

The American Multiculturalism and the Western Canon

A Study Case in Jewish American Literature

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FOR SOME time theoreticians have assumed that the Western Canon and the American multicultural demands create a dichotomy that compels scholars, members of the academia, writers and readers to swear allegiance to one side or the other. But we should keep in mind that basically this is a debate over what kind of curricula should be taught in American universities and what kind of knowledge (and implicitly policies, histories and narratives) should be largely upheld and disseminated with public money in a country of immigration where no ethnic group can be considered to be a majority and where the dominance of the WASP mainstream population (the supposed descendants of the Founding Fathers of the nation) has been questioned by political, economic and demographic changes. In this light one can easily see that a clear-cut, one-sided choice runs the risk of being unwise and dangerously limited. Ethnic literature, one of the battlegrounds of multiculturalism, proves this point especially in the case of Jewish American fiction by showing that a member of a minority can make his way into the canon of American literature by embracing both heritages.

For a better understanding of the limits and limitations of both paradigms an article written by Klaas van Berkel proves to be useful for its accurate and concise presentation of pro and con arguments against multiculturalism that scholars might bring. In his "Multiculturalism and the Tradition of Western Self-Criticism"¹ van Berkel argues that the respect for other cultures that multiculturalism upholds goes against the belief that Western civilization embodies a moral code, certain values, human rights that are meaningful for all people, regardless of race, sex, religion. However, he says, in the Western tradition there is a surprising complexity and polyphony that multiculturalism's supporters often tend to overlook. This attack on the Western canon started in the academia with the enrolment of a growing number of minority students who demanded that the texts assigned for discussion and evaluation belonged not only to white dead males of European descent with whom they had nothing in common, but to authors through whom the voice of their own background could be heard. Thus the teaching of Plato, Dante, Machiavelli, Shakespeare and Voltaire was replaced in many universi-

ties by the “Cultures, Ideas and Values” types of courses where the texts written by black, Asian, Hispanic, women, gay authors began to replace the old texts considered by the supporters of the multiculturalism to have a limited and sometimes discriminating vision. In this battle for academic supremacy and influence where the educational curriculum is seen by many as “a microcosm of national culture,” as an indicator of what that culture considers important, several arguments were brought in favor of and against multiculturalism.

According to van Berkel, the first argument favoring multiculturalism regards the old Western Canon program which was criticized by the supporters of multiculturalism as being ethnocentric, sometimes racist or sexist. Students belonging to minorities have been encouraged by their greater predominance in universities and have asked for texts that should better represent their cultural experience that has been previously omitted or distorted. Basically they feel that the American experience was created by several cultures that need to be studied and recognized in their own terms, and that the melting pot is an obsolete concept if one is to discuss the current American society and culture.

The second argument pro multiculturalism concerns the need of both the university and the society at large to be opened to various civilizations and outside influences which in the end would prove to be beneficial for the whole society. A multicultural society should have a type of education that reflects its basic elements: “To take the ethnic and the racial complexity of America into account is basic to an understanding of the historical and contemporary identity of America and a university would betray its mission in society if it were to neglect preparing its students for the multicultural society outside the walls of the academe.”²

The third argument in favor of multiculturalism criticizes the value attributed to the “Great Books” that the Western Canon endorses. According to multiculturalism’s advocates this value is socially and historically conditioned due to the fact that when we choose criteria for evaluating a work of art we are also connected to the social and political background of our time, and therefore the canon is the result of a historical and social change. The canon itself changes over time, therefore it is essential that it be permissive.

However, scholars have noticed that despite multiculturalism’s good intentions and its desire to expand “our mental horizons by opening our minds to the experience of other cultures,” its transposition into practice is problematic and can lead to peculiar and undesirable consequences.

The first argument brought by the opponents of multiculturalism regards the Balkanization of American intellectual life. If every group represented in the American society is given a voice over a common discourse, the result may be the dissolution of the tradition that so far has kept the nation together. This argument was supported mainly by Allan Bloom in his book, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) where he argued that the Western Tradition is not only one among many, but the most important one upon which the nation was built and that relativism, diversity, nihilism and openness may break down the coherence of the society. For him, in order to understand America one must go back to the Founding Fathers and the Federalist Papers which send us further to Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes.

The second argument against multiculturalism relies again on Allan Bloom's disagreement with the idea that all cultures are equal and truth is relative. Within multiculturalism the individual is a member of a racial or cultural group, while the canon advocates he/she is a human being with individual rights and duties. So perhaps the rights that someone enjoys should come from his/her quality as a human being, not from membership in such groups. Could it be that if rights were granted on a collective basis perhaps that might lead to an atomization of the society or a secession of a less satisfied group?

