**IS THERE A JEWISH LITERATURE?**

SERGE LIBERMAN

This is one of those topics which regularly appearing in different guises - "Is there a Jewish literature?" "What is a Jewish writer?" "What is a Jewish book?" - reminds me of Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass - "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

Imagine that I'm a matchmaker, and, in order to determine the compatibility of two young people, among the questions I ask of each of them is, "Is there a Jewish literature?

The prospective groom who likes nothing better than simple absolutes responds with a definite "Yes!"

The would-be bride, however, is more subtle, she is more circumspect and says more quietly, "No!"

As matchmaker, I believe that there is still a good marriage to be made here, despite their respective "Yes" and "No".

So I proceed to examine their respective positions to find a way of having them accept each other.

Wherein then lies the young man's "Yes" - that is, that there is so surely a Jewish literature?

In the interests of simplicity, objectivity and pragmatism, Jewish literature as an object for study encompasses all novels, plays, poems, memoirs and testaments written by anyone who is Jewish according to *halacha*; that is, in an unmitigatingly holistic view, anyone who is Jewish by birthright through matrilineal descent or by conversion.

[There may already be some dissent here. Whereupon I hasten for the record to add that, personally, as a professedly secular Jew, I don't like a definition of Jewishness that excludes patrilineal descent; but my personal predilections are immaterial to the discussion. The *halachic* is the one fixed present-day criterion we have to go by. As for Jews by conversion, I make no distinction between conversion under Orthodox, Reform, Conservative or Reconstructionist auspices, seeing the acceptance or rejection of such conversions being predicated less on truly halachic authority than upon temporal wielders of political/religious hierarchical clout. - In practice, however, neither of these riders impact significantly upon the subject, with only singular and anomalous cases - for example, converts from Judaism, such as Heinrich Heine and Benjamin D'Israeli - who might, for some, fall outside the postulated definition].

Hence, to repeat: by the criterion here used, Jewish literature is defined first and foremost in terms of its practitioner being *halachically* Jewish.

I know that not all agree, although for reasons other than those I have just mentioned.

For instance, in her essay, "Defining the Indefinable", that introduces her book, What Is Jewish Literature? , Hana Wirth-Nesher of Tel Aviv University, dismisses such a definition out of hand.

"The simplest formula for identifying Jewish literature," - she writes - "is also the least satisfactory - literature written by Jews. Such a reductive approach, by its indiscriminate inclusiveness and its biological determinism begs the question of what constitutes Jewish culture as a matrix for Jewish literary texts."

And she asks: "Do Sholom Aleichem and Nathanael West really inhabit a shared universe in any respect? Is a writer steeped in Jewish liturgy and Hebrew texts, such as S.Y.Agnon, part of the same literary civilisation as Arthur Miller or Bruno Schulz?"

Whereupon, attributing to him with clear approval as "the most forceful dismissal of the biographical condition", she proceeds to cite Itamar Even-Zohar, "Only a nationalistic Jewish approach, or a racist antisemitic one, or ignorance... would adopt the term 'Jewish literature' on the basis of origin of writers."

Loaded terms like "indiscriminate inclusiveness" and " biological determinism", rhetorical juxtapositions of highly selected writers both culturally and thematically light-years apart, and talk of "nationalistic or racist antisemitic approaches" or "ignorance" (ignorance of what?) do not substitute for reasoned argument. Nothing may bind the Greenlander, the Korean and the Peruvian, but each must be "indiscriminately included" in the genus man, with each being respectively Greenlander, Korean or Peruvian precisely by biological determinism. Further, I do not subscribe to being a "nationalistic Jew" (with Even-Zohar's pejorative implication) nor a "racist antisemite", but I am nonetheless unreservedly at ease with my view of Jewish literature on the basis of writers' origins.

Why?

First: in keeping with the best and most workable definitions, this one is singularly unencumbered by any complicating variables and grey zones: the writer is either Jewish or he is not; he cannot be one or the other.

Second: as already stated, the halachic definition is the only "legal" and accepted one we currently have, whether applied to the individual or collective.

