



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary  
Scholars, 1930-1990* (review)

William H. Galperin

Criticism, Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2001, pp. 116-119 (Review)

Published by Wayne State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2001.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/8812>



*Enlarging America: The Cultural Work of Jewish Literary Scholars, 1930–1990* by Susanne Klingenstein. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998. Pp. xxxiv + 492. \$34.95 cloth.

As a middle-aged English professor who is Jewish and has occasionally written on questions of Jewishness and anti-Semitism, I approached Susanne Klingenstein's *Enlarging America* with enormous curiosity but also with a fair amount of baggage. Based on my experiences as a reader, a scholar, and a human being whose own, relatively banal, narrative bears striking affinities (absent fame and fortune) with those of many of my predecessors, I am struck not only by the partiality of Klingenstein's survey—in particular its failure to engage in any real way the contributions of Harold Bloom and Leslie Fiedler who, in my view, are the most important "Jewish literary scholars" of the last century—but also by the disproportion between the study's subjects (some of whom are still a good decade away from retirement) and the solemn, archly historical, narrative fashioned about them.

Virtually all of the Jewish literary scholars on whom Klingenstein focuses have had genuinely major careers and several of them, notably M. H. Abrams, Harry Levin, and Lionel Trilling, have exerted a powerful influence both as critical practitioners and, more importantly, as role models. Nor can one emphasize enough the strength and determination that the majority of Klingenstein's scholars have displayed in the face of prejudice and outright discrimination. At the same time, the relationship between Jews and the profession of English in this century has proceeded in remarkably short order from one of exclusion to an inclusion so pervasive that the hegemony that English currently enjoys in the humanities is virtually recapitulated by the omnipresence of Jews and/or people of Jewish origin in the discipline at large. Thus, my own department, which is typical of most university-level departments, not only features the first Jew to have actually received tenure there, but also a large number of Jewish scholars without whom the department would be nearly unrecognizable to the profession at large. The same is probably true of every major department of English in the United States.

The reasons for this sea-change are undoubtedly manifold. But it is symptomatic of Klingenstein's "historical" reconstruction of the emergence of Jewish scholars from circles and influences connected to Harvard and Columbia that this rather large and important fact gets quickly buried in her individual case studies, which (to reiterate the homology of my own narrative) are important less for their exemplary or unique status than for their structural similarities with the lives and careers of others, past and passing. This is not to suggest, again, that the critics and writers on whom Klingenstein focuses are not important in a way that merits the kind of attention that *Enlarging America*

necessarily bestows; it is simply to repeat that the context on which this study depends for justification—namely, the racial and cultural identity of its representative men and women—ultimately points in another direction entirely. And this, in turn, is nothing less than one of the most thoroughgoing instances of assimilation and reconsolidation in twentieth-century America. With the possible exception of Ruth Wisse, Robert Alter, and Norman Podhoretz, whose work focuses explicitly on texts and issues that are identifiably Jewish, the most striking feature of the other scholars considered here, beginning with Bernard Berenson, remains the drive to accumulate cultural capital that may or may not have already been underwritten by real capital. For although Klingenstein touches on it, what she does not emphasize sufficiently is the degree to which the exclusion of Jews both from English departments and from many areas of the academy in general had as much to do with the real prejudice of such scholars as Emery E. Neff, who urged his advisee and recently-appointed colleague Lionel Trilling not to try to “open the [Columbia] English department to more Jews” (256), as it had to do with the more mundane material conditions that made a livelihood in English studies extremely difficult for scholars with no other real source of income. Such institutional parsimony may also count as a discriminatory practice. But lost in the concentration of *Enlarging America's* too-focused viewpoint is the fact that for many non-Jews in the academy, the businesses of teaching and scholarship were viewed (however erroneously) as a disinterested service to scholarship and society rather than a site for the realization of ambition and, by extension, upward mobility.

Although a surprising number of Klingenstein's subjects grew up in rather privileged environments—specifically Harry Levin, Daniel Aaron, and Leo Marx (whose early instruction was actually administered by a French nanny)—the more important point to emphasize, even for those like M. H. Abrams who were merely comfortably middle class, is the peculiar and, I would even venture identitarian, ambition that stimulated their production of books and critical essays in contrast to the “pellets of knowledge” that “old-fashioned scholars . . . sent . . . to the *Philosophical Review* or the *Publications of the Modern Language Association*” (268). Thus, without necessarily endorsing Klingenstein's denigration of a certain kind of scholarship practiced by gentiles and Jews alike, what she might have explored more broadly, over and against her informed but often disconnected surveys of these people's work, is the nature and disposition of the kinds of scholarship (or criticism, as the case may be) that many Jews produced at a time when one or two pellets were frequently a life's work, at least in matters of publication. The “so-called Age of Criticism” (268) had already dawned, of course, by the time that writers like Levin and Trilling began plying their trade. And, as Klingenstein shows, there was increasingly ample precedent, particularly in the work of F. O. Matthiessen, for the larger, more polemical, scholarship that critics like Levin, Abrams,

