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Critical Narcissism and the Coming-of-Age of Jewish American Literary Studies

MICHAEL P. KRAMER

LOUIS HARAP. *The Image of the Jew in American Literature: From Early Republic to Mass Immigration*. 2nd edition. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003. Pp. xxi + 589.

RENÉE M. SENTILLES, *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xi + 313.

I thought that to seem was to be.

But the waters of Marah were beautiful, yet they were bitter.

Adah Isaacs Menken, "Myself"

Three and a half centuries since the first Jews arrived in New Amsterdam, and more than two and a half centuries since the first Jewish-authored book was published in Boston, the academic study of Jewish American literature may very well be coming of age. There have been some very promising signs in recent years. W.W. Norton, the leading publisher of classroom anthologies, has given the field its imprimatur with *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*, and Cambridge University Press has added to its noted series *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, which I had the privilege of coediting with Hana Wirth-Nesher. Consider, too, the star-studded fanfare of the "Celebrating Jewish-American Writers" conference that accompanied the opening of the Leonard L. Milberg '53 Collection of Jewish-American Writers at Princeton University.¹ Along with the professional recognition it is re-

1. See Jules Chantezky, John Felstiner, Hilene Flanzbaum, and Kathryn Hellerstein, eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York and London, 2001), and Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (New York and Cambridge, 2003). For the "Celebration of Jewish-American Writers" conference, see: <http://www.princeton.edu/~jwst/writers/>.

ceiving, we now have the reissue, after thirty years, of Louis Harap's classic of early Jewish American literary history and bibliography and the appearance of Renée Sentilles's postmodernist-inflected biography of one of the most notorious and controversial figures in that early history. Both good signs as well, and those of us who study Jewish American literature ought to be encouraged. Yet Jewish American literary study needs also at this point in its history to take a good, honest look at itself, take stock of its achievements and failures, understand its motives and objectives. I have neither the space nor the hubris for the sort of full-scale reckoning the field wants and deserves. But I would like to take the occasion of the appearance of these two volumes for some general, preliminary remarks.

I.

Any serious consideration of Jewish American literature as a field of study must ultimately confront certain vexing questions—questions about the Jewishness of Jewish literature and the Americanness of American literature, about the aesthetics of ethnicity and the art of assimilation.² These are the field's constitutive questions. Jewish American literature is inconceivable without them, existing as a coherent, compelling category only because of their nagging persistence. We don't always tackle the questions head-on. We may approach them cautiously, hesitantly. We may ask them in one form or another, implicitly. But the fact is that we study Jewish American literature primarily because these questions intrigue us and confound us. We study Jewish literature because we want to know the answers, and the answers elude us. We may try to ignore them (some of them) but to ignore the questions is only to repress them. They remain nonetheless, around the corner, waiting to trip us up.

The questions are vexing for several reasons. They are *technically* vexing because they are second-level questions, that is, questions about questions. To ask about the Jewishness of Jewish American literature, say, assumes we know the answer to the question, "What is Jewish?" Which, to put it bluntly, we don't. Or, at least, we have not yet come up with any wholly or universally satisfying answers.³ So, at best, we are working

2. The term "aesthetics of ethnicity" was coined by Sacvan Bercovitch. See Bercovitch, "Problems in the Writing of American Literary History: The Examples of Poetry and Ethnicity," *American Literary History* 15.1 (2003): 2.

3. For some indication of the complexity of the issues involved, see Michael P. Kramer, "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish' Question," *Prooftexts* 21.3 (2001): 287–349. Included are responses from Bryan Cheyette, Morris Dickstein, Anne Golomb Hoffman, Hanna Naveh, and Gershon Shaked, along with my

with what might be called, in talmudic terminology, *sfek sfeka*, doubly doubtful propositions. Moreover, the questions are interdisciplinary. They ask about the relation of certain works of literature to broad historical and sociological phenomena—modern Jewish culture, American experience, the process of assimilation, and the perseverance of ethnic identity—ongoing, open-ended phenomena that are themselves notoriously difficult to define or measure and, as we all know, are already the subject of heated intradisciplinary (not to mention extradisciplinary) debates. Consider the titles of, for instance, Charles S. Liebman's *The Ambivalent American Jew*, or Steven M. Cohen's *American Assimilation or Jewish Renewal?*, or Stephen J. Whitfield's *In Search of American Jewish Culture*.⁴ When scholars ask these sorts of questions of literature, the difficulties are further compounded. For, speaking in disciplinary terms, literature does not try to *explain* experience—at least not the way history and sociology do, with statistics and verifiable facts. To use Sacvan Bercovitch's formulation, literature "returns us to gaps *between* experience and explanation."⁵ Add to this the latitude critics allow themselves in interpreting literature, on teasing out unexpected meanings from the ironies and ambiguities of literary texts. If anything, then, Jewish American literature makes it *more* difficult to answer in any definitive way the questions its study raises. If historians and sociologists cannot settle the questions of Jewishness and Americanness for us, then literary critics certainly cannot.