Third: it is exclusively a self definition, wholly independent of any external imposition - most notoriously, the Nuremberg Laws of 1935.

Fourth: it is a definition which accommodates Jewish writers of all kinds and everywhere, their recognition as such being untouched by other considerations, such as birthplace or citizenship, religious observance or non-observance, denominational affiliation or lack of it, racial descent or genetic endowment, personal experience or Weltanschauung , language or values, mores, rituals or creative concerns. For, as a legacy of their history, Jews are a trans-national, trans-linguistic, trans-cultural and trans-racial people, moulded in tandem both by their own experiences, laws and traditions and (pace all purists) by their encounters at numerous, diverse and profound inter-personal, social, cultural, religious, artistic, and philosophical levels through some four millennia with their host societies.

And fifth: it is the most workable definition.

Here I fall back on personal experience.

In my compilation A Bibliography of Australian Judaica , there is a section on Jewish creative writing in Australia. On gathering together my material, I had to make a very clear decision about whom to include and exclude, a decision which, if I were ever challenged to explain it, I could unimpeachably justify. What I could not risk in compiling such a work was arbitrariness, namely the selection or exclusion of entries that I , like some possibly idiosyncratic Olympian deity, deemed to be Jewish or not Jewish, separated by what I conceived as some justifiable demarcation line. There was - and is - no such line. Universal inclusion by the criteria already given was, to me, the most just, consistent and reliable guide, leaving it to others to treat the data-base in keeping with their requirements or as they willed.

In translating Jewish literature to very real and concrete expressions - precisely as bibliographic inclusions, or as entries in encyclopaedias, in anthologies of Jewish writing, in scholarly studies, journal essays, newspaper articles or obituaries - none so fits the bill as the so-reductive "indiscriminate inclusiveness" and "biological determinism" so scorned by Professor Wirth-Nesher. I am hard-put to think of one anthology of Jewish writing that does not conform to this most basic principle.

Of course, it may be said that, in speaking for wholesale inclusion, although I have stuck to the letter of the question, I have not touched upon the spirit of it - which is what my prospective bride may have been thinking of.

I fully recognise the fact. In being so clinical, I have said nothing of those inner elements of Jewish writing that lead the original question to mean: what is, or what are those elements so internally and recognisably Jewish in a work that invite it into the canon of intrinsically Jewish literature? In short, what is the essence, or quintessence (the *pintele*, if you prefer), in the work that makes it so?

Let us hear what others have had to say:

Ludwig Lewisohn, for instance, one of the early American Jewish writers: a Jewish book is written by someone who is well aware that he or she is Jewish. Jewish literature consists of all the works - written in every age and every language - whose creators knew they were Jewish.

Or partly allied to this, Vladimir Jabotinsky, who said, in effect, that not language, nor the writer's origin, nor subject constitutes Jewish literature but his state of mind when writing - most particularly his intention leading him to write in a Jewish spirit for a Jewish readership.

Or Tunisian-French sociologist Albert Memmi: "To be a Jewish writer is... to express the Jewish fate" and a "true Jewish literature" is necessarily one which revolts against the imposition and acceptance of that fate.

Then Israeli literary critic Gershon Shaked who writes: "Jewish literature in non-Jewish languages is, most fundamentally that written by individuals who define themselves as having a dual identity... [while] their work employs subjects and forms that respond to the national and the Jewish needs of their addressees."

Or the unexpectedly extreme view of one whom I have never considered extreme, Ahad Ha'Am in his essay, "Spiritual Revival": "Jewish literature is literature written in our own language; it does not include books written by Jews in other languages."

And, finally for our purposes, Philip Roth, I believe - and if not Philip Roth, then another - who holds that he is not a Jewish writer, but an American writer who happens to be a Jew - a self-definition echoed by not a few writers in Australia, Italy, Germany, France, Russia, not to exclude even Israel from the list.

Even these few examples should indicate that, once we venture beyond the original, albeit clinical definition, to pursue any other is - to cite Wirth-Nesher again, rightly this time - to seek to "define the indefinable".