and Aaron would subsequently practice. Nevertheless, the determination of these Jewish scholars to be heard, and to be heard moreover in a register that was louder and larger and more pressing, particularly regarding questions of modernity, suffrage, and liberal society, seems far more central and compelling than the knowledge they may have actually produced. For while it was very much to these scholars' purpose to interrogate (or anatomize in some form) the constitution of a liberal society—a practice in which their initial status as outsiders was largely homologous to their now-inevitable role as critics and commentators—it is scarcely coincidental that these initiatives were routinely mounted on the back of canonical writing and in ostensible command of a legitimate and *legitimizing* cultural order on which criticism might therefore deliberate. Ambition, in other words, may have taken the form of critical understanding for someone like Trilling, but not before the object of that understanding—specifically the art from which both culture and society showed forth—revealed an ascendancy on the critic's part, and an implicit assimilation, from which criticism was not merely a departure but also a step beyond. In this way, a typically linear narrative of upward mobility and advancement was simultaneously a circular return to one's irreducible, if now privileged, difference as a reader of the things that mattered.

If I have departed in some measure from a more deliberate summary of *Enlarging America*, it is because the dialectic of ambition such as I have just described it, where being an insider and an outsider are necessarily intertwined, is the most important thing that I discovered, or was able to infer, as a result of having read this book. For those who want to know precisely what the study is about, suffice it to say that it examines the careers of a dozen or so scholars who were Jewish and variously associated with Harvard and Columbia Universities and/or with scholars and scholarship at those institutions. *Enlarging America* moves from extended and discrete discussions of the life and work of Harry Levin, M. H. Abrams, and Daniel Aaron, who had sustained associations with Harvard, to scholars such as Leo Marx, Alan Guttman, and Jules Chametzky, whose connection to Harvard was increasingly less concrete and more a matter of discipleship. Although Levin and Abrams spent most of their careers focusing on British and European literatures, albeit in reaction to the anti-libertarian bias of their Harvard predecessors, Irving Babbitt and T. S. Eliot, the remaining four were consumed with American studies and with the hopes and betrayals of democracy.

Similarly, in her treatment of the Columbia sphere which revolved more directly around the enigmatic and influential Lionel Trilling, Klingenstein traces Trilling's effect, discursively and ideologically, on a variety of literary practitioners, from academics such as Steven Marcus and Carolyn Heilbrun, to people of letters like Norman Podhoretz and Cynthia Ozick, whose status as public intellectuals was plainly an extension of the critical engagement exemplified in the work of their teacher. Finally, in perhaps the most arbitrary

section of her study, Klingenstein focuses on three scholars, Robert Alter, Ruth Wisse, and Sacvan Berkovitch, whose Jewishness is manifest either in a preoccupation with *Yiddishkeit* and Biblical narrative as acceptable locii of literary and critical inquiry or (in the case of Berkovitch) in a more analogous preoccupation with the religious and typological underpinnings of American culture.

Absent in this study, unfortunately, is any sustained consideration of either Leslie Fiedler or Harold Bloom. This is a real deficiency because these two highly influential critics were not merely mindful of their Jewishness in a myriad of ways and applications, but also capable of appreciating with an extraordinary degree of self-consciousness the meta-critical narratives (identitarian and otherwise) on which their criticism necessarily opens. The revised introduction to *The Visionary Company*, which makes explicit the cultural stakes for both “New Criticism” and its authoritarian canon versus Bloom’s version of criticism and *its* canon, is probably the single most revealing work of Jewish literary scholarship in the last fifty years. For here, as perhaps nowhere else, the critic’s religio-cultural identity is so thoroughly assimilated to the task of reading Romanticism (and reading against T. S. Eliot and his followers) that it reemerges, somewhat like Freud’s uncanny, in an otherwise alien body of writing which is suddenly indivisible from—or unreadable without—the Jewishness of its retrospective admirer. This sort of enlargement, however tendentious and self-serving, is precisely what *Enlarging America* would have done well to examine more.

William Galperin  
Rutgers University, New Brunswick



*Philo-Semitism in Nineteenth-Century German Literature* by Irving Massey. *Condicio Judaica* 29. Studien und Quellen zur deutsch-jüdischen Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2000. Pp. 199. 98,00 DM paper.

Irving Massey’s study aims to offer analyses of a “number of nineteenth-century works of literature, mainly in German, by Gentile authors, in which Jews and/or Judaism are presented in a favorable, or at least not unfavorable light” (9). The topic presents a dual challenge because the corpus of philo-Semitic literature is rather slim, and, moreover, the literary quality of these texts is often lacking. Statements such as “it is hard to extract much of interest from such mediocre fiction” (127, in reference to Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach’s *Der Kreisphysikus*) abound in the book. At times the author declares himself to be surprised to find any philo-Semitism at all in nineteenth-century German literature; more often than not, even comparatively positive descriptions of