Against the relativistic notion of culture he continues to hold on to a universalist idea of culture; against "cultures" and "values" he upholds "natural rights." ... Bloom tries to rehabilitate the thought of the Enlightenment, the political philosophy that inspired the Founding Fathers. For Bloom, culture in the anthropological, relativistic meaning of the word binds people to their specific place in history, to specific customs and values. ... While the advocates of multiculturalism define man as a member of a cultural or racial group, opponents of multiculturalism see a human being first of all as an individual, a person with individual rights and duties. Although they concede that man is also at least partially formed by the group he belongs to, they feel it is the task of the educators to help their students rise above the limitations of their particular culture.³

The third argument against multiculturalism refers to the development of self-esteem, the overcoming of feelings of inferiority that this new cultural trend is supposed to develop in the minds of minority students who have previously felt wronged or oppressed by the limitations of the Western Tradition and who want to improve their achievements by embracing diversity. Van Berkel notices that detractors of multiculturalism say that self-esteem is a precondition, not a result of achievements and as suggested by Bloom, the search for "identity" is one of the manifestations of the hedonism and self-centered attitude of the modern world and that respect for the identity of minorities may lead to respect for the ethnocentrism of these minorities. Instead of accepting the fact that minorities be chained to their particular cave, young people should be encouraged by their educators to leave their specific "caves" and search to rise above these masked new limitations.

The fourth argument against multiculturalism is suggested to Klaas Van Berkel by Dinesh D'Souza's work *Illiberal Education* where the author notices that multiculturalism may go against its very own core ideals by encouraging a lack of open-mindedness. According to this point of view students actually are interested in what they think that a minority culture is, not in what it really is, they do not know or refuse to accept details that might contradict the rosy image they have of one culture or another (like the fact that slavery existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans, that African chiefs took part in the slave trade, that the ones who abolished slavery were not the oppressed by organizing a revolt, but the much blamed Westerners who appealed to the American Constitution, the natural rights doctrine and their conscience).

The fifth argument opposing multiculturalism is centered on the main criticism brought against the Western Tradition, i.e. the dogmatic, mono-cultural, white male-dominated discourse which is deeply hostile to change, diversity and other cultures. The advocates of the

canon say that Western culture is not monolithic at all, that it has harbored through the ages a tradition of disagreement, discussion, dissent, self-criticism, and last but not least, it has been deeply curious about other cultures. Van Berkel concludes that: "Without the values and patterns of thought that are part of the legacy of Western culture, students would have lacked the conceptual tools to challenge it. So, in order to challenge the West, one still has to study the West. Seen in this light, the conflict over the old and the new curriculum is less an attack on Western culture than a civil war fought out within Western culture itself."⁴

However, when it comes to American literature, according to Werner Sollors, things are not that clearly separated into mainstream literature and ethnic (i.e. marginal) literature. Werner Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*⁵ and David Hollinger's *Postethnic America, Beyond Multiculturalism*⁶ are important books in discussing the relationship between ethnic and canonical/mainstream literature and cultural trends. The first one is important because it brings another perspective to what was considered to be the mainstream, canonical culture and literature in America. It argues that it is flawed to think that American culture was/is unique and distinct because it reflected just one type of historical heritage; on the contrary, it was and is constantly enriched by each new culture and ethnic group it encompasses. That is why the very distinction between "American" and "ethnic" is flawed, because many of the so-called "ethnic" characteristics are not culture specific, but only become so in the confrontation with the larger American mosaic. Thus one has to move "beyond ethnicity" and admit that such constructs are expressions of American culture. The second book develops the *postethnic* concept initially coined by Sollors to argue that if America is to survive the divergence of its contrasting multicultural present, one has to admit that the identity of an individual is given not only by his descent, but also by the affiliations that he/she makes during his/her lifetime.

In the Jewish American case, one can notice a parallel evolution of the socio-historical development of the community and that of the writing of its authors: as the community became better assimilated in the larger American society, Jewish-American literature underwent a similar process from being an ethnic literature with parochial concerns to becoming mainstream literature addressing the larger public and being capable of sustaining the entrance demands for the American literary canon.