For, how can a reader, reading Ludwig Lewisohn today while knowing nothing of the man himself, determine how well aware he was of his Jewishness and knew (with every due stress given to the word) that he was Jewish? Likewise, who ventures to examine what was an author's state of mind while writing as Jabotinsky would have us do? And if Jewish literature is only that written in our own language, is that language exclusively Hebrew, or does it admit Aramaic, Yiddish and Ladino? And how is the rest of writing by Jews to be seen - with a Wiesel writing in French, Primo Levi in Italian, Ozick in English, Babel in Russian?

Indefinable as Jewish literature may appear when seeking to determine what makes it integrally so, let us try to define it nonetheless.

But where does one begin? Where, if we are not to enter into a minefield of literary metaphysics, subjective interpretation, imprecision, grey zones and qualifications over a host of variables?

Consider but these variables, and select which of them might be your sine qua non by which means you would define Jewish literature: the author's self-identification and affiliation; the country of origin and language of the created work; the writer's and his works historical, religious, folkloric and literary sources: the work's text in terms of narrative, characters, physical, social, economic, cultural and/or religious ambience or setting.

SELF-IDENTIFICATION CONTENT

& AFFILIATION NARRATIVE

CHARACTERS

SOURCES SETTING

HISTORY PHYSICAL

RELIGION SOCIAL

LITERATURE ECONOMIC

FOLKLORE POLITICAL

CULTURAL

COUNTRY OF WRITING RELIGIOUS

& LANGUAGE

ARAMAIC THEMES

HEBREW

LADINO

YIDDISH

Table 1

Whereupon another even more complicated question is instantly begged:

In the formulation of a compact, realistic and acceptable definition of Jewish literature, which of the literature's numerous themes, so many of them deeply existential, whether treated explicitly and/or in allegorical forms, qualify most: matters of covenantal chosenness and obligation; moral and ethical imperatives, prophecy and messianism, issues of faith and doubt, and of obedience to God or rebellion against; or of persecution and martyrdom, survival and revival; or of memory, consecration, preservation and forgetting; or uprootedness and the eternal wanderer's ever on-going quest for roots; or of marginality and alienation, the latter from self, from society, or from nation and world, and, on their flip-side, adaptation, acculturation, integration and assimilation; not to exclude the dilemmas besetting the contending impulses to individual autonomy and group allegiance, to Mosaic particularism and Abrahamic universality; and the quest for personal meaning , and, at a more domestic level, intergenerational concerns?

THEMES

COVENANTAL/ CHOSENNESS

MORAL/ ETHICAL

PROPHETIC/MESSIANIC

FAITH AND DOUBT

OBEDIENCE TO GOD/REBELLION

PERSECUTION AND MARTYRDOM

SURVIVAL AND REVIVAL

MEMORY: PRESERVATION/FORGETTING

UPROOTEDNESS/SEARCH FOR ROOTEDNESS

ETERNAL WANDERER

MARGINALISATION/ALIENATION

SELF vs SELF/ SOCIETY/ NATION/ WORLD

ADAPTATION/ ACCULTURATION/ INTEGRATION/ ASSIMILATION

INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY/GROUP ALLEGIANCE

PARTICULARISM/UNIVERSALITY

PERSONAL MEANING

INTERGENERATIONAL CONCERNS

Table 2

Is there, then, a Jewish literature as intended by the question? - some singular defining element so intrinsic to the literature that either stands on its own above all others or, alternatively, subsumes the whole under one umbrella?

The question remains a challenge and I am not yet done. As matchmaker, I remain set on the marriage, on reconciling the confident "Yes" and the more circumspect "No".

To achieve this, I proceed to a model that illustrates my perception of Jewish literature.

My medical training taught me to be as precise as the situation allows in defining clinical problems and determining their management in accord with the available data. Hence, my opening definition and my "Yes!" to the existence of a Jewish literature.

But, even before this, in high-school, I learned something of statistics,

Now, when I was beginning to contemplate the present subject, I called in a statistical tool which I have found immensely useful in other situations too: namely, the standard distribution or bell curve.