And should not. As frustrating as these complications may sometimes seem, they are, I think, all for the best for the study of Jewish American literature, laying the groundwork for a richly nuanced and lively critical discourse, resistant to facile formulations and dogmatic definitions. They keep the questions open and turn us back, time and again, to the literature itself, to the particular qualities and intricate workings of individual Jewish American imaginations.

But the questions are vexing for another reason as well. This reason

reply. On the problems of defining the Americanness of American literature, see, for instance, Wai Chee Dimock, "Planetary Time and Global Translation: 'Context' in Literary Studies," *Common Knowledge* 9.3 (2003): 488–507, and idem., "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," *American Literary History* 13.4 (2001): 755–75.

4. See Charles S. Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia, 1973); Steven M. Cohen, *American Assimilation or Jewish Renewal?* (Bloomington, Ind., 1988), and Stephen J. Whitfield, *In Search of American Jewish Culture* (Hanover, N.H. and London, 1999).

5. Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Question of Literary History," *Common Knowledge* 4.2 (1995): 3.

does not have to do with the field's raw materials, but with those of us who study them. And here vexation is not a virtue. We cannot and should not ignore the fact that many (if not most) scholars active in the study of Jewish American literature are themselves American Jews. Indeed, some critics turn to the study of Jewish American literature precisely because they are looking for an appropriate, satisfying mode of ethnic self-expression. Which is to say that questions about the definition of the field are inextricably bound up with questions of self-definition. Now, on one hand, this special relationship gives the field its energy and passion. Without the desire of critics to define themselves, to declare their allegiances through the literature, the constitutive questions would be at best academic. On the other hand, when literary criticism becomes overly personal, when too much is at stake, when the study of culture becomes confused with statements of creed, when questions of Jewishness and Americanness become questions of *my* Jewishness and *my* Americanness, *my* ethnicity and *my* assimilation, then the field's resistance to conceptual closure—the source of its strength and vitality—is significantly weakened. In short, if we insist on using Jewish American literature as a mirror, then we will only see images of ourselves.

I call this mirroring, this too-intimate identification of critic and literature, *critical narcissism*.⁶ The term “narcissism” can be provocative, I know. So let me try to explain. By “narcissism” I am not referring to a clinical syndrome but a critical style, one that relies on the critic's identification with a certain work or body of literature. I do not mean the sympathetic identification that emerges from and accompanies all reading, regardless of who we are, where we live, or what we profess. As readers we can jump past particulars to universals and see each literary situation as an instance of the human condition, of *our own* condition. We may feel Hamlet's dilemma keenly, though we are not Danish and have never contemplated suicide. We may share the exhilaration of Hester's rendezvous with Dimmesdale in the forest, though we are not Puritans and have never committed adultery. I do not mean, in other words, the sort of provisional identification that ignores or suspends context—or that helps us understand context. But there are other sorts of identification that depend upon context and emerge out of it, that precede our

6. For an application of the psychoanalytical concept of narcissism to the field of history, see José Brunner, “Pride and Memory: Nationalism, Narcissism and the Historians' Debates in Germany and Israel,” *History and Memory* 9 (1997): 256–300.

reading and direct it. One of them is ethnic context. Anyone may feel sympathy for Shylock and identify with his humanity (at least, when he is portrayed sympathetically) but a Jew is more apt to take it *personally*, to see the character, in all his cultural and religious particularity, as a version of himself. Or, perhaps more to the point of ethnic literary study, anyone may experience vicariously the pain and triumph of Frederick Douglass, but surely not as keenly as an African American. And plainly, an African American reader is more apt to claim the text as his own, to feel a proprietary pleasure in its very existence and a personal interest in its appreciation and its study.

Let me repeat: the connection ethnic critics (along with lay readers) feel to ethnic literature can be, on the whole, not only benign but markedly beneficial. Over the past few decades literary study in the United States has reaped significant benefits by cultivating ethnic literature and ethnic studies departments—I am talking first and foremost about the multicultural and multilingual redesign of the canon, along with the reconsideration of the criteria for evaluating aesthetic achievement—and the change could hardly have occurred without the institutional empowerment of minority critics. The American recovery of ethnic literature was in large part a result of the special relationship between ethnic critics and the writings of groups with whom they identify, of acts of ethnic self-discovery and self-celebration. At the same time, it needs to be said that the profound sense of cultural affinity that drew African Americans to African American literature, Asian Americans to Asian American literature, and American Jews to Jewish American literature also tended to suggest strict protocols about the study of ethnic texts—about who is authorized to interpret texts and what sorts of interpretations are acceptable. That is to say, it produced a tendency toward critical narcissism.

