But it is not wrong to note how attracted Jews have been to physics, and to wonder why. Though not founded until 1938, the Bronx High School of Science produced more Nobel laureates in physics than all but a tiny fraction of the member states of the United Nations. Because of such statistical improbability, curiosity about the common origins of Sheldon Glashow, Steven Weinberg, and Melvin Schwartz should be piqued. Humor comes pretty close to a universal phenomenon. But when a 1978 study calculated that four out of five professional comedians was Jewish,<sup>44</sup> the proportion should invite reflection on whether something like Jewish humor exists—and why, if it does, its place in Jewish culture is so secure. The Olympian Mark Spitz ranks as one of the greatest swimmers who ever lived, and the Olympian Kerri Strug among the nation's most astonishing gymnasts. But no one would claim any special Jewish disposition toward aquatic or acrobatic skills, and it would be foolish to account for such athletic gifts in other than fortuitously individual terms. But when Jews are heavily drawn to certain fields, curiosity demands to be satisfied rather than short-circuited. As with recent scholarly work on the roles of gender and sexual orientation, the challenge here is to expose something to a different light without being reductive. Attentiveness to ethnicity in the formation of the nation's culture is not intended to displace other readings, but to complement them.

The alternative of inattentiveness has consequences too. As this book was being written, two feature articles appeared in the *New York Times* on the peculiarities of foreign countries. "There is pride that Hungary has produced so many important minds" in the twentieth century, a correspondent reported from Budapest. "Hungary has produced an inordinate number of Nobel Prize winners." And from Buenos Aires came news that Argentina had more psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists per capita than any country on earth (except for Uruguay). Though the Hungarian physicists and mathematicians were reported to have fled "often under the shadow of antisemitism," the *Times* failed to indicate whether any of the Hungarian geniuses were *not* Jews, at least by Nazi criteria. (In fact *none* of the great nuclear physicists were Gentiles.) Leo Szilard, Edward Teller, and Eugene Wigner, plus the mathematician John Von Neumann (who converted to Catholicism upon marrying in 1930), attended the same schools; and Wigner attributed their brilliance to the excellence of their education in Budapest and to the stimulus of expulsion and relocation.

Neither Wigner nor the *Times*, however, explained why Roman Catholics or Lutherans did not perform so spectacularly in those Budapest schools, or why non-Jewish émigrés were less successful at physics than some Jews were. Only at the end of the article filed from Argentina did

the *Times* note that "a large proportion of the country's psychotherapists and patients are Jews, whose population of 250,000 is one of the largest in the world outside Israel and the United States." Readers might have wondered whether a Jewish absorption in psychology was an adequate explanation for what was called an "obsession . . . as thoroughly Argentine as the tango."<sup>45</sup> Such sociological imprecision is akin to asserting that the fascination that Manet, Monet, Renoir, and Cézanne showed in the play of light upon surface was distinctly "European." Such clustering may not be random after all.

There is no "Jewish economics"; consider the contrast between, say, Milton Friedman and Paul Samuelson (to say nothing of the divide between David Ricardo and Rosa Luxemburg). But there have been dispositions, susceptibilities, tendencies that Jews as a group have demonstrated and that they as well as others have not been shy about noticing. Such social observations cannot be utterly capricious and can sometimes be demonstrated. For example, a quite disproportionate flair for producing intellectuals (including theorists who have examined the strengths and weaknesses of capitalism) is among the group characteristics of modern Jewry. No minority or other collectivity has a monopoly of any of the attributes ascribed to it, and many members of the group do not exhibit such traits. But a belief in Jewish distinctiveness is familiar enough, and widespread enough, to be a datum worthy of consideration. A few examples are intended to be suggestive.

At least within the Anglo-Saxon world, Jewish culture has presented itself as more openly emotional and less restrained than the general ambience. Producer David O. Selznick aimed for electrifying feelings in his films, and urged Alfred Hitchcock not to permit Joan Fontaine to underplay the female lead role in *Rebecca* (1940). "A little more Yiddish Art Theatre [is needed] in these moments," Selznick advised the British director, "and a little less English Repertory Theatre." (On stage at least, such advice was the opposite of the standard instructions that *Ostyniden* received: "more Polish, less Polish.") When Aaron Copland gushed that the "passionate lyricism" of his music made it Jewish ("it's dramatic, it's intense. . . I can't imagine it written by a goy"),<sup>46</sup> he was unwittingly engaged in supplementing Lenny Bruce's ethnography by announcing: Dig—Tchaitkowsky is Jewish. Bruckner is Jewish. And yes, Wagner is Jewish.