Very soon after, on further reading around the subject, I took down from my shelves a volume titled Jewish Writing and Identity in the Twentieth Century by Leon Yudkin, Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at University College London. In his Preface at the very outset was a passage which strongly resonated in me.

In addressing this very subject of Jewish writing, Professor Yudkin had written:

"My method of treatment in this book is to posit a spectrum, with, at one end, an identity of the literature with the medium of expression as in Palestine/Israel; at the other end, an almost totally assimilated literature as in Italy... In between, there is a flourishing and recognisable though changing literature in Yiddish and English in the USA, a negative response to Jewishness but a recognition of the importance in literature in the USSR, a disputed but substantial issue in France, and literature as a sensitive but disguised antenna in German-speaking countries between the wars."

The operative word was "spectrum", the image of a graded distribution of authors and their works along a continuum. You will recall that the true meaning of spectrum is that of white light - here, translated into Jewish literature in its totality - dispersed through a progressive change in wavelength to its component colours, one grading into the next.

Where my model differs, however - conforming though it does to Professor Yudkin's horizontally graded view - is in my preference for the bell curve which, in addition to encompassing the totality of Jewish writing and its gradations from one end, the indisputably traditional, to the other marginalised or assimilatory one, seeks further, with whatever qualifications, to present a roughly semi-quantitative measure of the degree of "Jewishness" of these writers and their works beneath it: the majority of Jewish writers and their works occupying the broad middle ground about the median and the innermost standard deviations on both sides of it.

The bell curve serves at least one other purpose. While its form represents all-inclusiveness, it also permits the placing beneath it, in the form of a Venn diagram, all those dimensions listed above - namely, identification, language, sources, content and themes (you may well offer others) - which, to the degree that they overlap with one another, may offer some clearer notion where a particular Jewish writer and his work may be seen to stand along Professor Yudkin's spectrum or along this distribution, but allowing generous leeway for an author's changing of position determined by the work he goes on to produce.

I believe I'm at the point where I may broker the marriage between the enthusiastic future groom and the circumspect bride; namely between the "Yes" and the "No". In summary:

"Jewish literature is that which is written by all writers who are halachically Jews.

"However, the extent to which the literature and its authors (as reflected through their works) may be deemed Jewish, ranging from the totally traditional across a broad field of acclimatising, adaptive, integrated and acculturated writers to a total absence of any Jewishness at all, is determined by the permutations of interaction or amount of overlap (if any) of the works' characters, the ambience in which their dramas are played out, their subject matter or thematic concerns, the place and language in which they are written, and their recourse to Jewish sources."

The first part of the statement suffices even on its own as a broad, objective, neutral and functional definition for purposes of bibliographic compilations, literary anthologies and formal studies of the subject,

The second part accommodates the "softer" and more tapestried but more specifically text-based elements, these defining Jewish literature by means of the created works and of their authors as refracted through their work and/or as viewed in the eye of the beholder as reader, scholar and critic.

Put into such abstractions, this two-tiered definition may perhaps once again seem too clinical.

Hence, at the risk of assailing you with a string of names, I will illustrate how the model may work to grade the "literary Jewishness", if one may so call it, of the authors and/or their works across the range - doing so in full recognition that others may prefer a different ordering across the spectrum or bell. But it's more the principle that I'm concerned with than absolute precision, impossible in such things in any case.

So, beginning at one end, the traditional, we have the narratives of the Chumash, and the Prophets and the Midrashim; and Yehuda Halevi, Ibn Gvirol, Nachman of Bratzlav, Mendele Mocher Sforim, Sholom Aleichem and Shai Agnon whose works are unassailably and exclusively Jewish. We may then move on to, say , Bialik, Bashevis Singer, Cynthia Ozick, Yehuda Amichai, Appelfeld and Oz; then across the very broad middle ground where the inner Jewish is more interwoven with the worldly: Job, Koheleth and Song of Songs (though it may surprise some that I place these so far advanced along the line); and Abraham Cahan, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Pinchas Goldhar, Herz Bergner, Primo Levi, Isaac Babel, Giorgio Bassani, Arnold Wesker, Arthur Miller and Dan Jacobson; and Henry Roth and Philip Roth, and A.M.Klein and Mordecai Richler, and, on the local scene, Judah Waten, Fay Zwicky, Sara Dowse, Arnold Zable, Lily Brett, Alan Collins and myself; then on to Andre Schwartz-Bart and Albert Cohen; and Heinrich Heine, Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Kafka, David Martin, Osip Mandelstam, Natalya Ginzburg, Ilya Ehrenburg, Yuri Daniel and Joseph Roth; and Italo Svevo, Carlo Levi, Boris Pasternak, J.D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Alberto Moravia and Marcel Proust and, yes, in the same universe, Nathanael West and Bruno Schulz at the assimilated end.