Jewish American literature and its critics did not reap all the institutional benefits that accrued to other ethnic literatures from the explosion of interest in multiculturalism.⁷ But the movement nevertheless led to a resurgence of interest in Jewish American literature, and the resurgence has indeed shown signs of critical narcissism. The phenomenon is widespread but generally subtle, manifesting itself most often in efforts to emphasize and exaggerate the ethnically positive aspects of Jewish Amer-

7. See Andrew Furman, *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and the Multicultural Dilemma: Return of the Exile* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2000), esp. 1–22. See also David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, eds. *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (Berkeley, 1998).

ican writing—to the neglect or exclusion of other, contrary aspects of the writing.⁸ I will offer only one example, admittedly personal but also, I think, particularly egregious and, hence, useful for purposes of explication.

I began thinking about critical narcissism in a determined way after reading a review of *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. The review was polite, and several of the essays in the volume were even given passing praise. But the bulk of the review was not dedicated so much to the quality of the scholarship as to the alleged intellectual antagonism to the Jewish American culture of the editors and a few of the contributors, scholars who happen to be American Jews now living in Israel—according to the reviewer, insiders who had become outsiders. The allegation was that a cohort of “Israeli” critics believed that American Jews had, as a group, betrayed true Jewishness. Consider this one, brief, representative passage:

Today, many American Jewish writers are struggling to recall a distant past, to clarify and to mourn its losses. The integrity, complexity and seriousness of that effort are harder to see from a critical perspective that . . . considers our language inauthentic and our culture deviant.⁹

What struck me first about the review was how deeply and sincerely the reviewer identified with Jewish American literature. Notice how seamlessly the reviewer slips from “many American Jewish writers” to “our language . . . and our culture,” as if the sentence were meant to read: “Many American *critics* are struggling. . . .” But what struck me even more was how the identification is used to shift the focus from the substance of the criticism to the allegiances of the accused scholar (indeed, from the body of literature to the person of the scholar) and thus to preclude perceived-to-be-hostile discussions of the literature. Here was identification that was not provisional but jealously proprietary—in a

8. For an analysis of the fate of one writer in this critical atmosphere, see Michael P. Kramer, “Assimilation in *The Promised Land*: Mary Antin and the Jewish Origins of the American Self,” *Prooftexts* 18 (1998): 121–27.

9. Janet Burstein, “Israeli Critics Comment—Problematically—on American Jewish Fiction,” *The Forward*, September 26, 2003. (<http://www.forward.com/issues/2003/03.09.26/arts6.fiction.html>). For a more elaborate but similar sort of argument about American and Israeli Judaism and their relation to American Jewish literature, see Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky, “Philip Roth and American Jewish Identity: The Question of Authenticity,” *American Literary History* 13.1 (2001): 79–107.

word, narcissistic. *Our* language, *our* culture, *our* literature. Moreover, it seemed to me, the identification sought to close off debate just at that point where it was most warranted, the point where the significance of the field's constitutive questions become most evident. "Inauthentic" and "deviant" are harsh, accusatory words (words, by the way, that appear nowhere in the volume and are antithetical to its stated purpose) whose function, I felt, was only to divert attention from the ineluctable fact of Jewish American *difference*—or, better yet, differences. But a body of literature whose "integrity, complexity, and seriousness" are described by words such as "struggle," "recall," "distant," "clarify," "mourn," and "losses" surely begs to be seen precisely from a critical perspective that is open to difference and comparison, both synchronic and diachronic, alert to the constitutive questions of Jewishness, Americanness, ethnicity, and, yes, assimilation. The "struggles" of Jewish American writers—if they are truly struggles—are no doubt easier to see by those who take a nonmirroring perspective.

To be fair, Jewish critical narcissism does not begin with the contemporary study of Jewish American literature. "The literature of a people is very often described as the mirror of its soul," Meyer Waxman wrote in the 1930 introduction to his multivolume *History of Jewish Literature*, echoing the conceptual underpinnings of a significant strain in Jewish literary discourse, academic and popular, in the century that preceded him.¹⁰ From the time Leopold Zunz published his *Notes on Rabbinic Literature* (1818) and founded the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the Romantic notion of literature as the expression and repository of the spirit or genius of a people, of its *Volkgeist*, was often offered as the primary justification for the study, cultivation, and dissemination of Jewish literature. Literature written by Jews was not simply the work of talented individuals—who could be dismissed by a skeptical Christian public as aberrations—but by the Jews *as a people*, and in their own image. To study Jewish literature was, in short, to see the Jews. The road from this Romantic theory of literature to the moral imperative that Jewish literature be portrayed in a flattering light, and hence to critical narcissism, is a short one indeed.

One further element of this *Wissenschaft*-inspired literary discourse needs to be mentioned. Proof of the cultural vitality of the Jewish people gave Jews a ready defense against the calumnies of their Christian enemies and an ethnically assertive ticket of entry into European society.

10. Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, 5 vols. (New York and London, 1960), 1:xv. The original edition was published in 1930.