Selznick and Copland were probably on to a certain truth, but still far from the whole truth. Not even the descendants of the Psalmist have the franchise on passionate lyricism and dramatic intensity of expression. Such claims deserve skepticism not only because they look like special pleading, not only because they indulge in the unconvincing promotion of stereotypes, not only because Jewish actors and composers whose style is cooler

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and more cerebral are erased, and not only because Gentiles also have traits ascribed to Jews. Such claims can also be matched by their opposites: instead of passion, rumination; instead of lyricism, doubt. Though British film director Mike Leigh denied any "conscious" manifestation of a Jewish sensibility in his films, he conceded that something "inescapably Jewish" might be read into their "peculiar kind of inevitable tragicomic chemistry," plus a tendency "to pose reflective questions more than answer them."<sup>47</sup> Such attributes would make Chekhov Jewish too, and suggest how warily generalizations should be proposed.

Some claims are nevertheless sounder than others. Take logocentricity, for example. A religion that makes texts so integral to piety ensures that an exaltation of the word would shape Jewish culture and bestow upon it enduring power. Language "is the Jews' weapon," a British textile manufacturer once instructed his son, the future historian Simon Schama. At least in the Diaspora, "we can't really be soldiers; we must always rely on the spoken word." Or the written word. Learning was to be sweetened with honey on the alphabet, and sacred books that were too tattered to be used had to be buried (on consecrated ground) rather than thrown away. Through the remorseless ratiocination that entwined knowledge with religion, the transmission of texts, and the exegesis of legal codes, Jews have enjoyed historic advantages in what has seemed like the mass production of intellectuals, whose own religious tradition encouraged them to think of Life itself as a Book (*sefer ba-hayim*).

The meaning of Jewish culture is therefore most likely to be borne by language—which is why Philip Roth explained the significance of breaking protagonist Nathan Zuckerman's jaw in *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983): "For a Jew a broken jaw is a terrible tragedy, it was to avoid this that so many of us went into teaching rather than prizefighting." What makes such a novel so Jewish, its author insisted, is "the nervousness, the excitability, the arguing, the dramatizing, the indignation, the obsessiveness . . . above all the *talking*. The talking and the shouting. . . It isn't what it's talking *about* that makes a book Jewish—it's that the book won't shut up."<sup>48</sup> It is no surprise that a Jew invented what Zuckerman undergoes (as does Alex Portnoy): "the talking cure."

Many key figures in the evolution of linguistics have been Jews. Ludwig Lazar Zamenhof believed that talking a new language would cure humanity of its post-Babel hatreds and misunderstandings. Hence he invented Esperanto. The Harvard philosopher Stanley Cavell traced his interest in language in part to his "father's unease in any language—his English accented, his Yiddish frozen," which "helped create in him, and in me, a certain passion for expressiveness. Something of this passion, so conceived, may go into various modes of Jewish discourse." Some psychometric evi-



dence supports this interpretation. Even if Roth is wrong about Jewish verbosity, Jewish test-takers have ranked above the norm in verbal ability itself. They have also tended to earn lower scores than others when attributes such as visual ability and reasoning, as well as the conceptualization of space, are measured.<sup>49</sup> Jewish painters were less conspicuous than Jewish novelists and playwrights, at least until the 1940s. But even the central role of Jews in Abstract Expressionism, for example, is no more striking than their contribution to art criticism (Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg) and to scholarship (Schapiro as well as refugees like Erwin Panofsky). To be sure, writing about art demands acute visual powers. But Jews may nevertheless be more important in writing about American painting and sculpture than in creating it.