With this, my matchmaking is done.

So, by one definition, the most basic of all, "Yes", there is a Jewish literature.

By another, if one seeks in the literature one seeks a singular or over-riding inner essence by which to characterise the whole, then, "No", such an animal does not exist.

However, by uniting in harmony the basic definitional with the text-based in its multiplicity of inner variables, I see the marriage as done. And what we have is a Jewish literature that, in common with all literatures everywhere, is many things: variously a peacock with numerous eyes; a Joseph's coat; a continent replete with cities, rivers, pastures, orchards, mountains and fields unique to itself; and a treasure trove too; all of these being of such broad and immense variety that of no one eye in the peacock's tail, or colour in the coat, or formation in the landscape or particular jewel in the trove can it be said that it and it alone stands for the whole.

There are at least three other aspects of the subject one could address; namely, the Jewish writer who has converted from Judaism, the writer of patrilineal Jewish descent, and the works of the non-Jewish writer who deals significantly with Jewish characters and concerns.

These matters are not particularly problematic.

In brief, the converted writer may still be quite legitimately be incorporated into Jewish literature, sifting himself out of any particular significance as a Jewish writer if he chooses also to abandon all textual elements that point to some Jewish connection.

In dealing with a writer of patrilineal Jewish parentage, it would fall to the individual scholar, bibliographer or anthologist to determine his inclusion, although accompanied by an asterisked rider explaining the decision.

And as for the Jew in non-Jewish writing. Does the significant presence of Mordecai Himmelfarb in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* legitimise it as Jewish literature? Or his *The Solid Mandala* ? Or Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* , Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* , or Dickens' *Oliver Twist* , George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* , Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* , or William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, or Helen Demidenko-Darville's *The Hand That Signed the Paper* ? Very sensibly, the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* offers a place for all such works, sub-heading it The Image of the Jew as the last section in every treatment of the Jewish component of every separate national literature. Certainly, any of these titles and many others merit study in the broader context of the Jew in literature (as author and/or as subject), but they are not an inherent part of Jewish writing as defined.

Despite said all this, I conclude with a sting in the tail:

Unless you are a bibliographer, editor, anthologist, scholar, literary historian or coordinator of a department who needs to establish appropriate parameters for this subject, or you have any other specific vested interest in the matter, then do not trouble yourselves overmuch with the question "Is there a Jewish literature?" here asked. Of course, read the published essays, learned and not so learned discourses and polemics, if you wish; listen to our papers, arguments and literary metaphysics, if that is your bent. As exercises in *pilpul* and intellectual give-and-take, they're fun - to be enjoyed as one might enjoy a mathematical puzzle, a cryptic crossword or a game of chess; but with the knowledge that, unlike mathematical puzzles, crosswords and chess, there are no definitive end-points in the game. Far more important is what the literature means to you . More would I urge you to read it, savour it, study it, write about it, teach it and cull it for what it says, and for what the writer - with what expenditure of time, passion and sheer angst in his work - wishes to impart of his labours.

Once written, literature's next overriding imperative is to be read. If, in time, you arrive at your own view of what is Jewish literature, that will be fine; and, as reader, as beholder, as scholar, whatever you conclude - so long as the grand view is always before you - you will be right

In the meantime, I trust that I have matched my two young people well and that they will live as one in the extended harmony that I have sought to establish between them.

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