("Unless they have shown themselves in the past capable of contributing [as Jews] to the higher aspects of European culture," Joseph Jacobs wrote a century after Zunz published his landmark work, "it would be improbable that [the Jews] would be able to join fully in it now that they are allowed, in some measure, to work with their fellow citizens."¹¹) But while Jewish literary study supported the notion that Jews could enter European society *as Jews*, it also underwrote a fundamental change in the definition of what it meant to be a Jew. For as it shifted the locus of Jewish self-definition from Judaism as a revealed religion to Jewishness as national character, it downplayed the significance of the changes that marked Western Jewish culture in the nineteenth century. Judaism was reconceived as one of many expressions of the national character of the Jews, and all Jewish literature reflected that abiding character. What this meant was that assimilation did not matter, heresy did not matter, even conversion did not necessarily matter. Spinoza was not only as great a philosopher as Maimonides—he was as *Jewish* a philosopher. Heine was not only as great a poet as Judah Halevi—he was as *Jewish* a poet. Just at that point in history when cultural, theological, and ideological differences became most evident, most divisive, they could be swept under the carpet of the *Volkgeist*. Or, to return to Waxman's central metaphor, when Jewish literature is conceived of as a mirror, all Jews, no matter how disparate or deracinated, could always see themselves reflected in it.¹² In this respect, too, the road from *Volkgeist* to critical narcissism lies unobstructed.

II.

The problem with critical narcissism, then, is not only the image that critics see when they look at Jewish American literature but also what they don't see. A critical narcissist might be able to provide intriguing, even compelling appreciations of certain aspects of Jewish American writing, but the accounts are bound to be partial, in both senses of the word. One of the most intriguing consequences of this phenomenon in Jewish American literary history was the critical insistence during the

11. Joseph Jacobs, *Jewish Contributions to Civilization: An Estimate* (Philadelphia, 1919), 45.

12. For a more elaborate articulation of this argument, see my "Race, Literary History, and the 'Jewish' Question." For a more detailed and differentiated account of the intellectual underpinnings of *Wissenschaft* thought, see David N. Myers, "The Ideology of Wissenschaft des Judentums," *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, Routledge History of World Philosophies 2 (London and New York: 1997), 706–20.

mid-twentieth century (the period we now call the Jewish American Renaissance) that particular writers were *Jewish* writers, even when the writers themselves strenuously resisted the definition. The most well-known example is probably Saul Bellow. Dogged by the charge throughout his career—and by critical readings that searched for hidden Jewish messages in his work—Bellow responded time and again that what was intended as a compliment was, to his mind, an insult. Bellow never denied that he was a Jew, but he felt that being called a Jewish writer significantly oversimplified his sense of himself as a person and as a writer. He was, to be sure, “a person of Jewish origin . . . who has had a certain experience of life, which is in part Jewish,” but he was also many other things: American, Canadian, Russian, son-of-immigrants, male, twentieth-century, Midwestern, hockey fan, and so on.¹³

Bellow’s point is well-taken, certainly so when we think about Jewish history after Emancipation, and inescapably so in the United States, where the foundational separation of church and state allowed Jews to think of themselves simultaneously in separate Jewish and secular terms. Viewed as an adjective meant to define a particularized and (more or less) predetermined cultural identity, “Jewish” only partially accounts for the cultural matrix of the literature produced by Jewish writers in America—even by those most stridently and palpably Jewish. Moreover, in America, with no governmental and little communal constraint, not only did the secular sphere develop in unrestrained ways but so did the Jewish sphere. Not only must we be open to other cultural influences competing with “Jewish” but we must also be prepared to discover that “Jewish” doesn’t always mean what we thought it meant, or even that the boundaries between “Jewish” and “American” are not what we thought they were.¹⁴ Unless we are prepared to do away with the category of Jewish writer or of Jewish American literature, then we must be prepared to return again and again to the field’s constitutive questions, and to be ready for surprises—and disappointments. We must be ready to think about the terms “ethnicity” and “assimilation” analytically, not judgmentally. In this way, rather than lead us away from the category of

13. Saul Bellow, quoted in Michael P. Kramer, “The Vanishing Jew: On Teaching Bellow’s *Seize the Day* as Ethnic Fiction,” *New Essays on Bellow’s Seize the Day*, ed. M. P. Kramer (New York and Cambridge, 1998), 8.

14. On this issue, see Jonathan D. Sarna, “The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies* 5 (1998–99): 52–79; and Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (Albany, N.Y., 2000), 1–13. For a more general, theoretical account of the phenomenon, see Amos Funkenstein, “The Dialectics of Assimilation,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1 (1995): 1–16.

Jewish writer, Bellow's comments can very well point us toward an *im*-partial, open, non-narcissistic mature mode of Jewish American literary history.