To many contemporary voices, the problem that the Jewish writer and the community faces nowadays is the success they have obtained, maybe at the price of losing their authentic voice, of becoming too integrated, resembling the others too much. The writers do not have to explain to the foreigners their tradition, their rituals, they do not have to fear discrimination, nor struggle for acceptance; they have made it, but so has America with its homogenizing, indiscriminate spirit. In this case, what makes them different from the rest, what makes them so special? Interestingly enough, this assimilation to the point of no differentiation is exactly what the older generation wanted. And now, their offspring decide that maybe something valuable has been lost, maybe it is time to go back to the old tradition.

In various interviews, discussions later transposed into books or the official speeches he delivered on different occasions, one of the most important Jewish American writers, Saul Bellow was frequently asked about, or he voluntarily stated the way he relat-

ed himself to the cultural and ethnic heritage he received from his parents who were Russian Jewish immigrants to Canada and later on to the United States of America. While appreciating the richness of the Jewish tradition he inherited, he also firmly declared that he saw himself as an American just like any other, and the country where he grew up gave him the only home and identity he truly felt as being his.

While admitting that his fiction had this double source that sustained it, he vehemently refused to accept labels; that of “Jewish-American writer” being the one he discarded the most. To make the matters more controversial, one can notice that the American part of the equation never seems to be put into question for obvious reasons: the author lived in America and wrote about Americans, their country and the numerous social, intellectual and political issues that living in the New World entailed. But when it comes to the Jewish heritage that is so obvious in his fiction one notices that this is a matter rarely dealt upon or even avoided, either by the author himself in his public statements or by his readers or critics. This may be the effect of the American cultural policies that changed throughout time, a fact which made Saul Bellow modify gradually the attachment that he publicly showed for his ethnic heritage; this also influenced the researchers in choosing the types of issues to be investigated in his fiction.

Saul Bellow gradually changed in time the way he saw his ethnic heritage at the same time with maintaining constant his allegiance to America, thus mirroring, I assume, the changes that took place on the American cultural and intellectual scene. While being a writer at the beginning of his career in the 1940s and 1950s when an assimilationist trend was at its highest, the young Bellow, keen to be accepted and impose his view on the literary scene and eager to lose the “provincial” outlook that his upbringing as the son of Jewish immigrants gave him, tried to avoid referring to his Jewish heritage or even denied that it played an important role in his work. Yet most of his characters were Jews living in America, albeit having none of the (religious) preoccupations of their European ancestors. In the 1960s and 1970s, the American scene was so preoccupied with political, social movements and events that the issue of assimilation began to fade away. This process was paralleled by the emergence on the academic and literary scene of an important group of Jewish artists and intellectuals who gave a new, fresh voice to the American mainstream cultural environment.

Once a group of outsiders in the New World, beginning with the 1950s and 1960s, the Jewish American community felt fully integrated and turned its attention to the problems of their country, leaving in the background their old world heritage. That’s why the issue of growing up and becoming an American, the condition of the American intellectual and artist, the social issues regarding the Civil Rights movements, American and European contemporary history, the general situation of being a thinker in the troubled 20th century took a central place in Bellow’s fiction. From the 1970s to the 1990s and onwards, the new American cultural policy is the multicultural trend based on an older theory of cultural pluralism. Encouraged by the development of a post-modern paradigm it began to accentuate more and more the importance of identity politics, emphasizing the rights of formerly oppressed groups to demand recognition and power on the public scene. This would also bring forth a movement of a renewed ethnic pride, of revaluating the past religious, ethnic and cultural identity of each American minority. It is at this point that

Bellow openly admitted being proud of his Jewish roots and started commenting on how exactly this dimension of his past influenced his general outlook in fiction.

Keeping in mind all along that art and thus literature should have a certain degree of autonomy and should never be subjected to the political, social and economic policies of the day due to the risk of ending in a piece of propaganda, one cannot reject either, that one way or the other, literature ends up by mirroring the realities of its time. Bellow was deeply concerned by the evolutions of the 20th century which he tackled in his fiction. At one point, for a short while, he openly supported the Leftist ideology promoted among the others by his long-time intelligentsia friends of the *Partisan Review* group. One of his main subjects was the condition of the intellectual and the artist in 20th century America, a subject that allowed him to openly criticize the current policies of the Establishment. All these may allow a contemporary reader to analyze his work while keeping in mind that the author might be viewed as an outsider, a member of a minority which underwent the process of becoming an insider, of entering the mainstream without having all the security and comfort he expected. Yet acquiring the privileged WASP position was the dream that countless sons and daughters of immigrants embraced in the middle of the 20th century. That also meant effacing from fiction the traits that would make a writer the speaker for a certain minority. And writing for the general American audience, not only for the Jewish one, meant using the themes and characters that were considered to address every ordinary American, albeit an elitist one. The good reception of Bellow's work by this larger public was one of the means that allowed him to enter the American canon, and be labeled, sometimes against his own will, as the "assimilated Jewish-American writer" par excellence. "Dancing" between subjects, cultures, the history of the continents, past and present seems to characterize Bellow's fiction too. After all, straddling several worlds, living between them is essential both to the Jewish and the American experience and while the legal categories may set boundaries, writing effaces them. In writing books the larger culture is assimilated into the specificity of fiction, of each individual novel. From a certain point of view, Saul Bellow's work is just the fictional reflection of the social integration process of a great mind with the capacity to meditate upon and interrogate everything that he saw around and wonder where the artist and the intellectual belong in this power game.