An attraction to the impalpable at the expense of the tangible is a trait that the literary scholar Erich Auerbach traced to antiquity. The first chapter of *Mimesis* contrasts the Homeric poems, in which “delight in physical existence is everything to them, and their highest aim to make that delight perceptible to us,” with the Hebrew Bible, in which the characters move across an undescribed landscape, and encounters take place in settings that are very difficult to visualize.<sup>50</sup> The characters of the Bible move, according to the British polymath Jonathan Miller, “through a purely acoustic universe, propelled by audible dictates from God. No scenery described.” And when the Israelites are commanded to follow the moral law enunciated at Mount Sinai, they tell Moses, according to Exodus 24:7: *na’aseh v’nishmah* (we shall do and we shall hear). What amazes a soldier in Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* is that the Jews “only believe in things that you cannot see.”

Miller, a self-described “Jewish atheist,” has amplified the impression of emphatic orientation upon textuality: “Jews cluster around a book in the way that the Italians and the Irish don’t. The great tradition of Jewish religious life is exegetic—argument, dispute, and exegesis. . . . Indeed, the original founding myth of Judaism is in itself exegetical and legalistic. It’s a contractual relationship that we have with God,” and each party may “haggle over the terms.” He added: “The Jews had a head start over almost any other immigrant group in that so many of them had got, if not the fully developed *yeshiva* tradition, at least a familiarity with Talmudic dispute. Thus literacy and, associated with literacy, commentary, and, associated with commentary, hairsplitting dispute; out of dispute comes a comic sense, a sense of the absurd, the ridiculous, the triumphant defeat of opponents on matters of interpretation.” Jews who have distinguished themselves in the performing arts tended to be drawn to “the verbal, the quick wscackering, the arrangement of dialogue, rather than with the display of decor, for example.”<sup>51</sup>

Other signs of greater ease with abstractions than with the natural world

would not be difficult to locate. Vladimir Nabokov was not only a literary genius: as an entomologist he twitted Kafka for not realizing that a domed beetle (*Ungeziefer*) has wings, which means that the metamorphosed Gregor Samsa could have flown out of an open window when the maid was cleaning his room. “I can’t write description,” Joseph Heller has conceded. “In *Catch-22* there is very little physical description. There is very little in *Something Happened*.” Historian Ruth Gay grew up in Queens not knowing “the names in English of common flowers, trees, or birds, or even of the spices in everyday use in our house.” When she and her husband, the historian Peter Gay, bought a Vermont farm, a New England friend walking with them in a meadow elicited “amazement and dismay” by identifying the flora, making the memoirist doubt her credentials for “owning property when I could not even recognize its plant life.”<sup>52</sup> The American Jewish novel is likely to be psychological rather than pastoral. Even Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997) is typical in calibrating the wrenching tensions within a family rather than in giving its characters the option of lighting out for open spaces.

It is also something of a truism—even if true—that American Jewish culture is urban in setting and sensibility. Few of its participants ever imagined that their problems stemmed from the denial of forty acres and a mule. The Brooklyn-born Alfred Kazin once wrote in the *Partisan Review* with such rapture about Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail* that an editor’s eyebrow was raised: “*Our* forests, Alfred?” The family name of the Philadelphia-born Clifford Odets was shortened from “Gorodetsky,” which is Russian for “urban dweller.” For most of the century, Jews were less than 3 percent of the nation’s population. But they were nearly *ten times* that proportion of New Yorkers. Sixty thousand Jews lived in New York City in 1880; half a century later the figure had jumped to about two million. As late as the end of the 1930s, the greatest Jewish city in the world was more than merely the nation’s largest metropolis. The city’s population of 7.5 million was so vast that it exceeded that of any other *state* in the Union (including the rest of the Empire State).<sup>53</sup> So large did New York City loom on the horizon that the most famous painter of the Diaspora delayed leaving France, even as the Nazi juggernaut was approaching. A worried Marc Chagall asked his would-be rescuer: “Are there cows in America?”<sup>54</sup>

Neither Oscar Hammerstein II nor Lorenz Hart—Broadway lyricists who were quintessential New Yorkers—ever learned how to drive. Before there was Woody Allen’s *Manhattan*, Hart’s 1924 lyrics to “Manhattan” (music by Richard Rodgers) exulted in slant rhymes: “We’ll have Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island too,” because “the city’s clamor can never spoil / the dreams of a boy and girl.” (Well, not *only* the borough of Manhattan.) And when cowboys profess to “know we belong to the land /



And the land we belong to is grand," such autochthonous exuberance made sense in Hammerstein's Oklahoma but not where he himself worked. He seemed largely unaware that rural life differed significantly. As a producer of *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), he had to talk Irving Berlin into writing lyrics for rural folks, and assured him: "All you have to do is drop the 'g's' in present participles. For example, it's 'thinkin' " rather than "thinking." Berlin came back quickly with the winsome "Doin' What Comes Nat-ur'ly."<sup>55</sup> Anything you can do, I can do better.