To avoid the pitfalls of critical narcissism, first of all, we must conceive of the field as broadly and inclusively as possible, making sure it encompasses Jewish American literature in all its diversity and complexity—from Judah Monis to Julius Lester. After all, Jewish American history is not monolithic: only through an extraordinary imaginative effort could Emma Lazarus, the acculturated scion of Sephardic and German Jews, see the “wretched refuse” of East European Jewry as the “ignoble relic” of “psalmist, priest, and prophet,” let alone as an image of herself.¹⁵ It is distorting and demeaning to expect Jewish American literature to represent anything less than a full range of Jewish American experience: Sephardi and Ashkenazi; patrician and proletarian; religious and secular; good, bad, and ugly.

In this inclusivist effort, Louis Harap's classic and still indispensable work, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, can serve as a model—despite (to be frank) limitations that will be evident to all readers. Harap surely had no pretensions about his skills as a literary critic: his methodology consisted of linking together plot summaries and blocks of quotations, peppering them with perfunctory literary analyses—saying, for instance, that characters are either wooden or well-rounded, or that a writer was talented or not.¹⁶ His forays into historical context are not overly rigorous. And yet, *The Image of the Jew in American Literature* remains an extraordinarily impressive work. If it eschews the narcissism of some of its *Wissenschaft* predecessors, it nevertheless shares their impressive flair for the encyclopedic: Harap may not have found every single reference to Jews in American literature before the twentieth century (as he readily admits), but he has clearly gone through more American novels, plays, and poems than most of us will go through in a lifetime—from Thomas Paine's verse narrative “The Monk and the Jew” to Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*; from the Reverend Jarvis Gregg's Sunday school narrative *Selumiel* to Lew Wallace's historical epic *Ben-Hur*; from dime novels, such as the anonymous *The Gypsy of the Highland; or the Jew and the Heir* to Henry Harland's pseudonymous *The Yoke of the Thorah*;

15. I am referring here, of course, to Lazarus's poems “The New Colossus” and “The New Ezekiel.” See Shira Wolosky, ed., *Major Voices: Nineteenth Century American Women's Poetry* (New Milford, Conn., 2003), 451, 449.

16. For a frank description of Harap's scholarship, see Jacob Rader Marcus's preface to Harap's *Creative Awakening* (New York, 1987), which includes the remark “Dr. Harap is not a literary critic or literary theorist” (xi).

and, more to the point, from Isaac Mayer Wise's *The Combat of the People* to Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*. (Anyone who has attempted to make it through, say, Wise's *The Combat of the People*, will understand exactly how admirable Harap's achievement really is.) When it appeared in 1974, *The Image of the Jew* far exceeded the few accounts that preceded it, and although several excellent, more conceptually sophisticated studies have appeared since, none approaches Harap's work in sheer scope.¹⁷

The Image of the Jew remains to this day what it was then, the most comprehensive account we have of Jewish American literature in English up to the mass immigration of East European Jews at the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Indeed, it is promiscuously comprehensive—and that is its great strength. Critical narcissists will find little here of comfort. If the literature of a people is the mirror of its soul, then we'd have to conclude, after perusing Harap's text, that the soul of American Jewry is

17. Earlier studies include Joseph Mersand, *Traditions in American Literature: A Study of Jewish Characters and Authors* (New York, 1939); Leslie A. Fiedler, *The Jew in the American Novel* (New York, 1959); Sol Liptzin, *The Jew in American Literature* (New York, 1966); and Harold Fisch, *The Dual Image: The Figure of the Jew in English and American Literature* (London, 1971). An excellent broad-ranging study of literary anti-Semitism that appeared after Harap's book is Michael N. Dobkowski, *The Tarnished Dream: The Basis of American Anti-Semitism* (Westport, Conn., 1979). Recent critically sophisticated studies include Anthony Julius, *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism and Literary Form* (Cambridge, 1995; rev. ed. London, 2003); Bryan Cheyette, ed., *Between "Race" and Culture: Representations of "The Jew" in English and American Literature* (Stanford, 1996); and Jonathan Freedman, *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (New York, 2000). See also Michael P. Kramer, "W. E. B. Du Bois, American Nationalism, and the Jewish Question," *Race and the Construction of Modern American Nationalism*, ed. Reynolds J. Scott-Childress (New York, 1999), 169–94.