When recalling his days as an emerging writer on the Chicago literary scene, Bellow draws the portrait of a man who does not enjoy labels, especially when they try to connect too much an artist to his background. It may be the fear of being viewed as limited, as if being associated with one world would mean that one is totally unaware of what it means to live in another. It may also be a refusal to settle down inside a firmly determined set of borders. One can feel the reticence of the new American to be constantly reminded of his past, as well as his desire to be accepted as a talented artist who writes for the American public at large, and not for a Jewish minority:

But I started out to recall what it was like to set oneself up to be a writer in the Midwest during the thirties. For I thought of myself as a Midwesterner and not a Jew. I am often described as a Jewish writer; in much the same way one might be called a Samoan cellist or a Zulu Gainsborough expert. There is some oddity about it. I have tried to fit

my soul into the Jewish-writer category, but it does not feel comfortably accommodated there. I wonder, now and then, whether Philip Roth and Bernard Malamud and I have not become the Hart and Schaffer and Marx of our trade. We have made it in the field of culture as Bernard Baruch made it on a park bench, as Polly Adler made it in prostitution, as Two Gun Cohen, the personal bodyguard of Sun Yat-Sen, made it into China. My joke is not broad enough to cover the contempt I feel for opportunists, wise guys and career types who impose such labels and trade upon them. In a century so disastrous to Jews, one hesitates to criticize those who believe that they are making the world safer by publicizing Jewish achievements. I myself doubt that this publicity is effective.

I did not go to the public library to read the Talmud but the novels and poems of Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser The important thing was that American society and S. Bellow came face to face. I had to learn that by cutting myself off from American life in order to perform an alien task, I risked cutting myself off from everything that could nourish me.⁷

Bellow objected to the pigeonholing that was imposed on him, Malamud and Roth, saying that they differed very much in style, subject matter, that they did not form a school, on the contrary they just embodied the emergence of writers of Jewish origin among the leading novelists of their time. Upon an objective analysis of the matter, one realizes that the designation is inevitable. It represents the legitimate process of giving a name to a new literary phenomenon, that of the Jewish writers earning general recognition.

Later on, when he received the B'Nai B'Rith Anti-Defamation League Democratic Legacy Award in 1976 he admitted that both identities, American and Jewish were equally important to him and that asking somebody to choose between them would be a proof of totalitarian thinking. To him Jewish history was neither simple nor brief but intricate, full of gloomy passages, and after all, a large piece of the history of mankind. Yet his American heritage was just as important:

I was born in Eastern Canada and grew up in Chicago. My parents were Jewish immigrants from Russia. They sent me to a heder. They didn't want me out in the sandlots or playing pool in the poolroom. All these matters were discussed or disputed by us in Yiddish. But when I went to the public library, the books I borrowed were by Poe, Melville, Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson. I did not bring home volumes of the Babylonian Talmud to read. I took myself as I was – a kid from the Chicago streets and the child of Jewish parents. ... the only life I can love, or hate, is the life that I – that we – have found here, this American life of the Twentieth Century, the life of the Americans who are also Jews. Which of these two sources, the American or the Jewish, should elicit a greater piety? Are the two exclusive? Must a choice be made? ... I said I was an American, a Jew, a writer by trade. I was not insensitive to the Jewish question. I was painfully conscious of the Holocaust, I longed for peace and security in the Jewish State. I added, however, that I had lived in America all my life, that English was my language, and that (in an oddly universalistic way) I was attached to my country and the civilization of which it is a part.⁸

These contradictory public statements are indicative not only of a shift in the cultural policies of America, from the assimilation of the 1930s–1950s to the emergence of the multiculturalism’s demands of ethnic pride in the 1970s–1980s; but they also mirror an evolution in Bellow’s way of relating to his Jewish and American legacies, probably dependent upon his emergence as a mainstream American writer. In various interviews in the 1960s he mentioned that he did not have any sense of ethnic responsibility; that first and foremost his duty was towards his trade. He had never consciously written as a Jew. To be Jewish was to him “a gift, a piece of good fortune, with which one doesn’t quarrel.” To expect from these writers—Bellow, Malamud, Mailer and Philip Roth—to become the spokesmen for their community was too much. Doing public relations work was not what they asked for and some (Mailer and Roth) have gone to the extreme in being unflattering in their portrayal of Jews, which in turn triggered the community’s discontent.