And Woody Allen's films seem less appreciated in the rural Midwest, for example, than among audiences in Paris, where *Le Monde* claimed "every new [Allen] film is an event." It is also the city Allen once said he would live in, were New York ever foreclosed. "In the United States," he ruefully noted, "I do pretty well in the big cities and the college towns, but not in the rest of the country." *Alfie* (1990) earned more in France than in the United States. In his *September* (1987), when an actor ad-libbed a line about a state nicknamed Big Sky, the director was vexed: "Montana? Montana? The word 'Montana' is gonna be in *my* movie?" The line was cut.<sup>56</sup> In Wendy Wasserstein's play *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), a dropout lawyer named Susan Johnston is described as "brilliant" when she is introduced to the high-octane Scoop Rosenbaum. His riposte is peremptory: "Brilliance is irrelevant in Montana."<sup>57</sup> Perhaps just as poignant was the fate of Jews residing in Montana, whom Lenny Bruce had dismissed with a term he used pejoratively: *goyish*.

Of course the comedian piled a hipster's suavity on top of his urban knowingsness in mocking the tedium even of towns located closer to the metropolis. Bruce's routine about Lima, Ohio, is funnier on record than in cold print. He depicted a bleakness that might have reinforced the despair of a whole caravan of Midwestern writers from Edgar Lee Masters and Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson on down (to say nothing of Gertrude Stein's famous dismissal of Oakland as the sort of place where "when you go there, there is no there there"): "When you travel to these towns there's nothing to do during the day. They're very boring. All right, the first day you go through the Five-and-Ten. That's one day shot, right? The next day you go see the cannon, and that's it. Forget it. . . . Yeah, it doesn't make it," he sneered. "At night, [in] a city like this. . . . you don't see anything but stars. Stars. . . and a Socomy station."<sup>58</sup> Of course the heartland could be represented as different rather than just boring; and the forbidding mystery of states like Iowa and Minnesota could be mocked in the form of encounters between the likes of Alex Portnoy and Alvy Singer and the families of "The Pumpkin" and Annie Hall, respectively. But Jewish voices have rarely been village voices.

Although the style of the subculture has been urban, it has not been

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characteristically urbane or genteel. To be sure, a book more comprehensive than this one could not neglect the literary critic Lionel Trilling, who succeeded in the Ivy League because he was manifestly "a gentleman and a scholar."<sup>59</sup> Civility was an ordeal to which Jews (along with blacks and lower-class Southern whites) had some trouble submitting. Julian Rose's vaudeville routine early in the century, "Lepinsky at the Wedding," poked fun at the standards of the well-heeled. Invited to "please come in evening dress," Ikey Blatt showed up in his pajamas. An item served to guests as "tomato surprise" was no surprise to Levinsky: "I ate 'em before lots of times." When his friend Lipinsky is scolded for having grabbed an entire roast chicken "all alone to eat," he reacts by rushing to grab some potatoes to put on the plate too.

And so forth. The title of physicist Richard Feynman's first book of memoirs came from an incident on his first afternoon as a graduate student on the Princeton campus, when the dean's wife asked whether he took cream or lemon in his tea. The future Nobel laureate answered with a gauche "both," which startled her: "Surely you're joking, Mr. Feynman." His manner of speaking was reminiscent of a Brooklyn cabbie's, and his social orientation was largely designed to puncture pretense with an impish disregard of gentility. Attuned to the subtleties of conventions he made a political point of repudiating, the radical Abbie Hoffman rejected "the notion of 'modesty' as something invented by WASPs to keep the Jews out of the banking industry"; he "always thought the idea of postponing pleasure was something WASPs dreamed up to keep Jews out of country clubs and fancier restaurants."<sup>60</sup>