18. Other, less comprehensive accounts include Diane Lichtenstein, *Writing Their Nations: The Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Women Writers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992); Lewis Fried, ed., *Handbook of American-Jewish Literature: An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources* (Westport, Conn., 1988); and Michael P. Kramer, "Beginnings and Ends: The Origins of Jewish American Literary History," *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, ed. Kramer and Wirth-Nesher, 12–30. A comprehensive bibliography of American works by and about Jews is Robert Singerman, comp., *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900* (Westport, Conn., 1990). Harap later published *Creative Awakening: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1900–1940s* (New York, 1987); *In the Mainstream: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Literature, 1950s–1980s* (New York, 1987); and *Dramatic Encounters: The Jewish Presence in Twentieth-Century American Drama, Poetry, and Humor and the Black-Jewish Literary Relationship* (New York, 1987).

variegated indeed. For he does not restrict himself to positive Jewish images or admirable Jewish writers: he does not shy away from the negative or even the bizarre. Nor does he limit himself to what he feels is fine writing: while he does not hold back when he feels contempt for poor writing—of the early nineteenth century, for instance, he writes with frank insouciance: “Not all Jewish writers of this period were insignificant” (p. 264)—he nevertheless includes minor, and less than minor, works as well. He does not begin his account of Jewish writing in America where I would, with Judah Monis, the eighteenth-century convert to Calvinism who was also the first Jewish instructor at Harvard and the first Jew to publish a book in America—perhaps because conversion was a red line for him, but more likely because his notion of literature is narrower than mine, not extending to Hebrew primers and sermons.¹⁹ Still, he does introduce us early on to Samuel B. H. Judah, a “rather unpleasant figure,” in Harap’s words, “who fancied himself a playwright and satirist” (p. 261). Judah did not convert to Christianity, but he was apparently a belligerent freethinker (nowadays he would probably be called by many a self-hating Jew) who, among other controversial works, wrote two biblical dramas—*The Maid of Midian* (1833) and *David and Uriah* (1835)—whose plots were built around the bloody brutality of the ancient Hebrews and whose appeal was to those who “do not acknowledge the Jewish records of ancient ignorance, barbarism, and cruelty, as the proper basis for just laws and enlightened morality” (p. 263).²⁰ Harap actually gives Judah more room than he does Judah’s contemporary Penina Moise, though she was eminently respectable, “fervently religious,” and authored the first book of poetry by a Jew in America, *Fancy’s Sketch Book* (1833). Moise may have painted the Jews and Judaism in a sympathetic light, but Harap felt that she “lacked a poetic gift” (p. 261).

19. See Michael P. Kramer, “The Conversion of the Jews and Other Narratives of Self-Definition: Notes Toward the Writing of Jewish American Literary History; Or, Adventures in Hebrew School,” *Ideology and Jewish Identity in Israeli and American Literature*, ed. Emily Miller Budick (Albany, N.Y., 2001), 177–96; and “Beginnings and Ends,” 16–17.

20. Judah’s authorship of these particular works has been disputed. Harap no doubt relies on A. S. W. Rosenbach, *An American Jewish Bibliography* (New York, 1926), 288; and Edwin Wolf, 2nd, “Some Unrecorded American Judaica Printed Before 1851,” *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1958), 217. The librarians at the Houghton Library dispute this attribution and suggest that a freethinker named William Sinclair is the actual author (see Jacob Blanck, comp., *Bibliography of American Literature* [New Haven, Conn., 1955–91], 5:223). See also Singerman, *Judaica Americana*, 120, 128. In any case, Harap’s non-narcissistic, inclusivist, approach should be evident.

We must be ready to look at individual Jewish American writers dispassionately, not to search for *dos pintele yid* in each work but to allow the work to tell us about each writer's cultural assumptions and choices. Here, too, *The Image of the Jew* offers itself as a model for Jewish American literary history. For, paradoxically, it is not a work of Jewish American literary history at all: Jewish writers comprise only a part of Harap's subject, and a relatively small part at that. Harap's concern is actually anti-Semitism, and his subject is Jewish stereotypes (anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic, by Jews and non-Jews) in American literature. He treats Jewish writers with no more generosity than he does non-Jewish writers. His purpose is not to celebrate the achievements of Jewish genius but to show how the Jew was depicted, for better or worse. He focuses on the *image* of the Jew and does not look through the text for some informing Jewish soul. Compare, in this light, Meyer Waxman's description of Emma Lazarus to that of Harap. For Waxman, "The songs and poems of Emma Lazarus are a fine expression of the Jewish poetic genius and as such they should be cherished by the Jews of today as a gift of a beautiful and spirited soul of the former generation."²¹ This is Harap: "Looked at in perspective, Emma Lazarus was a minor American poet, but she was probably the finest Jewish writer [in America] up to our century" (p. 299). *In perspective*: Harap makes sure to tell us, for instance, that it was a non-Jewish critic, Edmund Clarence Stedman, who encouraged Emma Lazarus to explore her Jewish heritage "as a source of inspiration" (p. 289) and that her "enthusiasm for the creation of a national seat for the Jews in Palestine was fired by . . . George Eliot" (p. 293). To read Lazarus's poetry in the context of Harap's volume is to realize that her poetic depictions of Jews have as much in common with, say, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as they do with Judah Halevi. For all her unapologetic Jewishness, Harap insists that "her passionate involvement in the fate of the Jews was not parochial" (p. 296) but that she was a Jewish writer very much in the American grain.