At the peak of his career, this overt refuse of the writer to be pigeonholed and thus his consequent distancing from his roots, managed to raise anger among other writers of the community who believed that Bellow, the most famous of them all, had deserted them and embraced fame in the detriment of their heritage.

The 1970s saw the emergence of a new cultural policy which began reevaluating the importance of an individual’s ethnic heritage, and it also brought on the public scene the discussion of the dimensions and the tremendous importance of the Holocaust for the fate of Jews all over the world, especially the role it played for the American Jewry in rekindling the love for their heritage and discovering new dimensions of their identity. It was then that Bellow began confronting his origins. For the first time he tried to see what his Jewish parentage and upbringing really signified for him. This shifting attitude towards his identity is suggestive of the fact that Saul Bellow, just like Malamud or P. Roth illustrate a symbolic type of ethnicity where the individual enjoys a good deal of his ancestors’ cultural heritage, but then withdraws from a concrete involvement in the institutions or the customs that impose a strict norm on individuals.

When talking about the importance of the Jewish American renaissance in the 1950s, in her article “Jewish American renaissance,” Ruth Wisse⁹ mentions the way Saul Bellow transposed in his fiction both the ethnic heritage of the Jewish literature and the experience of the integrated, mainstream American artist. For the writer Jewish literature appears only where there is a mingling of laughter and trembling without the possibility to tell the two apart. Here Ruth Wisse notices that by substituting “laughter” for Kierkegaard’s “fear,” Bellow essentially maintained his affinity for the Christian civilization, yet sounding a note apart through his Jewish divergence from it. As somewhat expected, the emergence of the writer on the mainstream literary scene happened with the publication of *The Adventures of Augie March*, the story of the Jewish young man who seeks a place for himself in the Chicago urban landscape and a place in the American society. Throughout his novels, all his characters end up confessing that the greatest failure of their lives was caused by their inability to keep in touch with the simple but nourishing roots of their ancestors; a thing they have forgotten, being too keen to theorize about intellectual trends, memory, art and history in America. Bellow’s fiction seemed to be the very pinnacle of the naturalization of the immigrant voice. With him and his generational colleagues, Malamud and Roth, the Jewish voice was enabled to speak for all America.

As suggested by the particular characteristics and development of the Jewish American literature, one example being the emergence and later on the tremendous influence that Saul Bellow had upon the (mainstream) American literary scene, it is wise to assume that a clear-cut distinction between canonical, mainstream literature and the one belonging to ethnic minorities is not possible in the U.S. Not only have the social, demographic changes led to a shift in cultural paradigms, imposing the intermingling of identity politics and the world of the academia, but they have also forced the reopening of a much older debate concerning American identity and the common future of a (possibly still divided) nation. □

Notes

1. Klaas van Berkel, "Multiculturalism and the Tradition of Western Self-Criticism" in *Multiculturalism and the Canon of American Literature*, ed. Hans Bak (Amsterdam: Vu University Press, 1993)
2. van Berkel, "Multiculturalism," 9.
3. van Berkel, "Multiculturalism," 12.
4. van Berkel, "Multiculturalism," 14.
5. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
6. David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
7. Saul Bellow, "Starting out in Chicago" in *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, ed. Derek Rubin (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 5–8.
8. Saul Bellow, "I Said I Was..." in *The Jew in the American World*, ed. Marcus Jacob Rader, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 521.
9. Ruth R. Wisse, "Jewish American Renaissance" in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, eds. Michael P. Kramer, Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 204, 205.

Abstract

The American Multiculturalism and the Western Canon: A Study Case in Jewish American Literature

Among American cultural policies, multiculturalism is considered to be not only the latest and most fashionable trend, but also the most controversial one since it opposes the traditional canonical values of WASP America. In this battle of the "ancients" and the "moderns", a particular case that defies clear-cut boundaries and exposes both the qualities and the limitations of these two paradigms is that represented by the Jewish American literature.

Keywords

multiculturalism, Jewish-American, canon, community of choice