A sweet and unself-conscious document can also be cited, if only to discredit belief in human sameness. Whoever dismisses cultural differences, or might be tempted to define Jews as distinguishable from their neighbors only in worshiping at a synagogue rather than a church, might consider a letter to the editor of *Der Tog* in 1915. The English-language play the writer had attended was deemed "passable, but the theater! It is not like our Jewish theater. First of all I found it so quiet there." This grounding reported: "There are no cries of 'Shai!' 'Shut up!' or 'Order!' and no babies cried—if it were no theater at all!?" Nor were there any "apples, candy, or soda, just like in a desert. There are some Gentile girls who go around among the audience handing out glasses of water, but this I can get at home, too." The Yiddish theater aimed to please commoners, not *feinstmuckers* (aesthetes). The demotic dimension of American Jewish culture was also shown by Allen Ginsberg, who was listed in the telephone book at least through the 1960s, when he had become probably the nation's most famous living poet. Isaac Bashevis Singer also kept his listing in the Manhattan telephone book for a while after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature. Until the

demands of fame grew exponentially, he usually invited callers over for lunch, or at least for coffee.<sup>61</sup> Similar hospitality was not characteristic of other eminent European-born novelists; and even those, like Nabokov or like Thomas Mann, who were married to Jews are not usually recalled as *heirisch*.

But notice the extent to which Jewish culture exaggerates tendencies that are already evident in American culture itself. Arriving en masse when the nation was moving from the countryside to the city, Jews were ahead of the curve. All new citizens were required to renounce aristocratic titles in a land where nobility is less cherished than mobility, and an up-from-the-bottom scrappiness has been so widely admired that Jewish indifference to politesse did not appear peculiar. In the first third of the twentieth century, American Jews were—in the hyperbolic assessment of critic Wilfrid Sheed (of British birth and Roman Catholic persuasion)—unleashing “the wildest, vulgarst explosion of talent since the Reformation.” Even as congressional restrictionists were shutting the gates to further immigration, the United States was becoming home not only to the world’s largest Jewish population, but also to the largest since Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees.<sup>62</sup> Yet Charles and Mary Beard, in their magisterial *Rise of American Civilization* (1927), make no more than a few passing references to Jews, mostly in terms of persecution and not at all in terms of their contributions to “American civilization.”

From the long perspective of Jewish history, it was still possible to ignore the cultural accomplishments of the republic to which this minority would contribute so strikingly, and that were to captivate uncountable millions of earthlings. In helping to inaugurate the founding of the Hebrew University in 1925, Lord Arthur James Balfour invoked the contribution that a Jewish university might make to international culture. Among living Jews he cited Einstein, Freud, and Henri Bergson for their intellectual achievements. At that auspicious moment on Mount Scopus, Balfour saw no reason to include any American Jews.

He was hardly alone in regarding the United States as terra incognita. Historian Heinrich Graetz had defined the Jewish experience as a dialectic between prevalence over suffering and moral and intellectual creativity: he thus in 1870 noticed nothing worthy in what Jews in the United States had produced. To their community he devoted only a sentence and a half in the eleventh volume of his *Geschichte der Juden*. (To be fair, a later English edition expanded the treatment to a paragraph.) Historian Jonathan D. Sarna has come up with a different calculation, claiming that “Graetz had condensed to devote one page to America in the English edition—an improvement, but not much of one, over the single footnote to which he relegated it in the original eleven-volume German edition. But American

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Jewry never fit neatly into his conception of what was important in Jewish history: It had not struggled for survival or produced a significant cultural monument.” In 1890, when an Anglo-Jewish author’s *Outlines of Jewish History* was slated for publication as the very first offering of the JPS, its patriotic editor noted with horror the lone paragraph that Lady Katie Magnus spent on the Western Hemisphere, squeezed in between mention of Chinese Jewry and Turkish Jews. American Judaism was dismissed as “not always in a very much better state of preservation than among the semi-savage sects of ancient civilization.”<sup>63</sup> (One can almost see Lady Magnus’s forbidding longnettle and curled upper lip!)