True, Harap does not go far enough. While he makes much of Christian stereotypes of Jews, say, he does not note Lazarus's own use of Christian imagery in her depiction of the Jew.²² Nor does he remark upon Isaac Mayer Wise's effort to create Jewish heroes in the image of

21. Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, 4:2, 991.

22. See Shira Wolosky, "An American-Jewish Typology: Emma Lazarus and the Figure of Christ," *Prooftexts* 16 (1996): 113–25. On Christian imagery in Jewish American literature, see Leslie A. Fiedler, "The Christian-ness of the Jewish American Writer," *Fiedler on the Roof: Essays on Literature and Jewish Identity* (Boston, 1991), 59–71.

America's founding fathers. (In *The First of the Maccabees*, Wise's novelistic elaboration of the Hanukkah story, Matathia declaims, "The despotic will of Antiochus will shatter into atoms on the rock of Israel's fortitude. The blood of our saints impregnates the tree of liberty with new strength."²³) And in general, he does not consider how deeply the (non-Jewish) image of the Jew in English and American literature influenced the self-image of American Jews, how, for instance, many of the poems about Jews and Judaism by William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and John Greenleaf Whittier (along with others by British poets from Milton to Byron to Matthew Arnold) were adopted by Jews as "matter suitable for reading and recitation in Sabbath-schools and Sunday-schools, at entertainments of Jewish societies, and in the home circle."²⁴ Still, for all its limitations, Harap's study suggests that Jewish and non-Jewish writers alike shared a common discourse and that the literary self-image of American Jews is part of a larger history of the image of the Jew in American literature as a whole.

I am suggesting, in short, that for Jewish American literary study to come of age, it has to take assimilation seriously, not as a spiritual flaw but as a more or less inevitable part of a Jewish writer's cultural makeup—and as a creative resource. Not that *Wissenschaft*-style critics such as Meyer Waxman were blind to assimilation. They knew quite well that Jewish writers through the ages assimilated much from their surrounding cultures. They knew that Emma Lazarus was different from Judah Halevi. Indeed, they even valued these differences, in that they made Jewish literature "a great spiritual panorama which has the world for its background, where the echo of all centuries and all lands is heard."²⁵ But they believed that, ultimately, the abiding Jewish spirit is what gave Jewish literature its distinctiveness, despite surface differences, despite assimilation. I am suggesting that this approach, in its *Wissenschaft* form or in the form of contemporary critical narcissism, can lead to a distorted picture of Jewish American literary history.

A particularly interesting case in point is Waxman's account of the "Jewish poetess, Adah Isaacs Menken." Menken's life bore little resemblance to that of the ideal (or even average) nineteenth-century Jewish woman. "In her short life of thirty-three years," Waxman writes, "she succeeded in being married thrice, in distinguishing herself as an actress

23. Isaac M. Wise, *The First of the Maccabees* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1860), 7.

24. Isabel E. Cohen, comp., *Readings and Recitations for Jewish Homes and Schools* (Philadelphia, 1895), [3].

25. Waxman, *History of Jewish Literature*, 1:xv–xvi.

on the American stage, in traveling extensively in Europe, and in gaining the friendship of such illustrious poets and writers as Rosetti, Swinburne, Dickens, and Dumas." In short, she was well-traveled, broadly cultured, and hardly an exemplary Jew. However, despite all the "contrary attractions and interests" (a wonderfully understated phrase), Waxman maintains that Menken "retained an intense feeling for her people, and her heart responded warmly to its woes and tragedies." Indeed, he writes, not only are the few expressly Jewish poems she published "permeated by a deep Jewish spirit and poetic insight," but "*all* her poems are distinguished by a note of melancholy which is characterized as 'my heritage' and in which an echo of Kohelet is heard."²⁶

Here we have a prime example of narcissistic criticism in the *Wissenschaft* mode: the dust of unpalatable social and cultural characteristics is swept aside to reveal the Jewish core of Menken's poetry. Too bad that, as Renée Sentilles tells us in her fascinating biography, the evidence suggests that Menken was almost certainly not Jewish. Truth is, we don't know much for certain about Menken's early life. She may have been born Ada Bertha Theodore—at least that is the name on her 1856 Texas marriage license to Alexander Isaac Menken, a musician from an affluent Cincinnati Jewish family. But who the Theodores were, if that was indeed her name, remains a question. Waxman, who published the fourth volume of his history in 1940, was probably relying on the scholarship of Alan Lesser, who published in 1938 what he claimed was irrefutable evidence that Menken was born Jewish.²⁷ That same year, however, another scholar named John S. Kendall published evidence that maintained that Menken was African American. (Her one volume of poems, *Infelicia*, is included in the Schomburg Library of African American Women Writers.²⁸) Menken herself at times claimed parentage that was Irish or Spanish. All we know, however, is that she remained married to Alexander

26. Waxman, *History of Jewish Literature*, 4:2, 988. My emphasis.

27. See Alan Lesser, "La Belle Menken," *Weave a Wreath of Laurel: The Lives of Four Jewish Contributors to American Civilization* (New York, 1938), 21–35. Lesser later published a full-length biography: *Enchanting Rebel: The Secret of Adab Isaacs Menken* (New York, 1947). Harap assumes that Menken converted to Judaism, basing his assumption on Paul Lewis, *Queen of the Plaza: A Biography of Adab Isaacs Menken* (New York, 1964), which claimed to base itself on Menken's newly discovered diary, a claim that Wolf Mankowitz later proved to be a hoax. See Mankowitz, *Mazeppa: The Lives, Loves and Legends of Adab Isaacs Menken* (New York, 1982). For an overview of different accounts of Menken, see Sentilles, 258–83.

28. See John S. Kendall, "*The World's Delight*": *The Story of Adab Isaacs Menken* (New Orleans, La., 1938). On the Schomburg Library, see: http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digst/wwm9717/@Generic__BookView.

Menken for three years, and that part of the time she lived with him in Cincinnati. During that period, she published over a dozen poems and essays of palpable Jewish content, mostly in Isaac Mayer Wise's *Israelite*. (Several of the poems were plagiarized from Penina Moise, along with one from John Greenleaf Whittier. The revelation of the plagiarism signaled the end of her run as a "Jewish" poet.) In 1859 she left Cincinnati, and Alexander Menken, for New York, and the "Jewish" episode of her career was, for all intents and purposes, over.

Meyer Waxman's impressive, landmark scholarly achievement cannot be overshadowed or sullied by any lapse or quibble. My point is only that he relied on certain Romantic assumptions about ethnic identity that can obscure rather than illuminate creative achievement, both the aesthetics of ethnicity and the art of assimilation. Nowadays, we prefer to disclaim those assumptions. Still, traces remain. If we did not think Menken were Jewish, would we hear echoes of Kohelet in her secular poetry? If not, would we look for Christian echoes in her "Jewish" poetry? If yes, what does it tell us about the way we answer the constitutive questions of Jewish American literary study? To her credit, Sentilles does not even try to solve the mystery of Menken's identity. Instead, Menken's protean persona itself becomes her subject, along with the American culture it represents. Seeing her Jewishness (such as it is) does not make her any less American; and elaborating her Americanness makes her neither more nor less Jewish. *Performing Menken* is the most thoroughly researched account we have of the enigmatic poet-actress, but Sentilles's biography is "less a narrative of her life than an investigation of Menken as a deliberate performance, a self-created celebrity who shaped her image to suit the times" (p. 3). Whether or not Menken was born Jewish, whether or not she converted to Judaism (also doubtful), Jewishness was a role she played, and, at least for part of her life, she played it with energy. But, just as Bellow claimed to be many things besides Jewish, Menken played many other roles—on stage and off. Sentilles suggests that Menken "was an ideal celebrity, an ideal mirror, during a time of incredible social instability; she changed constantly before the public's eyes, giving the people what they wanted and what they believed or wished they were." At the same time, "she was also incredibly frustrating, because while she flattered her public, whom among them she mirrored always remained unclear" (p. 6). Blurring ethnic identities and gender roles (she often played men's roles—on stage and off), she blended exoticism and patriotism, bohemian notoriety and bourgeois respectability, sensationalism and sentimentalism. She played roles endlessly, and complained she was misunderstood. She let her audiences see what they wanted to see, and, at some

level, she made them question who it was that they were. In short, Menken made incurable narcissists of her audience—then and now. Her success at playing the Jewish role tells us something about the complicated image of the Jewish woman in nineteenth-century America—and about the game of mirrors that Jewish American literary studies can be.

Like the reissue of *The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, Sentilles's *Performing Menken* is a good sign for Jewish American literary studies precisely because it doesn't try to be a study of Jewish American literature. Because it looks at Menken as an American phenomenon, it broadens and deepens our understanding of Menken in ways no narrowly Jewish study of Menken could. It turns us back, past the ethnicity of the poet to the *šfek šfek'ot* that underlie our field. In Ovid's version of the Narcissus myth, the youth's tragedy does not stem from failure to see the image in the water for what it really is, a reflection of himself, but from his inability to move past his self-love to self-knowledge:

You are me. Now I see that.
I see through my own reflection.
But it is too late.
I am in love with myself.²⁹

Jewish American literary studies need not suffer the same fate. Commenting on the Roman Ovid's Latin version of the Greek myth in his Jewish American memoir on the riddles of identity, Daniel Mendelsohn, plainly aware of the ironies, offers a moral that can serve as well as the moral of this essay: "The image the water reflects isn't always the com-
plaisant one we want; the truth is richer, more complex, more satisfying," if also, "to be sure, more problematic."³⁰

29. Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid* (New York, 1997), 76.

30. Daniel Mendelsohn, *The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity* (New York, 1999), 39.