In the ambitious *Seven Jewish Cultures*, which ranges from the biblical era through the modern state of Israel, four brief references are made to the United States, which is subsumed under the culture of Emancipation. According to Efraim Shmueli’s criteria, in which distinctive formulations of the deity, of the Torah, and of the land are presented within a continuous wrestling with the meaning and interpretation of Scripture, nothing peculiar or divergent stemmed from the communities of the New World—a branch of European (and especially German) Jewry. Since Shmueli lived in Cleveland for thirteen years (and earlier in Chicago and Detroit), his views did not stem from ignorance of American Jewry. Nor were they unsound, given his definition of what constitutes “Jewish culture” and how its versions and variations might be assessed.<sup>64</sup> Some corrective is also needed to the disparagement of a hollowed-out American Jewish life that is on display at Tel Aviv’s Museum of the Diaspora, where the largest Jewish community in history is vaguely situated between Canadian Jewry and Latin American Jewry and receives less attention, for example, than Babylonian Jewry.

From such a perspective, there is something insufficiently Jewish, as though threads of traditions were severely frayed, about the American instance. In the United States, Jewish culture has not been endogenous, as though outside influences could be neglected. The civil societies of the modern age make such autonomy impossible. In the Diaspora the Jew “has nothing that is peculiarly his,” Ludwig Wittgenstein surmised in 1921. “It is typical for a Jewish mind to understand someone else’s work better than he understands it himself.” Ahad Ha-Am was also struck by the imitative adroitness of Jews, who “have not merely a tendency to imitation,” he wrote in 1894, “but a genius for it.” That uncanny knack went beyond assimilation: “Whatever they imitate, they imitate well.” In *Zelig*, Woody Allen’s 1983 cinematic exploration of the radical instability of identity, the protagonist is called “the Chameleon Man,” taking on with freakish fidelity the coloration of his social setting. His polyglot counterpart may be George Steiner. Even under hypnosis he could not find a “first language.”

In German, French, or English, the distinguished critic merely replied “in the language of the hypnotist.”<sup>65</sup>

Acute receptivity to outside forces accounts for the difficulty in locating what is Jewish in American Jewish culture. But what makes that culture special is that values, symbols, and ideals have circulated in *both* directions: not merely from majority to minority, but in an interactive and reciprocal fashion. No historical moment can be discovered in which the Jewish minority was ever so insulated that its own culture could have been created apart from the play of centrifugal forces. There was no fall from grace. Because that symbolic and expressive system was so permeable, because those who worked within it could not be cordoned off from an outside world that itself proved so open to Jewish influence, categorical rigidity is impossible to sustain.

Thus the historian needs to be sensitive to three separate, sometimes intertwined spheres, in which the internal dynamic of Jewish thought and expression could never ignore either the high culture or the popular arts that evolved in the United States. “What does it mean to be a poet of an abandoned culture?” was a question that Jacob Glatstein once raised. The Yiddish poet’s own definition was poignant: “I have to be aware of Auden but Auden need never have heard of me.” The historian is obligated to know *both* Auden and Glatstein, to negotiate between a dominant culture and a precarious deviation from it—and to know that the dominant culture is also divided into two branches. There is an ironic twist to Glatstein’s lament. In 1965 Auden himself was asked what he thought of Bob Dylan’s status as a “poet,” as a poll at three Ivy League institutions had revealed that the American writer whom the students most appreciated was the folksinger-turned-rocker. Auden was candid: “I am afraid I don’t know his work at all.”<sup>66</sup> This is the sort of unfamiliarity that impedes analysis of an American Jewish culture, though it is only a coincidence that Glatstein’s first book of poems, published in 1921, was called *Tankef Glatsteyn*; and Dylan’s first album, released four decades later, had only the singer’s name as the title. *Eccle homo*, bidding for recognition through the work.

Jewish life has been strong enough to sustain itself for several generations; it has also been subject to dilution, often under the impact of the nation’s popular culture. The Jewish community has hardly been invulnerable to the pressures and interventions of the larger culture. But the Jewish culture that emerged by the end of the nineteenth century has not only been mimetic, and should not be classified as merely a microcosm of the national culture. The creativity of American Jewry has also affected and altered that culture. Exchanging ideas and images with the larger culture in a network of reciprocity, Jews have borrowed freely but have also expanded the contours of that larger culture—which has itself been protean and fluid.

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American Jewish culture has no essence, and has never been autonomous. But it does have a history, which social conditions have limited as well as stimulated. Because such circumstances have determined how such a culture emerged and how it might be appreciated, a historical overview is imperative.

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